

Partners in Progress? An impact study of the 2016 Religious Education reforms in England

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Abstract

Recent educational reform in England has occasioned new interactions between the State, Universities, Faith Communities and Schools. Grounded in theories of 'powerful knowledge', the year 2016 saw the introduction of a suite of new public examinations designed to be a more rigorous test of the academic ability of English students matriculating at 16 and 18 years of age. In Religious Education, these state-driven changes deliberately involved religious stakeholders, universities and the 'faith school' sector. However, the curricula generated by this quad-fold interaction have had a mixed reception. Some welcome the renewed academic rigour, others regard the new curricula as overly academic, overtly confessional and ultimately off-putting. Themselves part of the agency for change, the authors outline the context of the reform and their empirical investigation into its actualities, particularly the impact upon the strategies of school leaders and heads of department. Though geographically and denominationally specific, the initial findings are quite striking and are relevant to any Religious Education initiatives where regional or national jurisdictions engage with Churches, Universities and Schools.

Keywords – Religious Education, Catholic, Church, Government, Schools, Universities.

Context

The involvement of faith communities in the patterning of school curricula for Religious Education manifests wide variation across Europe. The magisterial multi-volume work curated by the Vienna Forum for Religion and Theology surveys a magnificent landscape as diverse as the land mass itself (Rothgangel, Jäggle et al, 2014-). Even adjacent countries such as France and Belgium exemplify contrasting approaches to the subject. The principle of *laïcité* in France means Religious Education is not part of the core curriculum though faith communities can make provision for it as an added extra (Willaime, 2014). By contrast, in Belgium, RE generally occupies a more central place, not least due to the continuing importance of the Catholic school sector (Derroite et al, 2014). This allows several levels of interaction between state, church, university and school (Boeve, 2016) ranging from ecclesial involvement in the appointment of RE teachers to university academics researching the nature of Catholic identity (Pollefeyt & Bouwens, 2010).

In terms of this article, the Belgian pattern is perhaps closer to what is currently happening across the Channel in Britain, where the status of the subject as a compulsory component of the curriculum remains underpinned by legislative guarantee dating back to the 1944 Education Act (Gates & Jackson, 2014). As in Belgium, faith communities have been long-standing stakeholders; this in the UK has cemented a 'dual system' whereby schools affiliated to a specific faith tradition may make fractional contributions to capital expenditure but otherwise enjoy the full financial support of the state alongside those of a non-religious character. This 'faith sector' accounts for some 24% of primary and 17% of secondary schools, most of which are Anglican or Catholic (Clark & Woodhead, 2018).

If the 'dual system' is the most obvious mode of influence, a second strand comes through the teacher training colleges founded by faith communities. Historically supported by the State, many (like those of the authors) have become full Universities, essentially operating like any other in the public sector but retaining ecclesial influence through governance and institutional strategy. Thirdly, RE in England is also supported by the 'SACRE' network of *Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education* that are made up of representatives of local faith communities. Not only do SACRE members endeavour to provide expertise and support for existing classroom RE, they are often involved with the way a Local Authority periodically re-shapes curriculum RE through the work of an Agreed Syllabus Conference. Though not binding for state-funded non-Christian, Catholic and many Anglican schools, their work has hitherto helped tailor RE at the local level to reflect religious demographics and other concerns (Gates & Jackson, 2014).

Of late, however, a series of moves on the chessboard of educational policy have 'unsettled the settlement.' These changes need some explaining since they have had far-reaching implications for the subject, for teachers, for school leaders, for pupils and for faith communities involved in education (Towey, 2016). It is in response to this legislative change that the authors wish to offer a specific case study example detailing the impact of the reform upon Catholic sector secondary schools in England. First, by outlining the politico-pedagogical context for the reform and the deliberate ecclesial involvement of 'faith universities', and secondly, by profiling the current empirical study being undertaken by the authors to assess how this same interaction between state, Church, University has impacted upon RE in schools.

The 2016 Curriculum Reforms in England and Wales

The year 2016 saw the implementation of reformed curricula for 14-19-year-old pupils in England and Wales across a variety of subjects, including RE. The changes were both politically and pedagogically driven. On the one hand, there was a desire on the part of Government to make the examinations at age 16 (the General Certificate of Secondary Education [GCSE]) and those at age 18/19 (Advanced Level [A-Level]) more rigorous. This desire was personified by the figure of Michael Gove, Education Minister in the Cameron-Clegg Coalition Government from 2010-2015. A general sense that standards were falling and perennial disappointment at *PISA* rankings coalesced with concerns expressed by Universities that 'grade inflation' had made it difficult for them to identify intellectually agile candidates (Finn, 2015). The pedagogical driver came largely from educational theorists wedded to the 'powerful knowledge' proposals associated with Michael Young. Succinctly expressed, powerful knowledge is distinct, systematic and specialized. It deliberately takes students beyond their experience which in turn fosters social mobility and cultural empowerment (cf. Young, 2010 & Morgan, 2015).

Attempting to achieve 'more in four years than his predecessors had in forty' (Hands, 2015), the speed of Gove's reform was a major concern for teachers and the 'turn to content' was equally daunting. In the case of RE, while some (e.g. Kueh, 2018) were supportive of the pedagogical agenda, a shift in the 'epistemic ground' of RE towards philosophy and ethics

had long been taking place (Conroy, 2016). Explicitly facilitated by Government, however, this time faith sector stakeholders were invited to set curricula for 14-16 based on a matrix of beliefs, sources, practices and forms of expression such that specific religious traditions became core to the subject once again. They were also invited to contribute to the shape of the revised curricula in RE for 16-19. Not surprisingly, they greeted the reform warmly (DfE 2014b).

If these decisions appeared to empower faith communities and augment the status of RE, further policy decisions seemed to be working in the opposite direction. First, the introduction of the English Baccalaureate ('EBacc') in 2010 did not include RE as a component discipline. Given that EBacc attainment was timetabled to become a key performance measure by 2020, this implicitly threatened the status of the subject and its place on the school timetable (Long, 2016). Secondly, the Government was also pursuing a policy of 'academization'. Rooted in a desire to make schools more independent, entrepreneurial and ambitious, it meant increasing numbers of schools were effectively free of city and regional council interference and not obliged to pay attention to faith community stakeholders involved in local SACREs – a matter noted by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in 2013. Thirdly, although the atheistic British Humanist Association ultimately failed in an attempt to be considered as a *distinct* faith community in the reformed guidelines, their indefatigable lobbying was successful enough to ensure the DfE included familiarity with their worldview among the primary aims of the revised subject content (DfE, 2015a). Fourthly, dubious evidence that some schools in Birmingham were at risk of being infiltrated by religious extremists led to the 'Trojan Horse' crisis and a predictable media outcry. Although the recommendations of the subsequent enquiry focussed solely and soberly on school governance (DfE 2015b), the Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan, focussed on pupils and insisted that 25% of the curriculum be dedicated to a second religion. This abruptly challenged the autonomy of the State-funded 'Dual System' of Faith Schools – if they wanted to obtain a public qualification, they had to study another religion. Moreover, it presented another problem for hard-pressed teachers who now had to master a different faith tradition to examination standard (Whittle, 2016). The outcome was that just as more was being demanded of practitioners, perceptions regarding their subject were being diminished nationally and interfaith structures of support via SACREs were weakened locally.

Academics in the Theology and Religious Studies departments of the University sector were also concerned at developments in this, the hinterland of their subject. During the first half of 2014 they were consulted by the Government on the A-Level, and their views fed into proposals published by the DfE in November 2014 (DfE, 2014a). Under these proposals, the Philosophy and Ethics component of any future A-Level would have been reduced to no more than half the total award. It could be argued that this would have facilitated a more seamless transition into undergraduate study, but it was met by opposition from teachers who were by now much better versed in meta-ethics than in meta-narratives and faced the prospect of developing another year of new material at A-level. Disagreements were intense and led to a somewhat acrimonious public dispute between well-known educationalist Peter Vardy and the Catholic Education Service (Vardy, 2015). The protest ultimately found favour with the Department of Education and the decision was made to insist that the reformed A-Level could still retain Philosophy and Ethics as 66% of the subject matter but

that religion or sacred texts must comprise at least 33% of the curriculum work (Long, 2016).

At the risk of ossifying a selection of binaries, the interaction between government and faith stakeholders may be summarized as follows:

POSITIVE		NEGATIVE	
Raising the Status of RE	A compulsory subject, it was included in the suite of reforms designed to make 14-19 examinations more rigorous.	Diminishing the status.	RE was not included among the core subjects that can be combined to gain the 'English Baccalaureate (EBacc), a key indicator of school performance.
Engagement with faith community	Following consultations, the essential beliefs, sources, practices and forms of expression of faith communities became normative in DfE subject matrices.	Disengagement with faith community	Schools incentivized to become independent of Local Authorities, rendering them unaccountable to SACREs for providing statutory RE, still less examined RE.
Autonomy affirmed	The dual system affirmed, examined RE (14-16) could comprise 75% from a single tradition.	Autonomy denied	All state funded schools were instructed to study a second religion as 25% of the GCSE (14-16) qualification.
Importance of religious perspective	The reform emphasized 'insider' viewpoint of faith communities – eschewing the classic sociological approach and its privileging of the 'outside observer'/ agnostic position.	Importance of non-religious perspective	The reform insisted that non-religious viewpoints be considered – oddly making 'non-religion' the common reference point for each tradition.
Religious component of A-Level	Affirmed- the reforms challenged the domination of philosophy and ethics	Religious component of A-Level	Denied – Government reversed decision to mandate that Philosophy and Ethics be limited to a maximum of 50%
Importance of Sacred Sources	The reform emphasized the importance of traditional sources of religious authority (e.g. sacred texts) underlining the specificity of traditions.	Unimportance of Sacred Sources	Options mapped by the DfE at GCSE and A-Level meant few curriculum designs allowed in-depth study of sacred scriptures and now risked embedding a proof texting approach.

The Catholic Response & the Origins of the CREDO Project

As a major stakeholder in the reform, the Catholic Church in England and Wales had to respond appropriately. Accounting for 22% of all pupils taking GCSE and some 20% of the A-level cohort, the custodians of the Catholic school system, the CES (Catholic Education

Service) and NBRIA (National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers) joined forces with representatives from a broad variety of Catholic Higher Education institutions to discuss this and other matters relating to the reform. Under the umbrella acronym of 'CREDO' (Catholic Religious Education Development Opportunities), this group, of which the authors were founder members, drew on the expertise of a dozen different academics from seven different University institutions. Quite quickly, the group came to one mind on a number of matters which have been detailed elsewhere and are essentially repeated below (cf. Towe and Robinson, 2018:46):

- 1) The requirement to include more Catholic theological input was warmly welcomed.
- 2) The advantages of teaching of a second religion outweighed the disadvantages.
- 3) Rather than studying the *beliefs* and *sources* of a second religion as proposed by the DfE, the group suggested that *beliefs* and *practices* would be far more congenial and useful in terms of pedagogy and inclusivity.
- 4) The domination of Philosophy of Religion and Ethics (PRE) at A-level was not desirable in terms of transition to traditional theological courses at university.
- 5) There should be no 'privileging of the agnostic position', discernible both in an uncritical comparative religions approach and in the design of numerous PRE specifications and assessments,
- 6) RE is not desiccated catechesis. Theology rooted in a confessional tradition can be properly critical. The new specifications should recognize that critical discourse occurs *within* not just *between* religious traditions.
- 7) Some refreshment of the philosophy of religion component by means of using more contemporary authors was desirable.

It was gratifying for the group to see echoes of its discussions (especially #3-6) finding their way into the eventual statutory documents of the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual, 2015). Moreover, under DfE headings of *sources*, *beliefs*, *practices* and *forms of expression*, the group was satisfactorily able to capture a spectrum of Catholic theological understanding in the regulatory 'annexe' by which examination boards were to design their specifications (DfE, 2015b). Subsequently, there were varying degrees of interaction between the group and all four external examination boards in the UK which grant public awards (AQA, Edexcel, Eduqas and OCR). Each eventually offered A-Level specifications with a Christian component and all except OCR offered a specification allowing specialization in Catholic Christianity at GCSE.

Yet herein lay something of an issue – in an atmosphere of widespread classroom practitioner anxiety, it was not entirely well received that university academics were influencing curriculum design when there were already concerns that the new qualifications would be too difficult for pupils anyway. To gauge the depth of these concerns, and to offer focussed in-service to teachers relating to the new specifications even as they were emerging, the CREDO group convened eleven gatherings across the country through 2015-17, hosted by St. Mary's Twickenham, Liverpool Hope, Leeds Trinity, Newman Birmingham and Heythrop London. Those held in 2015 took place before any of the new specifications had been finalized by the Exam Boards, and were attended by over 300 teachers in total during which Theology, Philosophy and Religious Studies academics from the host universities led topic based inputs. These 'CREDO' days drew not only on the Universities'

and CES staff, but also the broader Roman Catholic community e.g. by inviting CAFOD, the Catholic international development charity of England and Wales, to provide input into the Catholic Social teaching dimension of the new GCSE. The following year, two further events were held at St. Mary's University for classroom practitioners to explore core concepts relevant to all the examination pathways.

It was out of these events that the research project under review emerged. Following consultation with ecclesial stakeholders and university colleagues involved in CREDO, the outlines of the research were presented to an evening gathering of some 100 teachers, clergy and diocesan representatives in November 2016. This Westminster event also saw the roll out of a range of teacher resources and pupil text-books as publishers began to catch up with the pace of the reform. In July 2017, CREDO offered a further five university-based workshops and though attendees were fewer (140 from c. 40 schools), they provided an important opportunity to explore practical concerns around assessment and grading. These events were pivotal in maturing the strategy for the research under review since they drew attention to specific issues that any monitoring of the reform might attend to.

The Research Project

The research project thus began in earnest during Winter 2017-18 by trialling a set of emerging questions in two secondary schools. These questions then formed the basis of a series of semi-structured interviews with School Leaders, Heads of RE departments, other RE teachers and pupil focus groups with GCSE and A-Level students. Between late January and July 2018 the researchers visited 18 schools across the country. These were chosen to reflect not only geographical and diocesan diversity, but also the wide variety of schools that come under Catholic aegis. Some schools manifested wide ethnic diversity, others had almost none; some had over 90% Catholic pupils on roll, others as few as 30%; most were gender mixed, but all-girls and all-boys schools were also part of the picture. The key commonalities which were being sought, however, was that schools were essentially non-selective in terms of academic ability, that they had a commitment as far as possible to enter all students for the GCSE, and that the sample surveyed would provide an equal number of six from each of the three GCSE Examination boards which offered a Catholic pathway. This latter criterion was to avoid the possibility that the project might be imbalanced by the reactions of staff or pupils to the details of *one* examination specification rather than the challenge of the reform itself.

For the purpose of this paper, with its focus on responses to macro-level changes, only the interviews with senior management (coded P=Principal and M=member of management team) and Heads of Department (coded D) have been used, as these were the individuals responsible for implementing and overseeing those changes on the ground. Ethical clearance was sought and obtained independently from both universities, and full ethical protocols were followed. Informed written consent – including parental consent for all participants aged under eighteen – was obtained.

The research aims were conceived as follows:

- a. To map the implementation of the new awards across a range of educational settings.
- b. To identify good practice for broader dissemination.
- c. To identify gaps in resourcing and training, and to develop timely remedial strategies;
- d. To provide an initial report to the CES and NBRIA and analyse transcribed data using the MaxQDA programme after the close of the academic year 2017-18.
- e. To track the progress of the reform through cohorts completing studies in 2018-19.
- f. To stimulate ‘targeted response’ production of additional resources and training opportunities.

In terms of methodology, the authors’ membership of CREDO inevitably raised the question of their positionality; after all, they were investigating an educational intervention of which they themselves were agents. Though the study can therefore be classified as ‘insider research’, the complexity of the authors’ position *vis-a-vis* their subjects demands more subtle understanding. Increasingly, empirical scholars are questioning the binary opposition that marked earlier discussion of insider-outsider positionality. Instead, in her relationship with her subjects, the researcher is understood to stand on a continuum between the two extremes (Mercer, 2007) – occupying sometimes insider, sometimes outsider positions. Furthermore, multiple continua may in play: of age or gender, for example (Hellawell, 2006) and the researcher’s position along any such continua – even her identity - is contingently fluid (Kaytal and King, 2011; Thomson and Gunter, 2011; Hanson, 2013; Milligan, 2016). In this case, three broad positions along the insider-outsider continuum can be identified for the authors since in each interview, questions moved back and forth between discussion of the school, issues of diocesan and national support and questions of curricula.

The first position related to the schools and colleges: the authors were neither employees nor governors of any of them, and with very few exceptions, did not previously know the interviewees. Therefore, the authors’ relationship with each study site lay towards the outsider end of the spectrum. This minimized some of the main challenges faced by insider researchers, such as proximity to participants, managing multiple roles within the organisation, or active participation in internal politics (Hanson, 2013; Humphrey, 2012). However, if we broaden the perspective to the national level, the authors’ engagement with CREDO, and its commissioning of the research, brought them into close association with stakeholders with whom the schools certainly did engage professionally. Moreover, those relationships were run through with dynamics of power and authority; for example, the local diocesan advisors, collectively represented by NBRIA, exercise a statutory responsibility for the inspection of the teaching of denominational religion and collective worship (Education Act 2005, Section 48). Consequently, thanks to their CREDO links, the authors also occupied a second, more ambiguous position along the continuum, somewhere between outsider and insider.

The third position occupied placed the authors towards the insider end of the spectrum, as each had, to differing degrees, played active roles in the reform. McGrail had served as a member of the Higher Education Advisory Committee for the revision of the Edexcel A-Level, and Towey had played a pivotal role in developing the AQA GCSE Catholic pathway as

well as being involved in publications designed to support both the Edexcel and Eduqas specifications. Therefore, they entered every interview as institutional outsiders at local level, held more nuanced insider-outsider positions at diocesan and national levels, and were insiders (albeit to differing and shifting degrees) in terms of the subject under discussion. Consequently, whilst relatively naïve to the schools themselves, they enjoyed the advantages – and disadvantages – typical of insider researchers (Mercer, 2007; Le Gallais, 2008). Advantageously, close knowledge of the new specifications and shared participation in the broader Catholic educational world facilitated detailed discussion with leadership and practitioner interviewees. Less helpfully, like all insiders, the researchers risked the danger of over-familiarity, blindness to the new, and (particularly) a personal commitment to aspects of the matter under discussion.

In negotiating the analysis of data produced across the complex of shifting positions, the authors had recourse to three strategies. The first involved CREDO itself, to whom the authors reported at thrice yearly meetings from the start of the project; the key stakeholders were thus able to comment on findings as they emerged, thereby augmenting the researchers' perspectives on the data and contributing to its analysis. Furthermore, since the launch of the research coincided with a change in the academics who represented the other HEIs on CREDO, the authors were continually subject to fresh critical perspectives. The second strategy was to present early stage/interim findings to a gathering of educational academics and school practitioners at Heythrop College, March 2018. The ensuing discussion facilitated the authors' reflection on the data both by reinforcing findings to date and suggesting new lines of analysis. Finally, a sample of interview transcripts was reviewed by an external academic whose feedback informed both the coding and the analysis of the data before they were uploaded to MaxQDA.

Common Responses

The CPD sessions held by CREDO with classroom practitioners in 2016 and 17 highlighted three recurring concerns among teachers. The first related to delays in the publication of the new curricula by the Examination Boards as well as the provision of text-books and other teaching resources. For example, although the AQA GCSE (AQA, 2016) was approved by Ofqual on February 11th, 2016, Eduqas (Eduqas, 2016) had to wait until May 16th and the Pearson/Edexcel specification (Edexcel, 2016) was not approved until 27th June, leaving some RE teams very little time to organize their work for the September start. Allied to this concern, teachers voiced a more generalised anxiety concerning the volume of content in the new specifications. Finally, there was a frequently expressed unease about how the delivery of a second religion – mandated by the Bishops Conference as Judaism in all but a minority of schools – would play out on the ground. We therefore included questions relating to these issues in our interviews; the results indicated that whilst access to resources and managing the increased content base had, indeed, proved challenging, the introduction of the teaching of Judaism had been experienced as rather less problematic – and, indeed, was regarded by several practitioners as a particularly positive development.

- ***The Roll-out of the Revised specifications***

A strong sense of dissatisfaction with the roll out of the revised specifications was voiced during very many interviews. Broadly speaking, interviewees focused on three areas of concern: the uneven pace at which the three exam boards completed their validation, a perceived lack of clarity from the exam boards, and a delay in the production of resources. Underpinning these three concerns was a frequently-stated sense of alarm at the impact on teachers of the tight timeframe within which the revised examinations were introduced: 'My big criticism was speed ... I'm pretty exhausted. I wouldn't say, "burnt-out", but I feel very, very tired.' (School 2D).

Whilst the slow delivery of teaching resources was almost universally raised the support of diocesan advisers was noted:

I did travel maybe twice to London, and there were talks organised by our diocese about Judaism and they invited speakers. So I think plenty was done to make it easier for RE teachers to deliver (School 7D).

Moreover, in the interviews, it also became apparent that schools had produced their own resources, either acting alone (School 15D) or working with other local schools (Schools 2D, 17D). Several remarked that the experience had pushed the level of teacher creativity:

I think any change presents a fresh opportunity to, you know, create new resources – and you've kind of got younger staff who are the people creating that, and creating the way it was delivered. So, I think it was a good opportunity. I do think it highlighted a lack in teachers' knowledge as well, and I think that was one of the key struggles – but it was a really good opportunity for staff to develop subject knowledge in a way that they hadn't been using it before. (School 9D, see also 17D)

- ***Curriculum Content***

When asked to summarize the changes found in the new specification, one teacher succinctly replied, 'It's the level of content, it's the quantity of the content, it's the accessibility of the content, and it's the language of the content'. (School 17D) The interviews indicated the extent to which these four dimensions were inter-related – and especially their impact on the use of curriculum time. Staff were acutely aware of the general government-driven requirement of greater academic rigour and several commented critically about perceived political agendas at play (Schools 10D, 12M, 13D.) At the same time, others reflected positively on the effect of the change:

I think in the past there may have been an accusation that RE was a little bit easier than some of the other GCSEs. I would definitely suggest that that's gone, that actually there is a parity of esteem there in terms of academic rigour. (School 4P. See also 2D, 4D)

However, the question of increased rigour also raised a question of accessibility. The revised specifications were seen to be 'tailored for very bright children' (School 5D).

This, for several interviewees, raised questions of accessibility for some other students:

I, in particular, have had to really look at how I can make this accessible for those lower ability students. And I have to make it as accessible as I possibly can, without watering down the content so much that there's no point to it any more. And that's a difficult balance sometimes, because they need to be able to access something from it, and they need to be able to achieve. (School 17D See also 5D, 9D, 10 P and M)

Factoring a second religion and the ambitious nature of the Catholic Annexe into the discussion, then the perception of one Head of Department can be understood: 'The big thing: it's way over the top in terms of the content... It's like trying to teach an A-Level' (School 3D).

- ***The Study of Judaism***

If this chorus has a somewhat sisyphian tone, then despite initial misgivings, ('far out of my comfort zone' [School 11D]) many of the interviews described the actual experience of teaching Judaism in positive terms. A recurring dimension was that of student appreciation of 'something different' (School 1D) – that is, different to Christianity. As one teacher reported, 'They're not so interested when you're telling them about what Catholics think because in some way, they feel a bit of a familiarity – they think they already know it, even if they sort of don't' (School 13D). A proviso expressed in one school was that students had engaged better with the unit relating to Jewish practices than with that covering Jewish beliefs (School 10D), but generally, others pointed positively to the opportunities presented to forge links with the local Jewish community (Schools 5P, 8D). The positive approach was replicated in interviews with classroom teachers and in focus groups held with students: paradoxically, for many, this proved to be the part of the RE GCSE that they most enjoyed.

Residual misgivings, however, continued to be voiced, particularly relating to two issues. The first was the decision of the Bishops Conference to mandate the study of Judaism as opposed to Islam; we encountered teachers who regarded this decision as flawed, pointing to the significant presence of Muslims in British society and of their portrayal in the media (Schools 12M, 13D). One of the subject schools was a rare outlier, having obtained the local Bishop's permission to teach Islam rather than Judaism. The broader social context was cited to justify the decision:

We chose to do Islam rather than Judaism, because we thought, 'Right, students are ... having to deal with this all the time in their lives outside with the media and what's going on in the world. What's possibly going to be the best thing that we can do to support them with that?' Well, that's hopefully to give them a good chunk of time on understanding a faith which is having a big impact on the world. (School 2P)

The second underlying issue related to the volume and detail of material required to meet the Exam Specifications for Judaism, and a concern that many students would be unable to engage adequately with that material. This was frequently expressed in terms of the need to engage with a highly specialised vocabulary (e.g. School 13D), but one Head of Department experienced the problem as more generalized: ‘The kids found it very, very difficult. It’s very alien to them. Once again, the sheer content.’ (School 15D)

A common response to the practical challenges presented by the need to deliver the substantial body of new Judaism material was to anticipate its teaching in Year 9, that is, before the normal start of GCSE delivery (Schools 6, 10, 11, 15, 17). This presented the challenge of ensuring that the students would be well placed to engage in the exams with the Judaism material at an appropriate academic level. Two strategies were proposed: targeted revision towards the end of Year 11 (School 11M) and an on-going requirement that across Years 10 and 11 students should refer back to Judaism in assessed work (School 15D). We encountered only one school in which the delivery of the Judaism material was delayed until towards the end of Year 11, and staff found themselves struggling to complete the material within the time constraints, with a perceived consequential reduction in student confidence (School 1D).

Stated rationales for the anticipated delivery of Judaism opened broader questions of a theological nature. Movement of the material to Year 9 was occasionally justified in terms of historical chronology (School 12M, 14D), or as laying the foundations for the study of Christianity: ‘Judaism is seed – Christianity grows from it’ (School 7D). This last point raises the question as to whether (at least in terms of underpinning attitudes) the school was entirely approaching Judaism as a discrete religious tradition in its own right or was actively deploying a Christian lens: ‘Judaism,’ said another Head of RE, ‘if taught well, is good. I mean, ‘cos all Christians are completed Jews with that fullness of revelation.’ (School 3D) It should be noted that this was not the rationale of the Catholic Education Service who act on behalf of the hierarchy, (CES, 2015), but such a supersessionist perspective suggests an underlying mind-set that was at least hinted at by other interviewees.

Contested Issues

Turning to issues which evoked contrasting responses, contextual and curriculum issues remain vexed questions:

- ***EBacc and the Academic Status of the Subject***

As noted above, it was a significant concern for practitioners that RE was not included in the core subjects comprising the aforementioned English Baccalaureate since the average point score on the EBacc is now regarded as a key measure of school performance. However, RE *could be* included in a second key measure which is longitudinal, and tracks pupil progress across key stages 3 and 4 in eight subjects – hence its name, ‘Progress 8’ (DfE, 2018).

A range of responses to the EBacc was encountered in the subject schools. The Principal of a school with generally high-attaining students found the EBacc to be ‘broadly helpful’ in that it established an all-round curriculum. Yet, he nonetheless expressed frustration ‘on a matter of principle’ that RE was excluded from it. (School 11P). A senior manager with responsibility for mission and ethos in a school with a rather different student profile offered a similarly nuanced perspective. Having been initially ‘appalled’ that RE was not contained in the Ebacc, he had changed his opinion: the exclusion of RE from the EBacc was ‘safest and best’ because this prevented any external perception that RE could inflate EBacc data in faith schools. (School 12M) A colleague who held overall curriculum responsibility added that he was satisfied with the flexibility to include RE in the open element of Progress 8. This position was reflected elsewhere – the fact that students had historically tended to score well in RE had made it a prime candidate for inclusion in the open element. (School 2P)

Other Head-teachers, however, took a diametrically opposed position: the failure to include RE among the EBacc humanities subjects was, for them, an ‘absolute misery’ (School 1P). In many schools RE had been one of the strongest subjects at examination, hence the frustration at not being able to include its results in the calculation of the EBacc performance measure. (See schools 4P and 10 P &M.) For individual teachers, the exclusion could be experienced as a personal slight:

Ebacc is a difficult issue, because I feel the whole business belittles what RE is – ‘It’s not worthy, it’s not academic enough, it’s not going to benefit you, so why would we include it in the EBacc?’ Yes, and that, I think, just belittles what we’re doing, and makes us seem not as important [as other subjects]. (School 17D)

Many schools, therefore, found themselves caught in a paradox: the 2016 reforms had significantly raised the academic rigour of the subject, yet it had been excluded from one of the most significant indicators of academic performance and of (perceived) subject esteem.

- ***RE in the Mission and life of the School***

That paradox was heightened by the frequent descriptions of RE as a core subject, in Catholic schools ranking alongside English and Maths – ‘those three go together in a sentence on a regular basis’ (School 17P). Its core status was reinforced by the expectation of the hierarchy that RE should be allocated 10% of curriculum time in Catholic schools (CES, 2012), and in one school received the same funding as Maths, Science and English. (School 4P) Interviewees repeatedly emphasised the enhanced role of RE in the life of their school that extended beyond the classroom and examination: ‘As a Catholic School, I think RE is at the core of everything we do, really. Right from our form periods to our time when we have Masses together or liturgies together. And it is key, I suppose, to everything we do as a school.’ (School 12M, cf. Stock, 2012)

Interviewees found different ways to describe what this ‘core’ role of RE might be; for example, one Head Teacher had recourse to the image of the chocolate cake as a metaphor for the Catholic School: ‘it’s not a chocolate cake if it’s just got chocolate icing on it. It’s got to be chocolate all the way through – so RE is absolutely central to what we do and what we provide.’ (School 1P) The Head of Department in a different school offered a more systematic presentation:

RE in a Catholic school, in my opinion, has two main roles. One is to heighten the understanding and awareness of the children of a spiritual and religious dimension to their lives through knowledge, but also through some depth of understanding. And to accompany them on their personal faith journey, wherever that may start and wherever that may, ultimately, lead. (School 13D)

However, others expressed concern that the revised GCSE curriculum had limited their capacity to deliver the second of these roles. Two causes were identified. The first was the focus on aspects of Catholicism for fully half of the GCSE which was regarded as reducing the scope for engagement with broader issues:

I’d like to see us dealing a lot more with the issues of the day. I mean, this is what really worries me with the curriculum, with what we’ve got. It’s very narrow, and you know, is it what students need at that age in order to, well, I just keep coming back to the Common Good, really, and Christ at the centre ... I don’t think we’ve got a curriculum RE any more where we can engage with some of these things. I think it should be broader than it currently is. (School 11M)

The second cause was, once again, the sheer volume of curriculum material, which filled the available time and therefore reduced the possibilities for broader engagement. In one school, their previous approach had been that alongside GCSE RE, all its students should have read a Gospel in its entirety before they left. However, the school’s senior management reported that, ‘We’ve stopped doing that so we can actually fit in the content of the GCSE, because we have been chasing our tails this year for Year 11’ (School 8M). Likewise, engaging creatively with questions of the students’ own spirituality has been somewhat compromised: ‘It feels a bit more ... academic. It’s a bit more, “Right! We get in. We’ve got to use every second, and we’ve got to be really productive.” And I guess we’ve lost that creative spiritual element in a sense.’ (School 9D)

- ***The Catholic Content***

Delivering the new Catholic content presented teachers with two key challenges. The first was their own up-skilling to deliver the new content. They now found themselves engaging with material that they had not previously encountered in the classroom, nor even in their own university studies (School 12M). The result has been a steep learning curve (School 10D). The second challenge was of engaging students with this new body of material. Yet, despite initial concerns about the

quantity of the material, some surprise was expressed at how positive the experience had proved:

We did the Catholic paper, beliefs and practices. Actually, at first I thought, 'Oh, I'm going to hate this,' but, actually, [I] really liked it in the end. I think, with anything, after a number of years you can think about how you can teach it in a way that's going to engage and interest them – most things. So, you know, we coped with it. (School 11M)

A similar positive tone was struck by the Head of RE in a different school, who highlighted the opportunities for classroom creativity that the new specifications offered:

Some of the things that, like, are being studied as well, but previously didn't come up – in terms of, kind of, art and music, you know? Even some of the Catholic social teaching, you know, that previously wasn't in the new GCSE. And I think that's about the life of the Church, and I think that they're really kind of exciting things to present to students, so that they get a broader sense of what it is to be a Christian or to be Catholic. (School 9D)

Perhaps inevitably, however, others perceived an underlying presumption on the part of the authors of the specifications that students engaging with the new curricula were familiar at the level of lived experience with Catholic practices, signs and symbols, and concrete forms of shared expression. Several interviewees insisted that this was not the case: 'On the Catholic Christianity paper, I think there's a real assumption that they're practising Catholics, and many of them aren't. And, so, you're talking about things, and they're acting like, "What? People do this?"' (School 1D. See also, School 10D)

Some also questioned the relevance to practising Catholic students of certain artistic aspects studied (for example, sarcophagi, frescos and hunger cloths – Schools 14D2 and 8M). The result described in some contexts was that students who previously would have been expected to have engaged with RE were no longer doing so:

What I am seeing, increasingly, is that rather than bringing them to the faith, we're simply reinforcing and consolidating all their negative suspicions and fears about it: 'Why am I doing this? What's the relevance of this? Why are we reading this?' They just don't get it ... I did meet pupils who have left a few years ago: 'I loved RE;' I'm not so sure I'm going to get that in the years ahead. (School 15D)

A second concern was the extent to which studies at Key Stage Three (ages 11-14) did (or did not) prepare students for the rigour of the revised specifications:

As soon as we started teaching it I think there was a real clear – like, they're not prepared for this level of content. And I think what we've been doing was the Key Stage Three curriculum [that] prepared them for the old GCSE, and so lots of the key vocabulary that they were asked to use and asked to learn just wasn't enough. (School 9D)

It has to be troubling for all those hitherto involved in the curriculum design and resourcing of 11-14 RE in Catholic schools that according to our research, this entire phase of learning risks being redesigned as an extended dress rehearsal for GCSE examinations.

Preliminary Conclusions

Any substantial educational reform is likely to elicit a range of reactions, which, at the risk of stating the obvious, is confirmed by our initial findings with regard to the impact of the 2016 GCSE and A-Level reforms among Catholic teachers and school leaders in RE. By and large, our research is indicating that the provenance of the reform, its pedagogical basis, the political and ecclesial dimensions thereof and the role of Universities in the eventual configuration of the curricula all remain secondary concerns compared to the salient challenges of implementation. The alacrity with which school leaders and heads of department have responded to such profound change is testimony to their thoroughgoing professionalism. However, as noted above, it has tested the resilience of teachers who, from our research have been more than open to change, but have been daunted by the scope and speed of the reform.

So actually the best thing people could have had with retrospect is a bit more time, but it wasn't there and ... you know hopefully teachers have survived it and their teaching will now continue to improve, and what's the best support? - probably getting dioceses etc to make the government hold fire on the next set of changes and let us be for a little bit (School 6D)

Latterly, correspondence between the Department of Education and the RE Council of England and Wales has seen an implicit acknowledgement of this sentiment (Hinds, 2018). Yet if there are lessons for Government, there is also food for thought for the Catholic Church and indeed the Universities.

- a) You can *perhaps* have too much of a good thing. Notions of powerful knowledge are one thing, but time and again it was the *amount* of information about Catholicism rather than its nature which was proving problematic, which in turn bore the risk of alienating staff and pupils. Teachers see this as particularly problematic for those less able pupils from non-practising backgrounds – the academic *anawim* that have previously prospered from a more immediate and engaging 'topical' curriculum.
- b) The attraction of 'the new', 'the different', 'the other'. While the imposition by the DfE of the teaching of a second religion caught the Catholic Church and schools a little off-balance, this element has been relatively successful – this despite the fact that the mandate by the Bishops to teach Judaism rather than Islam remains both a theological and (to some extent) political issue.

- c) The disappearance of Scripture. Less than 10% of pupils in Catholic schools now have the opportunity to study a Gospel between 14-16. Not only must this be a cause for concern among a hierarchy looking to have 'Christ at the Centre' and for whom scripture is the 'soul of theology', there is an apprehension that the new GCSE risks habituating proof texting instead of developing hermeneutical subtlety (Bowie & Coles, 2018).
- d) Examination Teleology. In January 2019 the CES is beginning a process of revision of its Curriculum Directory, which will review the programme at Key Stage Three. Our research suggests it will be essential that review takes into account at least three considerations: (a) the need adequately to scaffold students for GCSE at Key Stage Four, (b) the importance of ensuring breadth in engaging with religious traditions other than Judaism and Christianity at Key Stage Three, and (c) how to manage the widespread practice of anticipating the teaching of the Judaism element of GCSE at Year 9.
- e) Transition. The Universities may be rightly pleased to have exerted a particular influence on the shape of the A-Level. However, there are concerns raised by this research that the *religious* specificity now required by all the Examination Boards can be a barrier to those who hitherto have approached RE from the 'Big Questions' mindset. It would be ironic if the number of students doing Theology at University were to be reduced precisely because they were doing less Philosophy and Ethics at GCSE and A-Level.

Summary

Overall, the 2016 Reform of Religious Education in England has provided a four-fold example of interaction between secular state, faith community, university sector and schools. While Peter Schreiner has noted how socio-economic policies across Europe are influencing educational reforms and the 'place and image of RE', it is surely remarkable that as Sweden, Luxembourg and other jurisdictions are moving towards more generic curricula, the English state sponsored reform has gone in almost the opposite direction (Schreiner, 2018). Deliberately engaging with universities in designing the matrix of the subject discipline and moderating the recent 'philosophy and ethics' hegemony, it also poses a challenge to influential RE professionals committed to more phenomenological approaches (cf. CORE, 2018). Moreover, it has not ignored the challenge of multi-cultural realities and engagement with the other. On the contrary, it has presented a double challenge – engaging with the other *on others' terms*.

Our early research indicates that even though this reform was perhaps less shaped by classroom practitioners than it might have been, it has certainly gone some way to addressing a long standing concern among RE teachers regarding the academic credibility of the subject. Obviously it is still too early to assess all the ramifications of such a thoroughgoing reform and we are keenly aware that our empirical sample is denominationally specific. Nevertheless, we think the evidence gathered thus far has relevance across all secondary schools in the English context, not least since challenges faced by RE practitioners in the well-resourced Catholic sector, are *a fortiori* likely to be experienced elsewhere.

To verify this contention, our plan is to continue this longitudinal research through the next examination cycles with the hope that the project can be expanded to include academics working outside the Catholic sector in the UK and comparable endeavours elsewhere. Prescinding from any confessional allegiance, the 2016 RE reform in England will continue to affect some 500,000 14-19-year-old students each year. Moreover, since the future of TRS departments in the UK will depend upon these students, their experience of RE will doubtless condition the path our subject discipline will follow. It thus remains to be seen whether the prosperity of the subject has been furthered by this particular example of stakeholder synergy.

ABBREVIATIONS

A-level	Advanced level. Public examinations usually taken by 18-19 year olds in England and Wales.
AQA	Provider of GCSE and A-Level examinations based in Manchester
ASC	Agreed Syllabus conference
CES	Catholic Education Service
CORE	Commission on RE
CREDO	Catholic Religious Education Development Opportunities
DfE	Department for Education
EBacc	English Baccalaureate
Edexcel	Provider of GCSE and A-Level examinations based in London
Eduqas	Provider of GCSE and A-Level examinations based in Cardiff
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education. Public examinations for 16 year olds in England & Wales.
HEI	Higher Education Institutions
MaxQDA	Qualitative data analysis software named after Max Weber.
NBRIA	National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisors
OCR	Provider of GCSE and A-Level examinations based in Cambridge
Ofqual	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PRE	Philosophy of Religion and Ethics
RE	Religious Education
SACRE	Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education
TRS	Theology and Religious Studies

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