

Developing the Humanities area of learning and experience (AoLE)

Executive summary

Our inspection work in 2024-2025 found variability in the implementation of the Humanities area of learning and experience (AoLE) across schools. Where practice was strongest, schools prioritised Humanities and allocated sufficient teaching time, enabling collaborative curriculum design, purposeful professional learning and clear leadership. In these cases, teachers supported pupils well to make connections across disciplines. They planned for meaningful progression in knowledge, understanding and skills. Strong practice included rich learning experiences that nurtured curiosity, identity, and a sense of cynefin.

However, in too many cases, provision lacked coherence, balance or depth. Weaknesses included insufficient attention to progression, underdeveloped disciplinary skills, superficial treatment of content, and inequitable focus across subjects. Religion, values and ethics (RVE) and geography were particularly underrepresented. A lack of subject-specific professional learning limited staff development. In addition, a lack of appropriately specialist staff and insufficient access to enriching opportunities impact negatively on pupils' experiences. These findings highlight the need for a stronger strategic focus on teaching, planning and equity across the Humanities AoLE.

Developing the Humanities AoLE

Curriculum for Wales gives schools the opportunity to design their own curricula within a national framework. The humanities AoLE was designated as one of the six areas of learning and experience and includes geography; history; RVE; business; and social science. RVE is a statutory requirement of the Curriculum for Wales and is mandatory for all pupils from ages 3 to 16. As these disciplines often share common themes and concepts, the creation of the Humanities area of learning and experience was designed to help pupils make connections between and across these disciplines. The statements of what matters code sets out the mandatory aspects on which all maintained schools and funded non-maintained nursery settings must base their curriculum. The Humanities AoLE includes five of the statements of what matters. Following consultation in spring 2021, the Welsh Government strengthened these statements to ensure that 'the study of Welsh history in all its diversity and complexity is both explicit and compulsory for schools and settings'¹ [The Curriculum for Wales – Clarifying the Humanities area in relation to the history of Wales and the world \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](https://gov.wales/the-curriculum-for-wales-clarifying-the-humanities-area-in-relation-to-the-history-of-wales-and-the-world).

Through our inspection work in 2024-2025, we found that schools have adopted a wide range of approaches to implementing the Humanities AoLE. The effectiveness of these approaches varied substantially across Wales, with pupils' experiences dependent on the quality of teaching, curriculum planning and leadership. In secondary and all-age schools, pupils in Years 7, 8 and 9 did not always have opportunities to study humanities disciplines in sufficient depth. As a result, pupils did not always have the necessary skills when starting their GCSE courses. This often had a negative impact

on the number of pupils choosing a humanities subject.

Where the Humanities AoLE had been successfully implemented, leaders ensured that the AoLE and relevant subjects were prioritised appropriately and allocated sufficient teaching time. Leaders enabled staff to design and regularly review and adapt the curriculum. This included opportunities for teachers to collaborate with others, undertake professional learning to develop pedagogy and take part in quality assurance processes. Middle leaders were clear about their area of responsibility and regularly evaluated their curricula to identify how well teaching and learning experiences supported pupils to make progress. They adapted provision effectively where improvement was needed.

Overarching messages

In many primary and secondary schools we saw strong practice in the humanities. In these schools, most pupils engaged effectively in their lessons and made strong progress in their learning. Teachers:

- in primary schools built on the strong practice seen in non-maintained settings where practitioners nurtured children's curiosity; this enabled them to develop their sense of identity and encouraged them to explore the world around them
- showed great enthusiasm and passion for the humanities and had high expectations of what pupils could do and learn
- focused strongly on effective teaching to support the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and discipline specific skills
- considered precisely what they wanted pupils to learn over time and planned purposefully for progression
- developed and deepened pupils' understanding, for example by helping pupils to make connections within and across areas and topics
- addressed misconceptions and used effective questioning to probe pupils' thinking
- made effective use of assessment to support pupils' needs and next steps; in these instances, teachers ensured that all pupils, including those with additional needs (ALN) and those from low-income households, were well supported
- planned authentic and relevant opportunities for pupils to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills through meaningful humanities learning experiences
- provided a rich range of learning experiences, including opportunities for geographical fieldwork and educational visits to places of historical, religious and cultural significance
- showed a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion. They helped pupils understand the histories and experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities and LGBTQ+ individuals.
- shared a clear vision for the humanities in their schools
- were supported by leaders who prioritised professional learning, allowed time to reflect on pedagogy and curriculum and evaluated the impact of teaching in the humanities thoughtfully

In schools where the development of the Humanities AoLE was less effective, teachers:

- did not ensure that pupils had opportunities to make progress in the humanities well enough; they did not ensure sufficient balance between developing pupils' knowledge, understanding and discipline-specific skills

- did not consider pedagogy well enough; often, they relied too heavily on simplistic step-by-step processes, which did not fully develop pupils' understanding and allow them to apply their learning independently
- focused too closely on the content of the curriculum and 'covering' topics; in these instances, the curriculum tended to 'hop' from one topic to another with little consideration of chronology or opportunity to make meaningful links between places or historical periods – often, teachers did not consider the impact of specific events on wider developments within and across the historical periods studied, and this had a negative effect on pupils' understanding
- who were teaching outside their specialist area did not receive sufficient support and professional learning to help them develop their own knowledge and understanding and pedagogy
- did not ensure that cross-curricular themes were based on logical and authentic links, limiting the opportunities for pupils to make meaningful connections across and within topics
- had low expectations of what pupils could do and learn and did not plan well enough for progression within the humanities; activities lacked challenge or pupils repeatedly completed similar tasks across year groups and, in a few instances, poorly designed resources limited pupils' opportunities to develop and deepen their knowledge and understanding of humanities
- did not plan opportunities for pupils to develop their knowledge and understanding of the local area and Wales well enough; often teachers did not help pupils make purposeful links between local, Welsh, British and international contexts
- did not take account of the diversity of Wales and the impact of colonisation well enough; topics were over simplified and taught without due consideration for the experiences of people and, in a few instances, schools included unsuitable activities and too often presented a singular narrative – they missed opportunities to show examples of how Black, Asian and minority ethnic people and communities had contributed positively to society

A lack of professional learning to support the detailed development of the humanities, including the development of the disciplinary skills within the humanities, exacerbated the areas of improvement noted here.

Non-maintained nursery sector

Many non-maintained nursery settings embraced the ethos of the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings²[Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings](#). They introduced children to elements of the humanities through exploring their localities. Through these experiences, practitioners promoted in children a sense of belonging and pride, celebrated the diverse culture of modern Wales, and supported children to develop a sense of *cynefin*.

Many leaders provided beneficial opportunities for children to explore their local community, including discovering nature and visiting businesses and sites of historical interest. These experiences provided meaningful opportunities for children to broaden their understanding of the wider world and to develop a sense of awe and wonder.

In most settings, practitioners supported children well to develop their understanding of values such as honesty, fairness and respect. However, in a few settings, opportunities to learn about the lives and beliefs of people from different cultural backgrounds were limited.

Primary phase

A majority of primary schools inspected had adapted their provision in response to Curriculum for Wales suitably. They recognised that the humanities provided valuable contexts for the development of cross curricular skills. A majority of schools included opportunities for pupils to develop their sense of *cynefin* and identity. They often stimulated pupils' learning using local visits and visitors to enhance their experiences. However, too often, schools did not consider progression in the humanities well enough. For example, although pupils' recall of historical events was appropriate, they did not have enough opportunities to engage with historical sources to help them begin to consider how the past may have been represented in different ways and influenced by identity, experiences, viewpoints and beliefs.

In many schools, the Humanities AoLE tended to focus primarily on history. As a result, pupils did not always have enough opportunities to develop their understanding of aspects such as the geography of the local area and how this linked to the wider world. Pupils struggled to make connections in their learning. Read about how [Ysgol Gymraeg Pwll Coch](#) enables pupils to celebrate Welshness and diversity.

In many primary schools, the curriculum often helped pupils learn about major world religions including important celebrations such as Diwali, Easter and Eid. However, pupils did not have enough opportunities to consider the world through the RVE disciplinary lens and sub lenses³. These help schools and settings understand how topics and themes can be viewed. In RVE, sub lenses include themes such as the search for meaning and purpose, identity and belonging, values and ethics and the journey of life, outlined in Curriculum for Wales. In some instances, this promoted a superficial view of religion and spiritual aspects. In a majority of schools, the planning for RVE was at an early stage of development. Schools generally allocated little time to RVE within the school's humanities curriculum.

Many primary schools provided valuable opportunities for pupils to consider equality and diversity. In a few, staff had successfully incorporated this cross-cutting theme, ensuring that the stories and contributions of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people and communities were considered appropriately. However, too often the people represented were limited to a few well-known international role-models and did not always reflect the rich and diverse experiences of Wales well enough. In a few schools, provision to develop pupils' wider understanding of the diverse nature of modern Wales was underdeveloped. Opportunities for pupils to learn about a broad range of cultures, identities and experiences were limited.

In a minority of primary schools where stronger practice was observed in the humanities, staff benefited from worthwhile professional learning opportunities, which focused on developing the humanities curriculum whilst effectively taking progression into account. In a very few examples, schools had worked effectively with others to develop an understanding of appropriate progression.

Secondary phase

In secondary schools, the Humanities AoLE led schools to review the way they taught the humanities disciplines. When first trialling the curriculum, a majority of schools moved to teach the humanities through an integrated approach, anticipating the potential benefits of increased collaboration across subject areas. Where this worked well, leaders had planned meticulously how pupils would develop their knowledge, understanding and skills across the statements of what matters. They provided

effective professional learning to ensure that all members of staff had the necessary skills and pedagogy to teach across the humanities. However, more recently, we saw secondary schools adopt models where pupils were taught by subject specialists within separate history, geography and religion, values and ethics lessons. This was often driven by apprehension amongst leaders that pupils did not always develop the required specialist knowledge, understanding and skills in enough depth to support their progression and prepare them for their GCSE studies under an integrated model.

In a minority of schools, we saw effective practice within the humanities. In the best examples, leaders ensured that teaching was of a consistently high standard across the AoLE. As a result, pupils made strong progress in their knowledge, understanding and discipline specific skills and could make connections across their learning. Leaders used robust quality assurance processes based on a range of first-hand evidence to identify strengths and areas for improvement in teaching and learning. They used this information wisely and purposefully when planning for improvement. General weaknesses included:

- a lack of opportunities for pupils to engage with a suitable range of humanities subjects within the AoLE; this included limited opportunities for pupils to study physical geography and develop their geographical skills, including practical fieldwork
- too few opportunities for pupils to consider recent relevant geographical case studies and examples
- limited opportunities to visit places of historical, religious or cultural interest
- weak planning resulting in pupils considering a limited range of topics or historical events; pupils had few opportunities to study different periods and perspectives such as political, social, economic or cultural aspects in depth, and this often led them to develop an overly simplistic understanding of the world
- a lack of opportunity for pupils to analyse historical sources and consider multiple perspectives and interpretations
- a lack of opportunity to consider a wide range of religious and non-religious views on complex topics and engage with the sub lenses noted in the RVE curriculum guidance
- few opportunities to consider business within the humanities area of learning and experience in Years 7, 8 and 9
- little planning to help pupils build on their previous knowledge and understanding of the humanities from their studies in the primary phase

In a minority of schools inspected in 2024-2025, teachers' planning for the development of pupils' cross-curricular skills was effective. In the best examples, teachers developed meaningful opportunities for pupils to develop their oracy, reading, writing and numeracy skills in the context of the humanities. These opportunities were planned effectively to ensure that they provided suitable challenge and allowed pupils to make appropriate progress. In the most effective history lessons, teachers often developed pupils' advanced reading skills, choosing historical sources that challenged pupils to use sophisticated inference and deduction to consider the reliability and usefulness of sources. In a minority of schools, pupils benefited from opportunities to produce meaningful written work across humanities disciplines. Staff at Fitzalan High School plan effectively for pupils' progression in the humanities, including strong provision to develop pupils' understanding of histories, stories and contributions of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people.

In a majority of schools, shortcomings in provision meant that pupils did not develop their numeracy

skills well enough across the curriculum. In the humanities, numeracy tasks sometimes lacked relevance and rigour. For example, teachers asked pupils to calculate the circumference of a shell hole in history or restricted pupils' development of numeracy in geography by focusing only on basic graphs. Often, few opportunities were provided for pupils to analyse data independently. In the humanities, the development of pupils' digital skills was often focused on using the internet to find information and the creation of digital content such as presentations and, in a few cases, podcasts and short videos. Overall, the provision for developing pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital skills was not effective enough in a majority of secondary schools inspected.

A very few secondary schools continued to allow pupils to choose option subjects in Year 8. As a result, all pupils did not have an opportunity to learn across the full range of statements of what matters in Year 9. In addition, in a minority of instances, leaders did not ensure a suitable balance between disciplinary areas within the humanities, with more time dedicated to some areas than others. This was sometimes because of a lack of specialist staff caused by difficulties in recruitment, particularly in geography and RVE. This was exacerbated by a lack of professional learning for specialist subjects to help staff develop their expertise in the humanities.

It is too early to see the impact of Curriculum for Wales on examination entries for GCSE. However, the number of pupils entered for a GCSE qualification in geography has fallen since 2022. The number of pupils entered for a history GCSE has increased slightly over the same period. Although the number of pupils entered for a religious studies qualification has varied slightly over time, it reflects that all pupils in a few schools, particularly faith schools, sit a qualification in the subject. The number of pupils entered for a business studies GCSE increased sharply between 2022 and 2023 before falling slightly in 2024. A detailed table showing the numbers of pupils undertaking qualifications in the humanities can be found [here](#).

All-age schools

The messages included in the primary and secondary phase sections within this report are replicated in the all-age schools we inspected in 2024-2025. A few all-age schools inspected this year planned for the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills across the whole age-range effectively. This included teachers' planning for the Humanities AoLE in a very few cases. Pupils at [Ysgol Henry Richard](#) benefited from valuable opportunities to develop their understanding of their heritage through rich learning experiences.

Initial Teacher Education

The annual report for 2023-2024 outlined that the number of students on secondary initial teacher humanities education programmes has declined by nearly a half since 2014. None of the partnerships have succeeded in recruiting to their overall targets over the last decade. The numbers of students recruited to secondary subjects within the humanities, particularly geography and business, is an area of concern.

Questions for reflection

- Do leaders ensure that pupils have the time they need to develop knowledge, understanding and skills in the Humanities AoLE?
- How well do leaders at all levels evaluate the effectiveness of their humanities curriculum? Do they consider the impact of provision on pupils' progress and attainment, including how well they

develop their knowledge, understanding and skills over time?

- Do leaders consider a range of first-hand evidence when making their evaluations, including observations of teaching, work scrutiny, data and pupils' views? How well do they triangulate the findings to identify strengths and areas for improvement?
- How well do leaders plan for improvement in the humanities? Do they identify clear success criteria which outline the desired impact of any changes to provision on pupils' progress?
- Is the humanities curriculum sufficiently broad and balanced? Does the curriculum favour some disciplines over others? Do schools consider carefully enough the cross-cutting themes of diversity and human rights?
- How well are teachers developing their pedagogical approaches to help pupils learn in the humanities? (For example, when teaching pupils to interpret and analyse data in geography or business, when analysing sources in history or when considering multiple viewpoints on complex topics in RVE or the social sciences)
- How well do teachers plan how they will introduce key concepts and develop pupils' breadth and depth of knowledge to support them to make progress over time?
- How well do teachers support pupils to use a variety of disciplinary skills with increasing accuracy and fluency? (This includes how they help pupils to frame questions, use evidence to construct and support answers and represent and interpret enquiry results.)
- How well do teachers plan opportunities for pupils to transfer their existing knowledge, understanding and skills into new and unfamiliar contexts? Does the humanities curriculum allow pupils to deepen their understanding?
- How well do teachers work together to plan for the progressive development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills in the humanities during transition from one phase to another, including primary to secondary phase?
- Are aspects of the curriculum tackled superficially? For example, by cherry picking the sensational without developing the context to allow pupils to deepen their understanding?
- How well do teachers plan for increasingly sophisticated enquiry questions?
- How well do teachers help pupils develop their independence (opportunities to find suitable information, make predictions and hypotheses, make judgements about reliability and utility, or analyse data)?
- How well do teachers help pupils:
 - understand the distinct skills, knowledge and understanding of disciplines within the humanities?
 - make links within and between periods and places?
 - identify similarities and differences?
 - identify changes and continuities?
 - develop an understanding of chronology through careful sequencing of the curriculum?
 - use their understanding of concepts to identify connections in their learning?

Additional resources

Esytn (2021) [The teaching of Welsh history including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic history, identity and culture](#). Cardiff: Estyn

Estyn (2025) [Recruitment and retention – Adroddiad Blynnyddol | Annual Report](#)

EWC (2023) [Registered Newly Qualified School Teachers \(NQTs\) – 2023.](#)

Ofsted (2023) [Getting our bearings: geography subject report.](#)

Ofsted (2023) [Rich encounters with the past: history subject report](#)

Ofsted (2024) [Deep and meaningful? The religious education subject report](#)

In a minority of primary schools and a few secondary schools, we saw strong practice in the humanities. Most pupils, in these instances, engaged effectively in their lessons and made strong progress in their learning.

In these schools, teachers:

- showed great enthusiasm and passion for the humanities subjects and had high expectations of what pupils could do and learn
- focused strongly on effective teaching to support the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and discipline specific skills
- planned their questions effectively to help pupils deepen their knowledge and understanding; they probed pupils' thinking well
- considered precisely what they wanted pupils to learn over time and had planned purposefully for progression
- considered possible misconceptions and planned how they could address these within their teaching
- made effective use of assessment to adapt their approaches to support pupils' needs and next steps; in these instances, teachers ensured that pupils of all abilities and needs were well supported
- considered the order in which concepts were taught to develop and deepen pupils' understanding, for example considering how they could help pupils make connections within and across subject areas and topics
- planned authentic and relevant opportunities for pupils to progressively develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills; these opportunities helped pupils develop both their subject and cross-curricular skills meaningfully
- considered the learning and experiences they wanted to provide during the pupils' school career including opportunities for geographical fieldwork and educational visits to places of historical, religious and cultural significance

In a few primary schools and a minority of secondary schools we identified areas for improvement in the humanities area of learning and experience:

- Leaders did not ensure that pupils had opportunities to make progress against the five statements of what matters in the humanities well enough. They did not ensure sufficient balance between developing pupils' knowledge, understanding and discipline specific skills. For example, pupils were given few opportunities to develop geographical skills or did not have enough opportunities to deepen their understanding of religious and non-religious views.
- Teachers did not consider teaching and pedagogy well enough within the humanities. In these

instances, teaching relied too heavily on using simplistic step-by-step processes which did not fully develop pupils understanding and allow them to apply their learning independently. For example, when discussing the usefulness and reliability of historical sources.

- Cross-curricular themes were based on tenuous links limiting the opportunities for pupils to make meaningful connections across and within topics. As a result, pupils did not develop their knowledge and understanding well enough and were left with misconceptions.
- Teachers' planning focussed too closely on the content of the curriculum and 'covering' topics. In these instances, the curriculum tended to 'hop' from one topic to another with little consideration of chronology or opportunity to make meaningful links between places or historical periods. For example, schemes of work focused on superficial topics such as Jack the Ripper and the Titanic. Often little consideration was given to their context and if they had any impact on the events of the period.
- Teachers did not plan opportunities for pupils to develop their knowledge and understanding of the local area and Wales well enough. Often teachers did not help pupils make purposeful links between local, Welsh, British and international contexts.
- Teachers had low expectations of what pupils could do and learn and did not plan well enough for progression within the humanities. Activities and tasks lacked challenge or pupils repeatedly completed similar tasks and activities across year groups. In a few instances, poorly designed worksheets and booklets limited pupils' opportunities to develop and deepen their knowledge and understanding within the humanities subjects.
- Teachers' planning did not take diversity and de-colonising the curriculum into account well-enough. For example, topics such as empire were over simplified and taught without due consideration for the experiences of native peoples. In a few instances, schools included unsuitable activities such as writing a diary of a slave. Schools too often presented a singular narrative and missed opportunities to show examples of how Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people and communities had contributed positively to society.

A lack of professional learning to support the detailed development of the humanities, including the development of the disciplinary skills within the humanities, has exacerbated the areas of improvement noted here.

Numbers undertaking qualifications in the humanities

Summer 2019 – Summer 2024

GCSE

| Subject | Entries 2025 | Entries 2024 | Entries 2023 | Entries 2022 | Entries 2021 | Entries 2020 | Entries 2019 |
|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Business studies | 3,785 | 4,155 | 4,225 | 3,268 | 3,046 | 3,098 | 2,902 |
| Geography | 6,808 | 6,961 | 7,016 | 7,550 | 7,433 | 7,294 | 7,161 |
| History | 8,945 | 9,544 | 9,390 | 9,016 | 8,933 | 9,343 | 9,397 |

| Subject | Entries 2025 | Entries 2024 | Entries 2023 | Entries 2022 | Entries 2021 | Entries 2020 | Entries 2019 |
|-------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Religious studies | 8,916 | 10,171 | 9,687 | 9,833 | 10,138 | 9,708 | 10,198 |

The number of pupils entered for A level subjects in the humanities has fallen steadily since 2022, with a particularly notable decrease in geography in 2024.

A level

| Subject | Entries 2025 | Entries 2024 | Entries 2023 | Entries 2022 | Entries 2021 | Entries 2020 | Entries 2019 |
|-------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Business studies | 620 | 678 | 782 | 785 | 762 | 687 | 707 |
| Geography | 708 | 741 | 957 | 1,042 | 959 | 821 | 941 |
| History | 1,223 | 1,257 | 1,360 | 1,614 | 1,378 | 1,464 | 1,661 |
| Religious studies | 543 | 503 | 579 | 761 | 734 | 864 | 935 |

Sources:

[GCSE entries and results \(pupils in Year 11/pupils aged 15\) by subject group](#)

[Examination results: September 2024 to August 2025 \(provisional\) | GOV.WALES](#)