

## Student Reading

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Emmaus College students (from left) Stephanie Meerwald, Cameron Devey, Violet Wallis and Brian Wiltshire. Photo: Eddie Jim

# Mixed feelings on faith

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One in four high school students do not have a positive attitude to people of the Muslim and Hindu faiths, a major study of "religious literacy" among Australian teens has found.

But the study also found 90 per cent of people aged 13 to 18 believe Australia's religious diversity makes it a better place to live.

This is despite the fact that half of teens surveyed – 52 per cent – said they do not identify with a religion.

The three-year study, which analysed the views of more than 1200 students in three states, also found that teens who received a general education about religion and spirituality were more accepting of other people's beliefs.

Forty-five per cent of Australian high school students are taught nothing about religions and spiritual beliefs; in government schools the figure is 56 per cent.

The study's authors argue general religious education – as distinct from specific religious instruction, often taught by church-based volunteers –



should be taught more widely to better reflect Australia's growing racial and religious diversity.

"Religious literacy is not just knowing facts; it's also understanding religion's place in society, its importance to communities and individuals," said Anna Halafoff of Deakin University, one of the authors of the study.

The study of Australian teens' understanding of religion and attitude towards religious diversity has revealed there is broad tolerance, but limited understanding, of different faiths.

Those who are taught nothing

about religion in school are more likely to have negative perceptions of other faiths, the study found.

The study, *Religious literacy of Australia's Gen Z teens*, found 26 per cent of high school students did not have a positive view of Muslims, and 25 per cent did not have a positive view of Hindus.

"I think that's a disturbing statistic," Dr Halafoff said.

Nineteen per cent do not like Buddhists, 15 per cent do not like Christians and 18 per cent do not like non-religious people, the study said.

Co-ed Catholic school Emmaus College incorporates study of various faiths, including Judaism and Islam, in its religious education curriculum across years 7 to 12.

Director of religious education in faith Anne McLachlan said: "I think it helps with the sense of the holistic person and understanding the world in which you live."

Principal Tony Hirst said he sympathised with other schools struggling with additions to an already packed curriculum but that including general religious education was worth the effort.

"It's always a vexed issue trying to incorporate every single aspect, but for us it's non-negotiable," he said. "It has helped us build our culture of inclusion."

Violet Wallis, who is in year 12 at the Vermont South school, said she could see the benefits of learning about other faiths.

"I think it will help us in the real world in the sense that we can be more tolerant and open," she said.

Dr Halafoff said most government schools in Australia did not have religion education embedded in the curriculum. "Victoria is the only state that has two dedicated sections in the curriculum from year K to year 10 on learning about diverse religions, and it was only introduced in 2016," she said.

The study also found students' grasp of faiths was often superficial.

Students were shown images integral to a particular religion, such as the Dalai Lama. "In one focus group, many recognised him, some just said he was a Buddhist monk; only one student had a deep knowledge of his position," Dr Halafoff said.

<https://www.theage.com.au/education/teens-are-tolerant-but-uneducated-about-religion-study-finds-20200305-p547ch.html>