

Consultation Report:

Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle Religious Education

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The [Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle Religious Education](#) was made available for public consultation from 6th October to November 24th 2017.

The background paper provides a brief overview of the place of Religious Education within the curriculum, the origins of the existing syllabus and its aims and content. It presents experiences of students and teachers in the R.E. classroom as well as observations from inspection reports. It also summarised European practice and research in the area of religious education and identified some developments at a national level that are likely to be relevant to the development of the new specification. Finally, it set out the brief for the development of the specification.

The aim of this consultation period was to seek the views of interested parties in relation to the ideas set out in the background paper in order to inform the development of the new specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education.

1.2 Consultation process

There were two main avenues for consultation feedback: via an online survey and through written submissions.

The online survey comprised a mixture of rating scale questions and space for free-text comments. The survey grouped questions under the following broad areas for feedback:

- Views on the current Junior Certificate Religious Education syllabus
- Considerations and contextual factors to be taken into account in developing the new specification
- General comments on the background paper

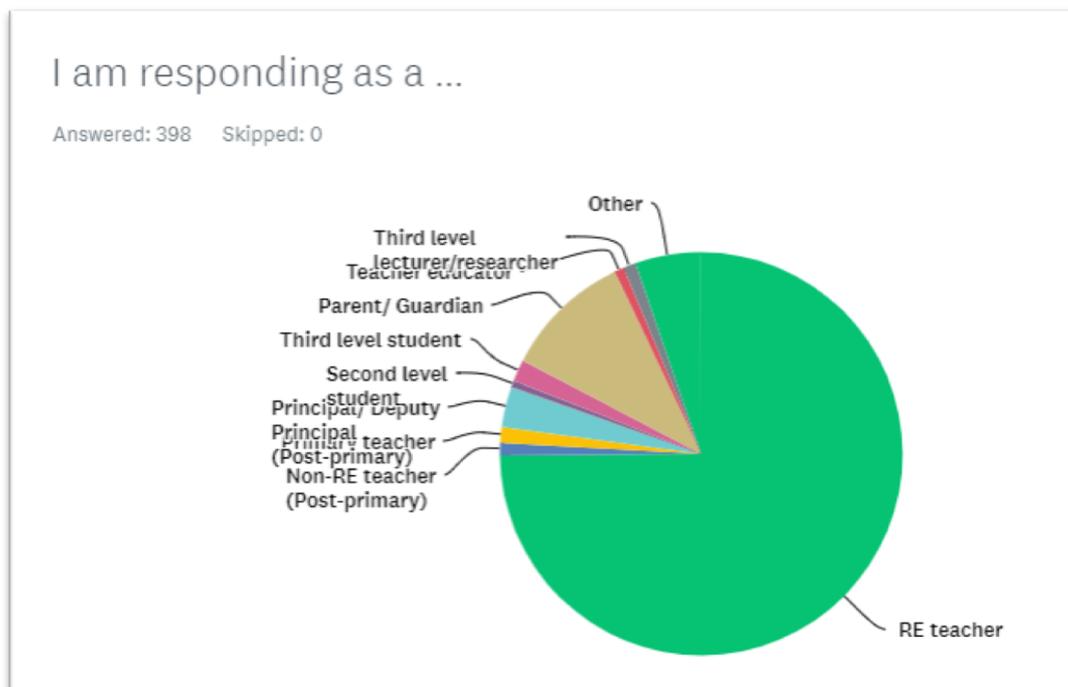
A copy of the survey questionnaire is included in Appendix 1

Opportunities to participate in the consultation were promoted in several ways: notices were placed on the NCCA webpages; announcements were made in the NCCA newsletter and on social media (Twitter); requests for submissions were circulated via education partners and the Religious Teachers' Association of Ireland (RTAI).

1.3 Respondents and demographics

In total, there were 398 responses to the online survey and 8 written submissions from organisations. Organisations who wished to be named are included in Appendix 2. The majority of respondents were RE teachers (75%), with the next biggest group being parents/guardians (10%) and the next largest group (5%) identified as Other (mainly school chaplains and Diocesan Advisors)

Table 1 shows the demographic breakdown of respondents



More than half the teachers who responded to the survey were from voluntary secondary schools as shown below.

| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES | |
|----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Voluntary secondary school | 53.58% | 187 |
| Community school | 18.62% | 65 |
| Community college | 4.58% | 16 |
| Comprehensive school | 1.43% | 5 |
| ETB school | 15.47% | 54 |
| Other | 6.30% | 22 |
| TOTAL | | 349 |

Table 2: School Type

2. Consultation Findings

In general, the background paper was very well received, with many respondents welcoming it for its clear and helpful description of the place and role of Religious Education in the junior cycle curriculum. The placing of students’ needs at the heart of the curriculum development process was welcomed as was the notion of R.E. providing a space for students to question, discuss and reflect on topics of relevance. While many respondents were happy with aspects of the current syllabus, they welcomed the opportunity to modernise the course and to reinvigorate teaching and learning in R.E. through a new specification. There was a strong consensus of opinion on the need for a reduction in the amount of content covered at present to allow more time for deeper enquiry, reflection and the development of key skills. Respondents also stressed the importance of the new specification being in tune with a more pluralist society which necessitates a specification that can genuinely respect both diversity and commitment.

Detailed findings are presented below.

2.1 The current Junior Certificate R.E. Syllabus

Respondents in this section of the survey were presented with a number of statements in relation to the existing Junior Certificate syllabus and asked to state their agreement or disagreement. Percentage responses are presented in the table below. Most noteworthy, are the responses where strong agreement or disagreement is evident (highlighted in yellow). In most of the remaining statements a split of 2:1 was evident between those who agreed/disagreed. Overall, this table seems to suggest that many people think the existing syllabus is working well in many schools. However, it also suggests that a large minority see scope for improvement in a range of ways.

Table 1: Responses to question 4 – Based on your experience of the existing Junior Certificate RE syllabus, please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements:

| Answer Options | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| The existing RE syllabus allows teachers and students the opportunity to explore the human search for meaning | 17.8% | 56.6% | 18.8% | 6.7% |
| The existing syllabus builds understanding about and respect for the diverse nature of religion and beliefs in contemporary Ireland and in the wider world | 21.25 | 56% | 16% | 6.8% |
| The existing syllabus is too content-heavy, with teachers and students feeling under pressure to cover material without time for in-depth discussion of topics. | 47.4% | 31.6% | 18% | 3% |
| The existing syllabus facilitates students in developing a | 17.4% | 48.2% | 27% | 6.7% |

| | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| range of skills, such as skills of enquiry, discussion, critical thinking and reflection. | | | | |
| The topics are interesting and relevant to the students' lives and stage of development | 9.8% | 53.2% | 28.75% | 8.25% |
| There is a good balance between teaching about Christianity and teaching about other major world religions and worldviews | 15.8% | 38.2% | 29.5% | 16.5% |
| Students are given sufficient opportunity to engage in learning outside the classroom | 5.8% | 24.7% | 56.3% | 13.2% |
| The existing RE syllabus contributes to the spiritual and moral development of the student | 15.8% | 54% | 20.4% | 9.8% |
| The existing syllabus encourages active and cooperative learning | 12% | 49% | 31% | 8% |

Respondents were also given an opportunity to provide free-text comments regarding ***the challenges facing teachers and students engaged in the current Junior Cycle RE syllabus***. 264 respondents used this opportunity and the vast majority of the comments reiterated that the current syllabus is content-heavy. They posited that this is creating pressure and negatively impacting on pedagogy. Many said that the amount of content to be covered *'leaves little time for reflection & hearing students' opinions.'* A significant number of respondents expressed the view that *'much of the content is not relevant to the lives of young people.'* Many comments also raised concern that the course poses difficulties for less academic students; *'the content-heavy nature of the course, combined with the complexity of the language makes it difficult for many students'.*

A significant number of respondents commented that *'the content is focused too much on Christianity and does not reflect our changing society'*. Some respondents expressed the view that the syllabus does not facilitate personal engagement and the nurturing of students' personal faith and spirituality. A number of respondents expressed the view that *'religion should have no place in the curriculum'* while others suggested that Religious Education was more important now than ever with comments such as, *'It is vital we put a modern slant on R.E. before it is too late'*.

In many cases respondents used this open comment box to highlight issues that are not directly related to the curriculum development process, such as, the need for R.E. to be given adequate timetabling, the importance of assigning qualified teachers to teaching the subject, difficulties in motivating students' interest in R.E. and perceptions regarding the status of R.E. While acknowledging that these are important issues, they are not germane to the specification as such and it is not possible to address these within the context of the development process.

2.2 Context and considerations for developing a new specification

Question 6 asked respondents to state their level of agreement with a range of statements related to possible considerations which should inform the development of the new specification. Over 90% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with all of the statements which would suggest that the priorities set out in the background paper ring true for many people.

Table 2: Responses to question 6 – The new specification should...

| Statements | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|
| Develop an awareness of and respect for the diversity of beliefs and world-views in the classroom and beyond | 72% | 25% | 1% | 2% |
| Promote student-centred, active teaching and learning on topics of interest to the students | 62% | 34% | 3% | 1% |
| Focus on developing skills of inquiry, reflection, critical analysis and action | 65% | 33% | 1.5% | 0.5% |
| Facilitate thoughtful and informed discussion about moral questions | 65% | 32% | 2% | 1% |
| Offer opportunities for learning about other religions and beliefs, as well as those grounded in Christianity | 66% | 30% | 2% | 2% |
| Promote engagement in action for social justice, sustainable living and community care | 65% | 30% | 4% | 1% |
| Be flexible and sensitive to accommodate a range of school contexts and forms of patronage | 61.5% | 30% | 3.5% | 0.5% |

The follow up question asked respondents to **rank the contextual factors that they consider most important when developing the new specification**. The following sets out the percentage of 1st preferences that each statement received:

- The contribution that RE can make in promoting the personal development and wellbeing of young people (38% of 1st preferences)
- The contribution that RE can make to developing religious literacy i.e. the ability to have informed, thoughtful and respectful conversations about religion (28% of 1st preferences)
- The contribution that RE can make to developing intercultural and inter-religious understanding (27% of 1st preferences)
- The contribution that RE can make to local and global citizenship education (11% of 1st preferences)

Respondents were also given an opportunity to provide free-text comments to this question – ***what other considerations or contextual factors should influence the development of a new specification?*** Approximately 180 respondents addressed this question.

Many suggested that the Development Group needs to take account of the plurality of schools contexts and patronage models in existence. In this context, the submissions show very divergent understandings and expectations regarding the role and purpose of a State curriculum in Religious Education. Some put forward the view that the new specification should enable schools to not only focus on *learning about* religion and *learning from* religion but also enable *'learning into'* religion. In other words, the specification should support faith formation/catechesis. In contrast, many other respondents expressed the view that the development of the specification must not promote or favour any particular religion as illustrated by comments such as *'the course should no longer be taught from a specific viewpoint'*. Many others expressed the view that through the new course students should learn about a wider range of religions and beliefs and non-religious interpretations of life. *'The course should enable students to gain an informed attitude towards non religious responses to life and an understanding of inter religious relations'*.

For others, the important thing is to strike a balance. They affirmed the importance of students learning about diverse views and beliefs but also wanted to balance this with students being afforded the opportunity to deepen their understanding of their own beliefs. *'While a new religion syllabus must take into account all the faith communities in a school and pupils should learn about other faiths, it is also crucial that students are allowed to explore their own faith in a safe environment.'*

A number of the written responses from groups representing faith-based schools, suggested that the concept of religious literacy as set out in the background paper needs to be expanded to include *'a more participative, reflective and engaged type of religious literacy'* and one that includes *'spiritual literacy.'* In addition, a number of respondents suggested that there should be consideration of how the specification can promote the spiritual and moral development of the students.

The tension between different views and desires is evident and in its work the Development Group will need to deliberate on how a specification can be developed that can address these tensions. An understanding of pluralism as a guiding concept underpinning the curriculum development process is important. In the context of religious education it might be helpful to understand pluralism as *not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity; not just tolerance, but the active*

seeking of understanding across lines of difference; not relativism, but the encounter of commitments and pluralism as based on dialogue. (The Pluralism Project, Harvard University)

A further consideration that some respondents wished to highlight was the role of R.E. in promoting social justice, sustainable development, equality and respect for diversity.

While affirming the contribution that good Religious Education can make to student wellbeing some written submissions stressed that '*R.E. should not be subsumed under the umbrella of wellbeing*' and welcomed the way in which the background paper set out the distinctive role and identity of R.E. as a subject in the school curriculum.

The creation and development of cross-curricular links with other subjects was also suggested as an important consideration by a number of contributors.

2.3 Assessment in Junior Cycle Religious Education

Although the questionnaire did not explicitly ask for respondents' views on assessment and the terminal examination of Junior Certificate R.E., many respondents commented on this. A very large number of comments expressed concerns about the language used and type of questions asked in the terminal examination and the influence this has on teaching and learning in the classroom. The strongest sentiment was a concern for the amount of rote learning and learning of definitions required for the exam. There was also considerable agreement that the writing up of the journal work presented a huge challenge for many students who find the questions difficult and repetitive. Many teachers see a value in the journal work itself but question the value of the write up.

The main concerns raised are represented in these comments:

The format of the RE exam is very difficult for students to understand, especially the way questions are phrased, even teachers struggle to understand what the question is asking the student to do

The focus on memorisation for exams is a block to higher order thinking and personal learning.

The standard of English is extremely difficult in the questioning of the exam paper and I believe is off putting for students to take up the subject at senior level.

Journal work is demoralising. The course work booklet doesn't let the students express themselves.'

The current journal work is formulaic, dull and uninspiring

The exercise is great but the write up is very difficult, repetitive and not engaging for students

Many respondents expressed a hope that the CBAs associated with the new specification might provide students with opportunities to exercise more choice and creativity in engaging in topics of interest to them. For example they suggested:

Making RE exciting and appealing to students - allowing students to do a project on a topic of their choice would benefit them greatly

CBA should allow students to focus on an area that they personally find interesting-should be much more open to topics they would like to research.

Need scope for differentiation which is greater than that offered by the present syllabus and forms of assessment.

I think the incorporation of a compulsory social justice activity as part of the CBA course could be highly beneficial, however the RE and CSPE dept would need to work together to ensure that overlaps don't occur. (E.g. one awareness campaign, one fundraiser or community involvement activity)

2.4 Brief for the review of Junior Cycle Religious Education

The brief for the Development Group (contained in section 7 of the background paper) indicated the areas that the Development Group needs to address in the design of the new Religious Education specification. Feedback from the consultation supports the brief as presented in the background paper, but the following points stand out as meriting particular careful deliberation by the Development Group.

The need for Religious Education to stand as a curriculum subject with a clear identity, aim and rationale. The consultation has revealed a considerable divergence of views and expectations regarding the role of R.E. in the curriculum and a clear statement of its aim and rationale will be helpful.

The importance of the specification being relevant and responsive to students' lives and needs. This requires a reduction of content and a focus on developing Learning Outcomes that facilitate flexibility, differentiation, the development of key skills and active cooperative learning. *'A key challenge is making the syllabus relevant to the student's world'. 'Make it fun, interesting and informative and use technology and more interactive resources'*

How to facilitate students in engaging in dialogue with a wider range of major world religions and belief systems than is possible with the current syllabus, while avoiding the superficial learning of facts/definitions. *'In the multi-cultural world our students are growing up in, it is vitally important students have awareness of other religions, cultures, people'*

The need to ensure that religious and belief diversity is reflected consistently in the language and objectives of the new specification. *'Careful consideration should be given to terms such as 'other', bearing in mind the diverse student populations in our schools.' 'Please don't write the specification assuming that the students are religious or that teachers will/should teach from a faith perspective'.*

How the new R.E. specification can support the holistic development of students in such a way that engages head, hands and heart. In this regard the Development Group might consider the role of learning outside the classroom as well as within the classroom.

The importance of designing learning outcomes that are flexible and can support learning and inclusion for all students in a range of school contexts.

3. Conclusion

It is clear from the large number of responses that many R.E. teachers wish to build on the strengths of the existing course while also welcoming the opportunity to bring it more up to date and relevant to the diverse range of students and school settings.

The overwhelming consensus is that there should be a reduction of content in order to facilitate greater student engagement in the learning and the development of key skills.

A key challenge for the Development Group will be to create a specification that encourages respect and understanding of a diverse range of religions and beliefs while enabling students to explore and deepen their own personal convictions and beliefs.

The consultation process was extremely helpful in both supporting some key directions set out in the background paper and in highlighting additional areas for consideration. The level of engagement and detailed responses of participants much be acknowledged and the NCCA is very grateful for all the feedback received. The feedback from the consultation will be carefully reviewed by the Development Group and will guide the development of the new specification.

Appendix 1: List of Organisations

The following is a list of organisations who either submitted an online survey or a written submission:

Written submissions:

Association of Trustees of Catholic Schools (ATCS)
Catholic Schools Partnership
CEIST (Catholic Education, an Irish Schools' Trust)
Council for Catechetics of the Irish Bishop's Conference
Department of Education and Skills (DES)
Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
Edmund Rice Schools Trust (ERST)
Le Cheile Schools Trust

On line responses (where groups wished to be named):

Dominican College, Muckross Park, Donnybrook, Dublin 4
Diocese of Cloyne
Diocese of Ardagh & Clonmacnoise
Religion Teachers' Association of Ireland
Diocese of Kerry
St. Brendan's Community school, Birr, Co. Offaly.
Presentation Secondary School, Castleisland, Co. Kerry
RE department of Moate Community School
Patrician Secondary School, Newbridge, Co. Kildare.
Education Secretariat, Diocese of Elphin.
Summerhill College, Sligo
Rosmini Community School
Catholic University School
Kinsale Community School
St. Vincent's Castleknock College, Religious Education & Chaplaincy Department
Pobalscoil Neasáin
St. Angela's College, Sligo
RE team St. Leo's College Carlow
Atheist Ireland
Diocesan Advisory Group in Tuam
Louth Meath ETB
St. Grellan's (Ballinasloe & District) Council of The Order of the Knights of St. Columbanus
Irish Centre for Religious Education
Rockwell College
St Mary's Knockbeg College, Carlow

