



## The Certificate in Religious Education.

### 1. The Purpose

This paper will present information relating to the Certificate in Religious Education and the role that it plays in the sectoral patterns of teacher employment in Northern Ireland. The evidence cited draws on policy and other documents available in the public realm, information provided by key organisations in response to direct requests, and academic research into the experiences of those teachers who have crossed the community divide in education. It is envisaged that this will stimulate public discussion around this issue which will, in turn, inform decision making and planning for education.

### 2. Context

The Certificate in Religious Education (hereafter referred to as the Certificate) is one of a series of interlinked matters that have been identified as limiting opportunities for teachers in Northern Ireland to access employment outside of those schools associated with their own educational background and community identity.<sup>1</sup> Briefing papers have already been produced in respect of two of these - the teacher exception from the Fair Employment and Treatment Order, and the place of religion in the curriculum. It is intended that other related issues, including the governance and administration of education, and the provision of Initial Teacher Education in NI, will be discussed in future Transforming Education papers.

Religious Education (RE) is included in the statutory curriculum that must be followed by all state-funded schools in NI from Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4 (i.e. all 12 years of compulsory education), although parents are entitled to ask for their children to be withdrawn from RE lessons. A common RE syllabus is followed by all state-funded schools. This has been drawn up by representatives of four Christian churches: the Catholic church in Northern Ireland and the three Protestant denominations that transferred their schools to the Controlled sector following the 1925 NI Education Act (the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland).

Primary school teachers need to be able to teach subjects right across the curriculum to a single year group (or, in some small schools, across two or more year groups). It follows that primary school teachers will usually be expected to be able to teach RE.<sup>2</sup> RE is therefore an integral element in the programmes of study provided at all higher education institutions in NI that provide Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for those wishing to teach in primary schools: Stranmillis University College, St Mary's University College and Ulster University.

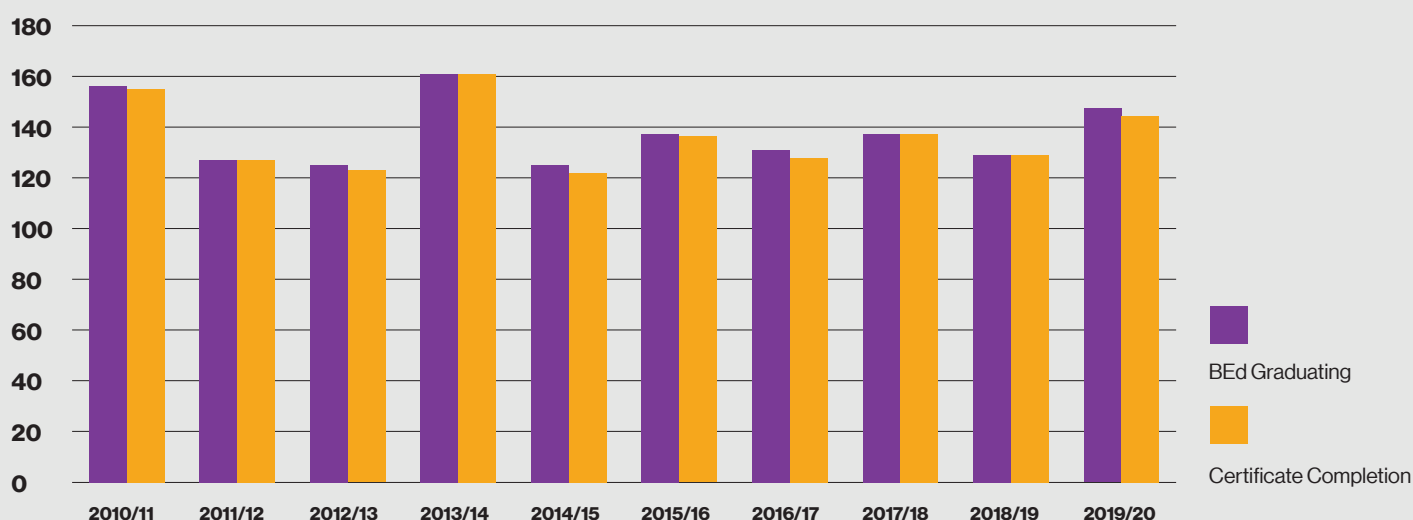
<sup>1</sup> Smith, A., & Hansson, U. (2015). *A Review of Policy Areas Affecting Integration of the Education System in NI*.

<sup>2</sup> Under Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights, teachers are entitled to 'Freedom of Conscience' in their professional engagement with the spiritual dimensions of education. Teachers may request an exemption from collective worship and/or the teaching of RE (there is no indication that this option is often called upon by teachers).

The trustees of Catholic education in Northern Ireland and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) - the employing body for Maintained schools - require that any teacher applying for permanent employment in a Maintained primary school must have completed a Certificate in Religious Education that meets criteria laid down by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. In 2018 the bishops stipulated that the course should be of at least 120 contact hours for an undergraduate award or 50 contact hours for postgraduate students. The Certificate may either be delivered as an integrated part of a teacher education course or as separate programme leading to an additional award. The content must include an exploration of Catechesis and Catholic Religious Education, and Theological Studies.<sup>3</sup>

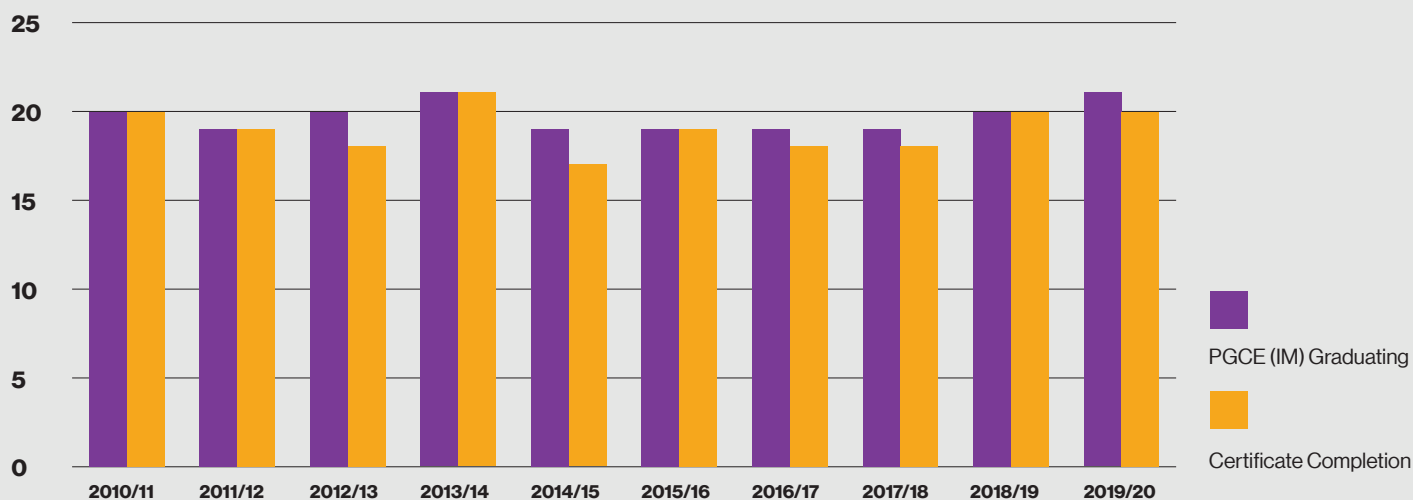
The RE Certificate that accompanies courses at St Mary's University College Belfast has been approved by the bishops as meeting these criteria. Completion of the course is not compulsory for St Mary's students but, given that most prospective teachers who attend the University College are aware of its significance when applying for posts in Maintained primaries, it would be unusual for an ITE student at St Mary's not to take the course. Over the last ten years 99% of students who completed a primary or post-primary BEd at St Mary's also completed the certificate.

**Figure 1. Numbers of BEd students graduating from St Mary's University College and the numbers completing the Certificate**



St Mary's also offers a PGCE qualification aimed at those wishing to teach in primary or post-primary Irish-medium (IM) settings – 96% of these students have completed the Certificate. Although there are ten Irish-medium units in Maintained primary schools, 28 IM primary schools are outside of that sector and do not therefore require teachers to be in possession of the Certificate in order to gain employment.

**Figure 2. Numbers of PGCE (IM) students graduating from St Mary's University College and the numbers completing the Certificate**



<sup>3</sup> Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (2018) *Recognition of Qualifications to Teach Catholic Religious Education in Catholic Primary Schools on the Island of Ireland*  
<https://www.catholicbishops.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Recognition-of-Qualifications-web.pdf>

The Certificate in Religious Education provided for post-graduate (PGCE) primary teaching students at Ulster University in Coleraine is delivered through an ecumenical model and by representatives from both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions. Ulster is the only non-Catholic/secular institution to have had their RE course endorsed by the bishops as meeting the specifications for those wishing to teach in Catholic schools in Ireland. Successful completion of the course has, until recently, been a requirement for all students undertaking the primary PGCE at Ulster – 100% of these students have therefore completed the certificate.<sup>4</sup> Ulster also provides PGCE courses for those wishing to teach in post primary schools – a proportion of these students avail of the opportunity to complete a recognised Certificate and thereby increase their range of employment options.

Of the three thousand primary schools in the Republic of Ireland around 90% are managed by Catholic authorities – this proportion has declined relative to the number of their non-denominational counterparts over the last ten years.<sup>5</sup> These schools also require the teachers that they employ to have successfully completed the Certificate. A certificate qualification that has been approved by the bishops is offered at six teaching colleges south of the border.

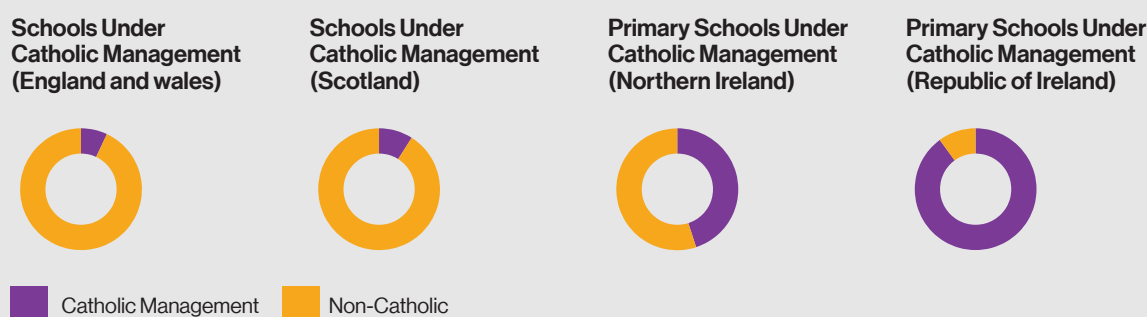
Fewer than one in ten state-funded schools in England and Wales are managed by Catholic church authorities. Thirty-three Catholic Higher Education institutions in England and Wales provide courses that lead to the award of the Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies (CCRS). The CCRS was re-designed in 1992 to provide teachers with a basic understanding of the central beliefs of the Catholic faith, “its teachings and way of life” in order to enable them “to contribute to the maintenance of the ethos of the Catholic school”.<sup>6</sup> The course description explicitly specifies that it may be completed by non-Catholics. One local teacher of RE who had undertaken ITE in England commented:

**In [teaching college] in England...ones on the course who were Sikhs did it, just to widen their opportunities**

Just over half of the teachers employed in English Catholic primary schools are Catholic although there may be a stipulation that, for certain leadership positions, the post must be filled by a practising Catholic. This is permitted under the 2010 Equalities act.<sup>7</sup>

Around 7% of schools in Scotland are under Catholic management and three institutions there award a qualification that is equivalent to the Irish Certificate – the Catholic Teaching Certificate (CTC).<sup>8</sup> Although this course is open to non-Catholics it has been designed specifically for “Catholic teachers wishing to teach religious education in Catholic schools”.<sup>9</sup> All applicants wishing to undertake the CTC need to obtain a reference from a Catholic priest as part of the entry requirements.

**Figure 3. Management of schools across jurisdictions on both islands**



The Irish bishops insist that “stringent assessment” is needed to ensure that any certificate obtained outside Ireland is suited to “specifically Irish needs”. The CCRS and CTC provided through 36 institutions in Great Britain have been recognised by CCMS as meeting the certificate requirement for employment in Catholic primary schools in Ireland, North and South. At undergraduate level, the CCRS requires eighty hours contact. The Irish bishops have advised that those teachers who had completed the CCRS should be able to demonstrate an additional forty contact hours in order to meet the criteria for employment in an Irish Catholic primary school.<sup>10</sup> The RE certificates awarded by Catholic university colleges in Canada (Ontario) and in Australia (Sydney) have also been accepted as meeting the requirements for employment in Maintained primary schools in NI.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The primary teaching PGCE at Ulster has an annual approved intake of 33 students.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/>

<sup>6</sup> CCRS website <http://brs-ccrs.org.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> [www.catholiceducation.org.uk](http://www.catholiceducation.org.uk)

<sup>8</sup> In 1918 all Catholic schools in Scotland transferred from Diocesan control to State governance – currently 366 of the 2,500+ schools in Scotland are Catholic schools.

<sup>9</sup> University of Glasgow <https://online.gla.ac.uk/programme/university-of-glasgow-credl-religious-education-1544700394202>

<sup>10</sup> Irish Catholic Bishops Conference (2018) *Recognition of Qualifications to Teach Catholic Religious Education in Catholic Primary Schools on the Island of Ireland*, Veritas, Dublin <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Recognition-of-Qualifications-web.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> CCMS Website <http://onlineccms.com/index.php/faq-s/51-catholic-education-certificate/55-where-can-i-get-a-certificate-in-religious-education>

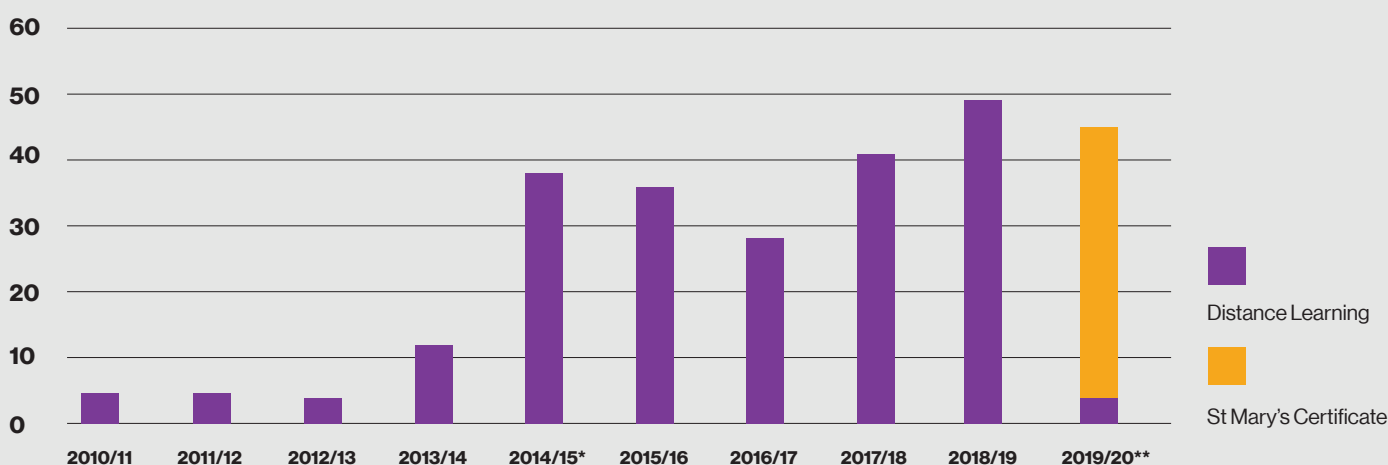
The module in RE that is integrated within the BEd primary teaching course at Stranmillis University College neither meets, nor was it ever designed to meet, the Certificate requirement for those seeking employment in Maintained primary schools. Until its closure in 1985, St Joseph's Training College, Belfast had provided an option for those Stranmillis students wishing to undertake the Certificate. In more recent times it was only available to Stranmillis students through distance learning courses delivered by either Life Light<sup>12</sup> or Glasgow University. Students taking this route were initially required to pay for the course up front – they were able to recoup these costs from DE, subject to successful completion.

Details on the religious/community composition of the student bodies in St Mary's and Stranmillis are not available in the public realm but, in 2014, the Irish News reported that 18% of the student teachers enrolled at Stranmillis were Catholic and that there were no Protestant students attending St Mary's.<sup>13</sup> Since an ITE course undertaken at Stranmillis did not provide students with the wherewithal to teach in a Maintained primary, it has been proposed that the Certificate requirement specifically disadvantages Protestants; accordingly, the place afforded to the Certificate has been cited as a justification for the retention of the teacher exception to Fair Employment legislation (FETO).<sup>14</sup> The FETO exception allows schools to use religion as grounds to discriminate between applicants for teaching posts. It has been argued that, without the FETO exception, qualified teachers who had attended St Mary's would have unlimited access to jobs in any primary school whereas most of those who had attended Stranmillis could only apply for posts in Controlled and Integrated primaries.

In March 2013 a Department of Education (DE) investigation into teachers' employment opportunities and the impact of the Certificate requirement in Maintained primaries recommended action to ensure that those Stranmillis students undertaking the Certificate were not "out of pocket at any stage".<sup>15</sup> From the 2014-15 academic year the authorities at Stranmillis undertook to pay the fees (£400-£500) up-front for any of their students who wished to complete the Certificate by distance learning. The college would then recoup these from the Department of Employment and Learning once the course had been completed. The number of Stranmillis students completing the Certificate jumped from an average of 12 per annum between 2005-06 and 2013-14 (i.e. 7.5% of the approved annual ITE student intake at Stranmillis [n=160]<sup>16</sup>) to 44 between 2014-15 and 2018-19 (i.e. 27.5% of the annual ITE student intake).

The DE report had also recommended that Stranmillis and St Mary's explore the possibility of the development of a "joint arrangement" to improve students' access to the Certificate. Since September 2019 BEd students entering Stranmillis have been able to access a three-year course leading to the award of the Certificate in-house. First year students are now able to undertake the Certificate alongside either the primary BEd course or any post-primary BEd course (i.e. Business and Enterprise, Mathematics and Science, Religious Studies, Technology and Design) offered at Stranmillis. The course is delivered through lectures and tutorials led by Stranmillis staff. Students will also be required to demonstrate their application of the knowledge and practical skills developed during teaching practice at an appropriate school (most probably a Maintained or Integrated school). The Certificate is validated by St Mary's. Students in other year groups may still avail of the distance learning option but it is envisaged that this option will eventually be phased out as the in-house course is rolled out for each new student intake. The DE approved 2019/20 BEd intake to Stranmillis was 145 students and around 25% of these have opted to undertake the in-house Certificate.

**Figure 4. Certificate uptake by students at Stranmillis UC 2010/11-2019/20**



(NB \* Stranmillis undertakes to pay fees for distance learning Certificate up front.

\*\* Option available to undertake the Certificate at Stranmillis)

<sup>12</sup> A UK-based home study course endorsed by the bishops in both GB and Ireland.

<sup>13</sup> Irish News 25th November 2014 "No Protestant Trainee Teachers at St Mary's College" by Simon Doyle <http://www.irishnews.com/news/2014/11/25/news/no-protestant-trainee-teachers-at-st-mary-s-university-college-108939/>

<sup>14</sup> Dunn, S. & Gallagher, T. (2003) *The Teacher Exception Provision and Equality in Employment in Northern Ireland*. Belfast, Equality Commission for NI.

<sup>15</sup> DENI (March 2013) *Review of employment opportunities for teaching staff* <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/de/Review-of-employment-opportunities-for-teaching-staff-Part-1.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> DE website (accessed 25th Nov 2019) Approved intakes to Initial Teacher Education courses 2019/20 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/approved-intakes-initial-teacher-education-courses>

The 2013 review by DE further advised that there need to be a “stepped change in terms of all students viewing the Certificate as an enabler, a qualification that will widen opportunities for employment.” There is little evidence that much progress has been made in respect of this as indicated by one recent Stranmillis graduate:

**I was the only [Protestant who took the Certificate] in my year, although there were a few Catholic ones who did it... they knew that they would have to have it if they were going to get work.**

There would also appear to have been limited progress with the DE recommendation that: “CCMS may wish to consider reviewing the requirement for the Certificate for all Nursery and Primary posts, ensuring the requirement is in line with need... [by] amending the requirement to allow teachers to gain the Certificate in the first two years of employment [and] maintaining the requirement for designated posts only rather than a blanket requirement for all posts in the Nursery and Primary sector.” In 2013, CCMS agreed to an accommodation for the transfer of those primary school teachers who were facing redundancy due to the closure of a Controlled primary school but who had not completed an approved RE certificate. It was determined that they could be relocated to a vacant post in a Maintained primary school to obviate this eventuality, with the proviso that they would complete the Certificate within three years of appointment. This option has yet to be called upon.<sup>17</sup>

Integrated primary schools require only those teachers who are involved in preparing Catholic pupils for the sacraments of Eucharist (First Communion), Confirmation and Reconciliation (First Confession) to have completed the Certificate.

Teachers wishing to teach RE in a Catholic post-primary school (Maintained or Catholic voluntary grammar) – or those who wish to take up a post with significant pastoral responsibilities in these schools – may also be required to be in possession of an approved RE certificate. RE teachers in post-primary schools will generally have studied RE as their principal subject whilst in higher education. Most post-primary teachers will have undertaken study in a second subject area to increase their employability options. Many of those post-primary students who are aware of the certificate requirement in Maintained primaries and are willing to teach in that sector may undertake a subsidiary course leading to an approved certificate in the knowledge that it will expand their range of potential employment options.

ITE institutions are heavily oversubscribed in NI – particularly for primary school teaching. A number of prospective teachers therefore elect to attend teaching colleges in GB (and, to a lesser extent, Rol). Around a quarter of those currently teaching in NI have undertaken ITE outside NI. The institutions attended by these teachers are broadly reflective of the community divide: it seems that Catholic students choose predominantly to attend those teaching colleges which have a Catholic ethos and offer the CCRS or CTC – Protestant students, on the whole, attend different institutions.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Discussion - An Occupational Requirement?

The 2013 DE review of the Certificate concluded that there was “no statistical evidence to suggest that [it] has resulted in inequalities in employment”. This quantitative conclusion was supported with comments from qualitative research commissioned by the Equality Commission in 2002 which had identified a “chill factor” that had resulted in a reluctance for Protestants to apply for posts in Catholic schools and a similar reluctance for Catholics to apply for posts in the Controlled sector. At the time of the review this qualitative material was already 10 years old.

DE’s review was also informed by the findings of a questionnaire that had been completed by only 11 students at Stranmillis. It did not seek to ascertain whether or not the Certificate was fit for purpose – to assess the extent to which, by completing the course of study, those who undertook the Certificate were better equipped with the skills and knowledge required to educate children according to Catholic principles.

#### Notes

<sup>17</sup> From correspondence with CCMS

<sup>18</sup> Milliken, M., Bates, J. and Smith, A. (2019) ‘Education policies and teacher deployment in Northern Ireland: ethnic separation, cultural encapsulation and community cross-over.’ *British Journal of Educational Studies* Manuscript ID BJES-03-19-0036-RI

Research conducted through Ulster University into teacher deployment in NI included both a survey that was completed by more than 1,000 current teachers and 30 in-depth interviews with teachers whose careers had departed from the traditional, community-consistent path. A different pattern is seen to have emerged in recent years. Although the distribution of teachers remains generally reflective of the community division between sectors, there would appear to have been a relative thaw in the chill factor. This was particularly noted in non-Catholic grammar schools, where 23% of teachers had received their formative education in Maintained primaries in NI. Figures for cross-over teachers in Catholic voluntary grammar schools (14%), Maintained post-primary schools (8%), Controlled post-primary schools (18%) and Controlled primary schools (8%) show that there is now greater diversity in the staff room than had been observed in previous quantitative studies – by Ulster University in 1977<sup>19</sup> and the Equality Commission in 2003.<sup>20</sup> Maintained primaries, however, remain as bastions of professional community separation. Fewer than 2% of teachers employed in these schools had attended Controlled primaries in NI. It would seem that the Certificate requirement could be a significant factor in limiting cross-community teacher employment in this sector.

The CCMS website contains a commitment “to equality of opportunity in employment” and states that applications are welcome from, “all suitably qualified candidates irrespective of belief, gender, disability, race, political opinion, age, marital status, sexual orientation, or whether or not they have dependants.” Women make up 84% of those teaching in primary schools and very nearly all of those teaching in nursery schools<sup>21</sup> – it could be argued therefore that the Certificate requirement impacts differentially on women teachers’ employment opportunities.

In order to be classified as an effective and appropriate occupational requirement the course of study followed by students undertaking the Certificate must impart the specific skills and knowledge necessary to teach in Maintained primary and nursery schools. The research conducted through Ulster has raised questions in respect of this. Cross-over teachers cast doubt on the capacity of the Certificate, as it currently exists, to adequately prepare a non-Catholic teacher for supporting their pupils to follow Catholic religious practices and rituals. Protestant teachers who were employed in Maintained primary schools were interviewed in depth. None of them was convinced of the practical merit of the Certificate. A view was expressed that, as long as a qualified, capable teacher was in possession of adequate curriculum material then they could deliver any class – irrespective of their personal faith:

***You don’t have to be Catholic to teach in a Catholic school... I’ll get handed the curriculum book and I’ll read it – because I’m not staunchly any religion I don’t find offence – I don’t find a problem with it.***

There has been significant investment in the development of Catholic RE primary curriculum materials – firstly the ‘Alive Oh’ resources and, since 2016, ‘Grow in Love’. It must be emphasised that there is no requirement that applicants wishing to complete the Certificate should be Catholic. One Protestant teacher, however, saw the Certificate as being a barrier without educational merit or practical justification. She did not have the Certificate and, as a result, had been unable to apply for a permanent post in a Maintained primary even though she had occupied a longer-term temporary post in that same school. The requirement for teachers seeking employment in Maintained primary schools to have completed the Certificate only applies to those who apply for permanent posts.

***[The principal’s] words were... “If we were to have you as a sub or for maternity cover it wouldn’t matter but if you were applying for a permanent job you would need it.”***

Another teacher suggested that the Certificate requirement may be concealing an ulterior motive:

***When you are in a Catholic school and you are advertising for a teacher you have to put that thing in about the Catholic certificate so it’s highly unlikely you will get any non-Catholics applying for the job.***

Following consultation with parents, in December 2019 the Archdiocese of Dublin made a commitment to a “process of significant change” in Catholic schools – they would still promote the Catholic ethos, but the primary responsibility for preparing children to undertake the sacraments (including First Penance and First Communion) was to pass from the teacher and the school to the parish and the family. It is as yet unclear whether or not this will have an outworking on the Certificate requirement for those teaching in the district.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Darby, J., Murray, D., Batts, D., Dunn, S., Farren, S. and Harris, J. (1977) *Schools Together?* Centre for the Study of Conflict, University of Ulster, Coleraine.

<sup>20</sup> Dunn, S. & Gallagher, T. (2003) *The Teacher Exception Provision and Equality in Employment in Northern Ireland*. Belfast, Equality Commission for NI.

<sup>21</sup> GTCNI (2018) *Digest of Statistics* [https://www.gtcni.org.uk/publications/uploads/document/DgstStats\\_2018.pdf](https://www.gtcni.org.uk/publications/uploads/document/DgstStats_2018.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Irish News 05 December, 2019 <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2019/12/05/news/schools-to-move-away-from-preparing-catholic-children-from-sacraments-1782540/>



## 4. Summary & Recommendations

### 4.1 Summary

To gain permanent employment in posts that include RE teaching duties in Maintained schools in NI, applicants must be able to provide proof that they can do so in line with the church's theology and ethos - this includes all permanent primary and nursery school teachers. The body that oversees Catholic education in NI, CCMS, regards those teachers who have completed an approved certificate in religious education to have met this requirement - this is consistent with practice in the proportionally smaller number of Catholic schools in England, Wales and Scotland. The Catholic church is the dominant education provider in the Republic of Ireland. The education landscape in NI presents a more complex demographic, historical and societal pattern.

In 2013, DE assessed the impact of the Certificate requirement as an employment precondition and determined that it had not resulted in inequalities in employment – even though teaching students at St Mary's and Ulster completed an approved RE certificate as part of their programme of studies and Stranmillis students who wished to undertake the Certificate needed to undertake a distance learning course. Since September 2019 an optional in-house Certificate programme has been offered to those students commencing a primary teaching BEd in Stranmillis.

Many students leave NI to undertake ITE in colleges in GB – a pattern has been observed of Catholic students attending Catholic colleges where they can obtain a CCMS-recognised Certificate whilst Protestant students attend non-Catholic (non-Certificate) colleges. A proportion of these students will subsequently return to NI to teach.

The teaching workforce in primary and nursery schools is predominantly made up of women - the Certificate requirement therefore disproportionately affects women teachers' employment opportunities.

Evidence from recent research conducted by Ulster University suggests that, although the proportion of teachers who work in schools across the traditional community divide had generally increased, few Protestant teachers were working in Maintained primary schools (<2%). The Certificate requirement for employment in Maintained primary schools has been perceived as debarring Protestant teachers from applying for these posts and has consequently been cited as a justification for the continued existence of the teacher exception to FETO.

Interviews with Protestant teachers who had been employed in Maintained primary schools raised questions about the efficacy of the Certificate in adequately equipping non-Catholics to work within Catholic religious practices and ethos.

### 4.2 Recommendations

1. Consideration could be given to allowing teachers to be appointed to posts in Maintained primaries pending completion of the Certificate within an allotted time period (as is already the case for teachers who transfer to the Maintained sector to obviate redundancy).
2. Action could be taken to progress the recommendation made in the 2013 DE review that the Certificate requirement be limited to designated posts.
3. There may be merit in reviewing the Certificate course content to ensure that it actively seeks to prepare non-Catholics to work within the religious practices and ethos of a Catholic school.
4. The availability of the Certificate could be further extended by providing it as an integrated, ecumenical module within all primary ITE courses available in NI, and by aligning content and delivery style between the St Mary's and Ulster models.



**transforming education**

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