VCE Religion and Society (Units 3 and 4: 2023–2027)

School-based Assessment report

This report is provided for the first year of implementation of VCE Religion and Society Study Design (2023–2027) and is based on the School-based Assessment Audit and VCAA statistical data.

All official communications regarding the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) Religion and Society Study Design (2023–2027) are provided in the [*VCAA Bulletin*](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/news-and-events/bulletins-and-updates/bulletin/Pages/index.aspx)and [Notices to Schools](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/administration/schooladministration/notices/Pages/index.aspx). It is recommended that teachers subscribe to the [*VCAA Bulletin*](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/news-and-events/bulletins-and-updates/bulletin/Pages/index.aspx) to receive updated information regarding the study. Schools are required to alert teachers to information in the *VCAA Bulletin* and Notices to Schools, especially concerning assessment schedules. Important administrative dates and assessment schedules are published on the School administration page of the [VCAA website](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/HomePage.aspx).

General comments

Unit 3: The search for meaning

Responses to the Unit 3 School-based Assessment Audit for VCE Religion and Society indicate that most teachers have attempted to transition to the reaccredited 2023–2027 VCE Religion and Society Study Design. Almost all assessment tasks submitted reflected the new terminology for each area of study. There is a new requirement in the study design to ensure that each task completed for each area study needs to be a different task type. This new requirement was not fulfilled by most teachers with most submissions to the audit indicating that the tasks used to assess each outcome were the same task type. Most of these tasks which were the same task type were short-answer questions or structured questions which mimic the end-of-year examination.

Completing the School-based Assessment Audit

Most of the questions in the audit were completed in detail. Teachers often took the opportunity to upload tasks that are used to assess outcomes instead of completing the questions in the audit which required them to describe the tasks. A common reason for schools going to the next stage of the audit was incorrect task types or a lack of detail on marking schemes and authentication practices. The further evidence required was often an updated copy of the task used to assess each outcome or greater detail on marking and authentication processes.

There were some specific concerns with the responses to the audit questionnaire including:

* The questions asking for a description of each of the School-assessed Coursework tasks for each outcome. When a task was not submitted for consideration, the responses to the audit questions asking for the description of the School-assessed Coursework were often unclear or too short. Some responses listed only two or three prospective questions with others indicating that the School-assessed Coursework took place over the course of a ‘double period’, without specifying exactly how long this is. Some schools listed a variety of past questions that have been used to assess students without providing the specific details about the conditions of the task.
* The question asking what two beliefs from selected religious traditions/denominations would be studied for Area of Study 2: Expressing meaning. Schools are required to clearly identify the distinctive belief for the selected religious tradition or denomination. Some schools named categories of beliefs, such as ‘death and the afterlife’ or ‘the ultimate reality’ instead of their tradition-specific beliefs relating to these categories.

Assessment planning and administration

It is evident from the audit questionnaire that most students are informed of the school and VCAA policies and procedures by the start of Unit 3 and that the timeline of assessment is well planned, with each area of study allocated a lengthy period for learning, practice, and review. All submissions to the audit indicate that sufficient teaching time was allocated to all three outcomes and students were informed of the conditions of the task in a timely manner. The audit submissions indicated that teachers return School-assessed Coursework tasks two weeks after they have been written, which gives students the opportunity for reflection and to work on improving particular skills before the next outcome.

For each School-assessed Coursework task students should at least be given a clear and accurate written statement of:

* the outcome being assessed
* the task type
* the requirements and conditions of the task
* any resources permitted
* authentication process (if relevant)
* the contribution of the task to the final outcome score
* assessment advice as appropriate for example performance descriptors, rubrics or criteria for questions awarded higher marks.

School-assessed Coursework

The audit of the further evidence of School-assessed Coursework tasks following the questionnaire stage revealed the following:

Conditions and authentication

Most School-assessed Coursework tasks were completed under exam conditions and authentication is less of a concern in these cases. In addition, all students completed the same task in all submissions to the audit.

Some tasks were designed with the option for students to bring prepared notes into the task. In these cases, it was often not explained how teachers are able to authenticate that the notes used by students were their own work. This meant that these authentication processes were required in the further evidence stage of the audit. Some teachers chose to remove the option for students to bring prepared notes after the request for authentication processes. Allowing students to bring prepared notes into a task increases the chances that the work being produced by the student is not completely their own. Inspecting the notes and insisting that they are handwritten may not sufficiently authenticate the notes as the production of notes is unsupervised and students may use the notes of a past student and copy them. Teachers should consider whether it is necessary for students to use notes in such tasks.

In some outcomes students were being set an essay as a way of assessing their understanding of the area of study. The use of an essay is in line with the study design as a tool for assessing students. When teachers use an essay as an assessment tool, it is important that teachers follow VCAA authentication rules regarding acceptable levels of assistance in relation to providing feedback on the draft. This is to maintain the integrity of the School-assessed Coursework and ensure the authenticity of each student’s work. The use of the *Authentication Record for School-based Assessment* would be appropriate in these circumstances, but it was rarely used. Some teachers allowed students to bring an essay plan into the task after this drafting, which also poses issues for authentication where these plans are based on drafting in class.

Most School-assessed Coursework tasks were 60 to 90 minutes in length, providing an appropriate period in which students could demonstrate their understanding of the outcome.

Assessment

Most schools inform the students of the structure of the School-assessed Coursework tasks, however, not always how the task will be assessed. For all tasks, teachers should inform students not just of the format and structure of the task, but also how it will be assessed, for example providing a rubric that outlines the assessment criteria. Some schools used the VCAA performance descriptors without modifications, but the questions used in the task did not reflect all of the performance descriptors. In cases where schools modified the VCAA performance descriptors, they were often better suited to assessing the task by replacing general terms of the performance descriptors with tradition-specific knowledge that was taught during the course.

Teachers often developed their own marking guides which were vague or listed potential answers as dot points. Teachers who develop their own marking criteria should consider providing students with qualitative advice describing expectations rather than simply a range of numbers or a scale of low, medium, or high. In some instances, no marking advice was provided at all and only a mark range was listed.

Format and structure

In the audit submissions it was evident that teachers have been accustomed to utilising the same tasks over the course of a unit. In many cases the tasks which were used to assess all three outcomes in Unit 3 were the same and were designed to replicate the type of questions used in the end-of-year examination. Often these tasks were separated into two sections, Section A with short-answer questions and Section B with extended responses questions including some with multiple parts. The new study design requires that the tasks used to assess the outcomes in Unit 3 each need to be of a different task type. Some submissions to the audit labelled the tasks as being different types but the tasks submitted were essentially the same in their structure and in requirements.

The submissions which used different task types for each of the three outcomes typically employed structured questions and extended responses for Outcome 1, visual analyses, for Outcome 2, an essay or for Outcome 3, case studies. The VCAA study page for Religion and Society includes sample approaches for developing assessment tasks, with one example using a visual analysis and one example using a case study. This is a useful resource for teachers developing a set of different assessment tasks.

In the setting of the School-assessed Coursework tasks, it was clear that some teachers were utilising past examination questions as part of the construction of the task. The VCAA should consider ways in which they can discourage the use of past examination questions and commercial tasks. In some cases, these questions were taken directly from the past examinations without modification or updating to the language of the new study design. In some cases, these questions were retained with a change to the category of belief, or the aspect of religion used in the question. Reliance on past examination questions as a model for the questions used in the School-assessed Coursework tasks can create a situation where some students are unfairly advantaged when they complete past examination papers as practice and have access to the comments and answers in the VCAA External Assessment Report.

Highest level of performance

Many School-assessed Coursework tasks did not allow students to achieve the highest level of performance, as the questions did not go beyond basic definitions, and simple explanations. The key terms used in such questions were typically: ‘define’, ‘outline’, ‘identify’ and ‘describe’. Teachers should refer to the VCAA Glossary of command termsto select command terms that allow students to demonstrate the extent of their learning. Selecting a range of command terms from the glossary allows teachers to distinguish between levels of ability and allows the highest performing students to demonstrate their achievement. Drawing on the full range of task terms specified in the key skills and glossary of command terms, for example ‘examine ’and ‘analyse’, provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate the outcome at the highest level.

Specific information

Unit 3 – School-assessed Coursework

Outcome 1

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse the nature and purpose of religion and religious beliefs.

**Task type options**

The students’ performance in Outcome 1 can be assessed using one or more of the following: analytical exercises, case studies, essays, extended responses, structured questions, visual analyses.

The task type selected must be different to the task type used to assess other outcomes in Unit 3. Most schools used structured questions or extended responses for this outcome.

In most tasks used to assess Outcome 1 the questions focused on the different categories of belief. In some cases there were a series of questions that required students to outline what a tradition believes about ‘ultimate reality’, ‘the nature and purpose of human life’, ‘the meaning of suffering’, ‘death and the afterlife’, ‘the relationship between ultimate reality and humanity’, ‘the relationship between humans’, ‘the relationship between human life and the rest of the natural world’. Whilst these categories are important key knowledge in the outcome, they often became the overwhelming focus of the task to the detriment of other elements of the outcome such as the connections between beliefs, the interrelationships of the aspects of religion, or the nature and purpose of religious beliefs.

In most tasks submitted, questions relating to the particular study of the range of religious beliefs for one or more religious traditions/denominations were weighted more than the general questions.

Some tasks submitted in the audit failed to assess the key knowledge point relating to ‘the connections between these religious beliefs’ in a meaningful way. This meant that students were able to avoid one of the more challenging and important concepts in the outcome that requires them to understand the complex nature of beliefs in religious traditions. The School-assessed Coursework tasks could be improved by creating questions where students describe a range of beliefs and then use the answers they have provided to analyse the connections between these beliefs.

Outcome 2

On completion of this unit the student should be able to examine how beliefs and their expression through other aspects of religion are intended to respond to the search for meaning.

**Task type options**

The students’ performance in Outcome 2 can be assessed using one or more of the following: analytical exercises, case studies, essays, extended responses, structured questions, visual analyses.

The task type selected must be different to the task type used to assess other outcomes in Unit 3.

There were very few tasks submitted in the School-based Assessment Audit which fulfilled the requirement to be of a different task type to other tasks and an excellent example of assessment for Outcome 2. In instances where teachers described the task in the audit questionnaire itself, they often referred to photos or visual stimulus that students would analyse to show their understanding of the task. Whilst this is a useful way to assess students, and visual analysis is listed in the study design, it was difficult to assess the appropriateness of the questions suggested without access to the visual material. In some cases, the questions which asked students to analyse images required them to identify specific expressions of a religious tradition or religious denomination in the image without reference to a specific belief as required in the study design.

Some tasks submitted for review were too heavily focused on the specific expressions of beliefs in a religious tradition or religious denomination at the expense of general questions about the role of the aspects of religion and the relationship of the aspects to each other. This tended to occur when tasks required students to address almost all of the remaining aspects of religion, other than beliefs, in questions specifically related to the selected beliefs of their religious tradition or denomination. Often this was because a very large portion of the total marks on the assessment task were allocated to the description and explanation of the way in which these beliefs are expressed. When so many marks had already been allocated it meant there was very little opportunity left in the task for other questions.

The way in which the expressions of beliefs, both for specific religious traditions and religious denominations, and in general, support the search for meaning was assessed in a way which was too simple. Often questions regarding the way in which these expressions support meaning used command terms such as ‘describe’ and ‘outline’. This meant that students were limited to naming and describing only the most obvious or basic ways in which these expressions contribute to the search for meaning.

Outcome 3

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse the interplay between religious beliefs and their expression through related aspects of religion and significant life experiences.

**Task type options**

The students’ performance in Outcome 3 can be assessed using one or more of the following: analytical exercises, case studies, essays, extended responses, structured questions, visual analyses.

The task type selected must be different to the task type used to assess other outcomes in Unit 3. Often an essay was selected as the task used to assess Outcome 3.

The tasks that were submitted in the audit indicated that students were being assessed on the relationship between significant life experiences and beliefs in general, as well as for a specific individual from a religious tradition or religious denomination. In most of the tasks there were specific questions, or marking criteria, which required students to discuss the influence of the significant life experience on the beliefs of adherents in general, or on their studied individual, as well as the reverse influence, how beliefs can affect significant life experiences.

Not all tasks submitted by teachers indicate that students were being assessed on the impact of significant life experiences on the expressions of religious beliefs. Where tasks did address this key knowledge, it was often incorporated into a much larger extended response question that required the students to analyse or describe the individual’s understanding of their religious beliefs before, during and after their significant life experience.

General comments

Unit 4: Religion, challenge and change

Responses to the Unit 4 School-based Assessment Audit for VCE Religion and Society revealed some general concerns. While the results of the audit questionnaire indicated that most schools were aware of the reaccredited VCE Religion and Society Study Design 2023–2027*,* many of the School-assessed Coursework tasks did not meet the new requirements. As in Unit 3, there is a new requirement in the study design to ensure that each task completed for each area study needs to be a different task type. This new requirement was not fulfilled by most teachers with most submissions to the audit indicating that the tasks used to assess each outcome were the same task type. Most of these tasks which were the same task type were short-answer questions or structured questions which mimic the end-of-year examination.

Schools are advised to review the 2023 VCE Religion and Society Study Designcarefully to ensure that the School-assessed Coursework tasks are compliant with the outcome statements for each area of study and not just requiring students to memorise and respond to the key knowledge dot points in the study design. Some of the tasks developed for assessing student work repeated a series of questions or prompts for a series of challenges or required students to walk through a predictable pattern of ‘context’, ‘challenge’, ‘stance’, and ‘response’ based questions.

Completing the School-based Assessment Audit

The majority of the questions in the audit were completed in adequate detail. The challenges studied for Areas of Study 1 and 2 were described in detail, showing how they covered the three categories of challenges – theology, ethics, and continued existence. Most schools were aware of the reduction in the number of challenges studied in Unit 4, being reduced from four to three.

Some responses to the audit question which required teachers to describe the challenges being studied in Area of Study 1 were unnecessarily long. These descriptions of the challenges appeared to be sample answers from current or past student work which outline each of the three challenges in lengthy detail. This also occurred in the description of the challenge selected in Area of Study 2.

Some submissions to the School-based Assessment Audit questionnaire were incomplete. After having submitted a School-assessed Coursework task for consideration for Area of Study 1, the questions and submissions for Area of Study 2 were left blank. This might indicate that the teacher incorrectly understood that only one task was required, or only the task which had been drafted was required.

Assessment planning and administration

It is evident from the audit questionnaire that students are informed of the school and VCAA policies and procedures by the start of Unit 4, typically in Unit 3. The timeline of assessment is well planned, with each area of study allocated a lengthy period for learning, practice, and review. All submissions to the audit indicate that sufficient teaching time was allocated to both outcomes and students were informed of the conditions of the task in a timely manner. The audit submissions indicated that teachers return School-assessed Coursework tasks two weeks after they have been written which gives students the opportunity for reflection and to work on improving particular skills before the next outcome.

Almost all tasks submitted in the Unit 4 audit questionnaire provided students with a clear and accurate written statement of:

* the outcome being assessed
* the task type
* the requirements and conditions of the task
* any resources permitted
* authentication process (if relevant)
* the contribution of the task to the final outcome score
* assessment advice as appropriate for example performance descriptors, rubrics or criteria for questions awarded higher marks.

School-assessed Coursework

The audit of the School-assessed Coursework tasks revealed the following:

Conditions and authentication

The audit revealed that School-assessed Coursework tasks were almost exclusively completed under test conditions. This allowed for schools and teachers to have greater confidence in the authentication of student work. The change in the study design, which requires teachers to use different task types for each of the two outcomes in Unit 4, has meant that teachers have not varied the conditions under which the task is run when needing to change the task type.

Most tasks used by teachers to assess students were between 60 and 90 minutes in length.

Assessment

* Most schools used the suggested performance descriptors in the Support materials to assess the School-assessed Coursework tasks or a modified set of the performance descriptors when assessing using an essay. When used to assess student achievement in an essay this was a useful approach. Most schools when modifying the performance descriptors either added marks to each of the criteria or reworded the descriptors in the rubric to refer to their specific religious traditions or religious denominations. Using these performance descriptors ensured that all parts of the area of study were being assessed.
* Some schools chose to use school developed marking criteria to assess student work. In some cases, these school developed marking criteria were dot points of suggested answers or marking allocations, such as two marks for ‘context’ and four marks for ‘challenge’. In these circumstances students are unable to understand the way in which they are assessed and therefore to improve or work towards what was required.

Format and structure

As with Unit 3, the audit submission showed that teachers have been accustomed to utilising the same tasks over the course of a unit. In many cases the tasks which were used to assess both outcomes in Unit 4 were the same and were designed to replicate the type of questions used in the end-of-year examination. Often these tasks were separated into two sections, Section A with short-answer questions and Section B with extended responses questions including some with multiple parts. The new study design requires that the tasks used to assess the outcomes in Unit 4 each need to be of a different task type. In some cases, schools indicated that they were using different task types, such as structured questions and extended responses, but the tasks submitted to the audit were not materially different in any significant way.

* When teachers submitted tasks that were compliant with the different task types, the most common approach was to use structured questions and extended responses to assess Area of Study 1 and an essay or case study to assess Area of Study 2. This approach allowed for greater analysis in Area of Study 2 regarding the interaction of religious traditions or religious denominations and society. However, it often meant there was limited scope for comparison and analysis in Area of Study 1 where the questions included lower order command terms such as ‘identify’, ‘outline’, and ‘describe’.
* When teachers chose to use a case study to assess Area of Study 2, the amount of stimulus material used was often appropriate in length. The most common approach was to select between one and three sources for students to refer to in extended responses questions, limiting the material for students to read to no more than one page. This approach was often successful and was described in the Support materials on the VCAA website in the sample approach to developing assessment tasks.

Specific information

Unit 4 – School-assessed Coursework

Outcome 1

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse and compare stances and supporting responses taken by religious traditions or religious denominations as they are challenged.

**Task type options**

The students’ performance in Outcome 1 can be assessed using one or more of the following: analytical exercises, case studies, essays, extended responses, structured questions, visual analyses.

The task type selected must be different to the task type used to assess the other outcome in Unit 4. This outcome contributes 50 marks out of 100 marks allocated to School-assessed Coursework for Unit 4.

Most tasks submitted for review focused on the description and identification of the challenges faced by religious traditions. This approach covered the majority of the key knowledge dot points but failed to address the key skills which required examination, analysis and comparison of stances and responses. Where there were questions related to the comparison of stances and responses, it was often a minor component of the task which meant that students could complete the task and be awarded high marks without having to compare stances and supporting responses. Teachers should refer to the VCAA Glossary of command termsto select command terms that allow students to demonstrate the extent of their learning.

Drawing on the full range of task terms specified in the key skills and glossary of command terms, for example ‘examine’ and ‘analyse’, provides students with the opportunity to demonstrate all aspects of the outcome that require comparison of the challenges studied.

Outcome 2

On completion of this unit the student should be able to discuss the interactions within a religious tradition or religious denomination and between a religious tradition or religious denomination and wider society in relation to a significant challenge and evaluate the influence of the stances and responses on these interactions.

**Task type options**

The students’ performance in Outcome 2 can be assessed using one or more of the following: analytical exercises, case studies, essays, extended responses, structured questions, visual analyses.

The task type selected must be different to the task type used to assess the other outcome in Unit 4.

This outcome contributes 50 marks out of 100 marks allocated to School-assessed Coursework for Unit 4.

This area of study requires students to understand the interaction between a religious tradition or religious denomination and society. All tasks submitted to the audit indicated the use of specific questions regarding the influence of stances and supporting responses on the interaction of the selected religious tradition or religious denomination and society, or clear criteria in the performance descriptors being used. Where schools chose to use an essay to assess Outcome 2, this requirement to analyse the interaction was often clearly stated in the description of the task. When teachers chose to use a case study to assess Outcome 2, it was rare that the source material included in the task was oriented towards the interaction of society and the studied religious tradition or religious denomination. Often the source material was primary or secondary source material about the challenge itself or its source, and rarely about the interaction of religion and society.