

Consultation on the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill

Evidence submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) for Stage 1 scrutiny of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill.

About you

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1. The Bill's general principles

1.1 Do you support the principles of the [Curriculum and Assessment \(Wales\) Bill](#)?

Partly

1.2 Please outline your reasons for your answer to question 1.1

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 1500 words)

ABOUT ME

I write as a member of the Commission on RE (2016-18) which reviewed the provision of RE across England and in my role as Professor and Director of the Aquinas Centre for Theological Literacy involved in teacher formation at St. Mary's University, Strawberry Hill, London.

As such, I am impressed by the breadth of the proposals being made and the evident commitment to the educational flourishing of children of different ages across all subjects in these challenging times. That said, with particular reference to my area of expertise, I would want to draw the attention of legislators in the Welsh Assembly to certain areas of concern and indeed some anomalies manifest in the proposals as they stand which I will coalesce around three headings - Curriculum, Choice and Conviction.

CURRICULUM

While at one level I have no intrinsic objection to changing the name of a subject which has had different nomenclature in the past, I would want to sound a note of caution about the current proposal. When the RE Commission recently heard evidence from almost 1000 teachers and stakeholders discussing the subject in England, changing the name was not regarded as a priority whereas changing perceptions about its academic rigour was. In part, this perception has been due to an over-emphasis in the classroom context upon debates around values and ethics in contradistinction to religious beliefs which form part of the human quest for truth. Perhaps unfairly characterized as *Ninian Smart v Jeremy Kyle*, the implied emphasis of a subject entitled Religion, Values and Ethics leans heavily towards the latter which has several consequences:

- a) The subject will be asymmetrically concerned with opinion rather than content, further damaging its academic credibility.
- b) The subject will not contribute as it does currently to social cohesion, risking increased religio-ethnic division.
- c) The subject would risk further dilution of its specificity via congruence and deliberate alignment with RSE.

It appears to me that the changes proposed risk initiating a non-virtuous circle whereby teachers required to develop expertise in Citizenship and Philosophy 101 at the expense of religious knowledge will nurture a generation of students and thereafter teachers, with neither adequate knowledge nor the pedagogical dexterity to deal with religious matters of central importance. In short, the reform will lead to less religious education taught less rigorously by less qualified teachers.

CHOICE

I am surprised that the proposals as I understand them seem to trespass the sensitive area of parental choice. The vexed question as to whether pupils can be legitimately withdrawn from the subject as taught in a particular school was something considered at length by the Commission on RE. Hearing evidence from up and down the country, it became clear that while exercising the right of withdrawal was extremely rare, the fact that it existed provided an opportunity for a parent to raise a concern with a Head of RE or Head Teacher which more than nine times out of ten would be resolved. Ultimately the counsel of xxxxxxxxxx xxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxx held sway since again and again it became clear that any compromise or novelty in that area would infringe international protocols on Human Rights.

Admittedly as the country lurches further down the Brexit path a 'go it alone' approach may have some appeal and I can understand that questions around RSE may partly be the driver here but it seems odd that in espousing liberal values the proposals (as I read them) seem to at the very least complicate parental rights in this regard. As a result, I can only foresee the matter becoming more contested and more difficult for Head teachers to manage with deleterious effects on RE. For school leaders already preoccupied with the time available for curriculum choice, an obvious option will be to 'service' the subject through drop-down days and alternative provision. In sum, changing the goal posts on parental choice may lead to an own goal in terms of RE.

CONVICTION

A third area of concern arising from the proposals is the way in which Voluntary aided Faith Schools seem vulnerable to more interference than others. This seems to be predicated on a totally unresearched assumption – namely that faith schools narrow rather than broaden the religious horizons of their pupils. Whether aired in the form of 'think tank' style reports such as the Impact team hosted at Warwick University, proposed incrementally by the Accord Coalition or more plainly demanded by the lobbying of Humanists UK, removing state funding from faith schools is a corollary to this marvellously unreflexive conviction.

To put my cards on the table, I am a beneficiary of Catholic education, my research has largely been in Catholic RE and I currently earn a living at a Catholic University I am aware that this background conditions my approach to educational issues and the current 'dual system'. However, far from narrowing my horizons it has enabled me, for example, to teach here and abroad and equipped me to serve inter alia as Bishops' consultant on Catholic-Humanist dialogue where I regularly find myself agreeing or amiably jousting with the likes of xxxxxx xxxxxx and xxxxxx xxxxxx. I have no problem with Humanist viewpoints being aired in RE – theirs is in fact the only viewpoint that must be taught in the DfE reformed GCSE in England. Yet what continues to baffle me is why scholars and policy makers espousing no faith fail to see that they too have a conviction, a stance, a worldview which is not neutral and has no intrinsic claim to hegemony over educational policy still less RE.

The Treaty of Westphalia, 1648 may have settled Thirty Years of religious conflict with the slogan 'cuius regio, eius religio' - In a ruler's land the ruler's religion, but surely if we are committed to fundamental liberal values, we cannot subscribe to that nor an unnecessary 'one size fits all' approach to RE. These proposals would not only open up Catholic schools to unprecedented and sometimes unqualified interference from local SACRE's, they risk breaching an ecclesio-political settlement which has stood the test of time. RE currently

enjoys a rich ecology across the range of faith and community schools – enforcing an Orwellian homogeneity may kill it.

CODA

To repeat my opening remarks, it behoves every generation to review the way education is undertaken among the young. Aquinas has it as a fundament of Natural Law and it is right and proper for the Welsh Assembly to consider these matters. It is also right and proper that my 5 year old daughter's Catholic school curriculum already includes familiarization with a variety of religious festivals – Diwali, Eid, Chanukah, Christmas, Chinese New Year etc. Yet the challenges ahead include the need to address possible outcomes of legislative change and the proposals around RE have not precipitated from parental or pupil concerns. Rather, they are characterized by an inadequately reflexive desire for curriculum control reminiscent of the 1970s. And unfortunately, they risk nothing less than the marginalization and eventual disappearance of the subject as a regrettable but entirely foreseeable consequence.

Further Reading

<https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/>

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/nbfr.12542>

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2056997119865569?journalCode=icec>

1.3 Do you think there is a need for legislation to deliver what this Bill is trying to achieve?

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

I am not convinced that legislation is necessarily the best way forward in the specific area I have expertise in.

2. The Bill's implementation

2.1 Do you have any comments about any potential barriers to implementing the Bill? If no, go to question 3.1

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

As detailed above, in the case of Religious Education, there is the risk of alienating parents, teachers and religious bodies.

2.2 Do you think the Bill takes account of these potential barriers?

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

Not really. In my reading of the Bill as presented, there is the possibility that dissent from detailed aspects of the proposals will undermine the broad thrust. It is best to build an irresistible coalition rather than pick unnecessary fights.

3. Unintended consequences

3.1 Do you think there are there any unintended consequences arising from the Bill? If no, go to question 4.1

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

My submission in section 2 addresses is dominated by my concerns around unintended consequences.

4. Financial implications

4.1 Do you have any comments on the financial implications of the Bill (as set out in Part 2 of the [Explanatory Memorandum](#))? If no, go to question 5.1

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

No

5. Powers to make subordinate legislation

5.1 Do you have any comments on the appropriateness of the powers in the Bill for Welsh Ministers to make subordinate legislation (as set out in Chapter 5 of Part 1 of the [Explanatory Memorandum](#)). If no, go to question 6.1.

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 500 words)

No

6. Other considerations

6.1 Do you have any other points you wish to raise about this Bill?

(we would be grateful if you could keep your answer to around 1000 words)

Seek consensus - work with those who are already working in the field rather than those who have never had their hands dirty.

