Practical wisdom and the good RE teacher

A case for change to Secondary ITT in RE in England

A Working Paper by Janet Orchard and Hugo Whately
For Culham St Gabriel’s
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Executive summary

This research is concerned with Initial Teacher Training (ITT) in Secondary Religious Education (RE) in England. It reviews recent general changes to ITT provision introduced by policy makers and assesses the responses of a range of Secondary RE ITT providers, using philosophical ideas currently being developed in the field of teacher education. Providers of ITT in RE face a double-bind in this context. General reforms to ITT are causing allocated numbers of students on dedicated RE programmes to fall, so that courses are closing; and this is compounded by curriculum changes which are undermining RE’s role and status.

We conclude that in principle radical change to ITT in England may be desirable but that the particular reforms being implemented in practice are not properly thought through. A similar conclusion is reached by the House of Commons Education Select Committee found, who found that “greater effort is needed to identify which additional personal qualities make candidates well-suited to teaching” (Education Select Committee 2012a,3). We use a mix of empirical and philosophical research methods to address this concern with particular reference to RE. We find that a richer and more nuanced account of the good RE teacher is needed at a theoretical level which needs mediating into ITT provision if standards of learning, teaching and professional formation in the subject are to improve.

Key findings

1. A ‘thin’ understanding of the good teacher is shared widely among policy makers and Secondary RE ITT providers, focused on these kinds of general characteristics:
   - Proven academic ability in a related subject
   - Personal presence in the classroom
   - Capacity to Inspire confidence and passion for the subject so that it engages pupils’ interest
   - Capacity to learn from observing other experienced teachers
   - Capacity to reflect profitably on failures and successes with others
   - Capacity to be inquisitive about different approaches to learning to teach
   - Willingness to take risks and be creative in the classroom

2. However, Secondary RE ITT providers’ conception of the good teacher demands more than this, their “thicker” conception typically including the following additional qualities:
   - A clear sense of the purpose of RE in particular
   - Capacity to engage actively with issues that are specific to the subject, such as RE pedagogy, curriculum content and community politics
   - Capacity to use, adapt and (where appropriate) blend different pedagogies in their practice
   - Commitment to on-going critical reflection on classroom practice

3. A thicker conception of the good teacher still is articulated by philosophers working in the field of teacher education. Re-appraisal of the Aristotelian

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1 This term is contested; and rejected by many providers, who prefer the term “initial teacher education”. However, the term ‘ITT’ is used here not as endorsement but because it has been adopted in the dominant discourse with which this research engages.
notion of ‘practical wisdom’ has attracted particular interest, including the following three elements:

- The teacher’s theoretical knowledge and understanding, or episteme;
- The technical competence and practical skill combined with good professional judgement, or techne;
- The sound moral judgement of the teacher, or phronesis, although this last dimension is more controversial and less well developed than the previous two elements of practical wisdom;

4. If policy makers in England are seriously committed to the aim of a world class education system, populated by high calibre teachers, the more ambitious notion of the good teacher promoted in the philosophically informed account should be argued for.

5. If so, this has significant implications for the kind of professional formation they will need, so that their growing technical competence in the classroom and school context is blended with developing their theoretical knowledge and understanding of education. RE teachers in particular will need to engage with educational theory which extends beyond the established canon of RE ‘Pedagogies’ and RE-specific tips for teachers and more attention should be paid to their moral and ethical judgement in the classroom.
Introduction

RE is currently being sidelined as a subject on the secondary curriculum, despite the best efforts of best efforts of curriculum developers within the subject community over many years to assert RE’s importance. As recently as 2005, a key text book for new teachers of Religious Education opened with an authoritative claim: “Religious Education is flourishing: brash, bold and self-confident” (Brandom and Wright 2005, 1). Yet the same cannot be said for RE in England at the beginning of 2013. Even though pupils continue to “need to understand the role and significance of religion in the modern world and the important beliefs and values that shape it” (NSNF 2004, 3), the rapidly changing status of RE on the secondary curriculum is exerting a very negative impact indeed on ITT provision in the subject.

Thus, while some student teachers training in what are identified as high priority secondary subjects can expect to receive up to £20,000 financial support for their PGCE course, there is to be no government funded training bursary at all (DfE 2012a) from September 2013 for student RE teachers. Schools are recruiting fewer RE specialist teachers and fewer such specialists are being trained (DfE 2011e). A further layer of uncertainty about the future of ITT in RE is created by policies intended set to shift mainstream teacher training provision into schools and out of universities (DfE 2011c).

This policy priority creates a further set of related concerns about the future of ITT in RE in England; for longstanding and ongoing concerns have been expressed about standards of RE teaching in England, in both primary and secondary phases (REC 2011). While the Department for Education (DfE) point to a lack of demand for new RE specialist teachers (REC 2013), the National Association for Teachers of RE (NATRE) suggests a rather different scenario. They argue that there is a shortage of specialist RE teachers and large number of non-specialist teachers teaching the subject in secondary schools in England (REC 2013) with inadequate subject knowledge to teach with academic rigor. Moreover, where these non-specialist teachers are isolated from the good RE practice which does exist, they do not benefit in lieu from ongoing and subject specific continuing professional development. Under the new arrangements for ITT, it is these non-specialist teachers who may be training the next generation of teachers of RE, rather than university-based RE specialists.

The radical and fast-moving nature of these changes – to RE and ITT practice in England - should be of considerable concern to those who value it highly. Radical change to both may be desirable in principle; but are the particular reforms being promoted through the direction policy making is currently taking adequate and suitable? This study focuses on ITT in secondary RE specifically. Our investigation causes us to think that significant change is warranted but not the particular changes that are currently being proposed. Furthermore, we argue that a richer and more nuanced account of the good RE teacher than we have found in policy and practice to date is needed, if standards of learning and teaching in the subject are to improve. If we are right, our argument has significant implications for Secondary RE teachers, both in the initial and ongoing stages of their professional formation.

Firstly, we have critically evaluated current policies in ITT being promoted through the dominant discourse, drawing on an emerging literature in philosophy of education and teacher education to undertake this task. Next, we have sought to capture the opinions and perceptions of a small but representative sample of people engaged actively in the provision of ITT in RE, in four different geographical locations in England, who are thus bound up in the current climate of radical change. From this evidence, we identify four distinct categories of provider currently engaged in ITT in RE. We have found elements of shared understanding of what makes a good RE teacher, what kinds of ITT work best across those four categories and geographical
areas. We have also invited our interviewees to describe for us the kinds of RE
teachers and RE teacher training they would like to see being promoted in the future,
given adequate resources.

We have found examples of positive innovations in ITT in RE and reasons why these
might represent improvements to traditional provision. However, we have found
further evidence to suggest that radical “improvements” to teacher training which
policy makers (and some practitioners) advocate exclude key theoretical and value-
driven elements of ideal core provision in training and CPD. We believe these are
elements to which good new RE teachers might reasonably be entitled, at some
point, if not in the initial phase of their career. The very immediate needs of those
graduates experimenting with teaching or pursuing it as a relatively temporary form of
employment might be served adequately enough by school-based, craft models of
ITT. However, a “thicker”, more sustained programme of professional development
than either the conventional PGCE or employment based routes alone provide
should be offered for two reasons. Firstly, this will be needed to prepare very good
practitioners indeed for a lifetime’s career in teaching; secondly because without a
serious, systematic and sustained revision of ITT and CPD in RE poor standards of
teaching and thus learning will continue to be an issue for the subject.

Finally, we have constructed a theoretical conception of the really good RE teacher
from the same literature we used to critique policy. We have begun to sketch the kind
of professional formation, given ideal circumstances, which might enable such
teachers to develop. Very good teachers indeed, we conclude, need to be able to
blend growing technical competence in the classroom and school context with
knowledge and understanding of education at a theoretical level. This must extend
beyond an acquaintance with the established canon of RE “Pedagogies” (Grimmritt
2000).

Some of the people we interviewed showed sophisticated knowledge and
understanding of education more broadly; however, across the sample this was far
from commonplace. Furthermore, the professional judgement demonstrated by the
very best teachers indeed cannot be reduced to pedagogical competence but also
requires the capacity to make sound moral decisions in the context of schooling. This
argument, based on ideas gathering strength among philosophers of education and
teacher education researchers, promotes “practical wisdom” as the distinguishing
characteristic of the very best educational professional practice from others. We
outline the implications of this finding in the final part of our study.

**Part One: The Double Bind in ITT in RE**

**Bind one: the changing nature of ITT**

Like its predecessors, the Coalition government elected in May 2010 has argued that
the quality of teachers in all subjects is central to the task of raising educational
standards (DfE 2010, 3). This broader policy context exercises a considerable impact
on ITT in RE with serious implications for its future, so we examine it here, in relation
to three key themes that recur consistently in discussions about teacher education in
the dominant policy discourse (Oancea and Orchard, 2012). We analyse the
contested notion of teacher quality first before going on to consider how such
assumptions have impacted on proposals for innovation in ITT in England. We
conclude this section of the study with a review of issues of teacher employability in
England.
A concern with quality

Building on assumptions shared with earlier administrations across political parties, policy makers have argued that pupil attainment is affected “above all other factors” by the quality of their teachers (DfE 2011c, page 4 para 1). With quality, rather than quantity in mind, the present government has reduced the number of secondary ITT places it funds each year for the past three years. RE is one of a handful of subjects on the secondary curriculum to have been particularly badly affected. Cuts have been argued for based on evidence of a falling demand for RE teachers, due to falling secondary school rolls and contested claims of an oversupply of RE teachers in the past. DfE figures in the School Workforce Survey of 2011 count approximately 16,500 teachers teaching RE that year but admit:

“Teachers were counted once against each subject that they were teaching, regardless of the amount of time they spend teaching the subject” (DfE 2012c, 48)

Thus the figure cited does not distinguish those teachers with an RE-specific qualification from teachers drafted in to teach RE who have with other subject specialisms. At best, it is hard to tell from these figures whether or not there is an issue of over-supply of RE teachers. Meanwhile numbers for training for the Primary phase have risen slightly (DfE 2011d, 2011e) in line with an increase in the birth rate. This has created further pressure still to reduce allocations in the secondary phase, because funds are needed to support this expansion.

The government set out its vision for the future of ITT in a series of key policy papers. A White Paper, The Importance of Teaching, was published in November 2010 (DfE 2010), with a revised ITT strategy launched in June 2011 (DfE, 2011a), following a consultation process. After further consultation, a report was published in November 2011 (DfE, 2011b) accompanied by a final implementation plan: Training Our Next Generation of Outstanding Teachers (DfE 2011c). This document paints a picture of impending diversification of providers in ITT, balanced by retained central control over funding criteria.

Notable is the degree of detailed control central government has assumed over ITT in masterminding these changes. The numbers to be allocated to ITT are determined by the DfE, with the Teaching Agency (TA) which was established (by the Department) to replace the Teaching Development Agency (TDA) from April 2012. Currently the TA is responsible for allocating places to providers through “effective market management” means and matching “good-quality training provision and the supply of the workforce to Ministers’ priorities...” (DfE 2012b). However, it has recently been announced (DfE circular January 2013) that the TA is to merge with the National College for School Leadership; the new agency will be headed up by the DfE’s “behaviour tsar”, former headteacher Charlie Taylor.

Strategic direction for ITT is determined by government. These priorities are concerned with:

“further improvement of training quality, encouraging innovation, focussing on the employability of trainees, and rewarding the most effective partnerships between universities and schools”  (DfE 2011c, page 9 para 16).

At first glance, these priorities seem uncontroversial. Who would deny that good teacher training should focus on the demands of the job itself, with universities and schools working creatively together to this end? However, such arguments prove far from simple on further inspection. Education is vitally important to the life chances of individual children and young people, and state education in particular is supported through the public purse. Governments, and those people who elect them, are rightly
concerned to hold all teachers to account for their actions; yet policy makers’ and professional educators’ interpretations of quality in teaching often diverge. These will be reflected in the alternative descriptions they might give both of what constitutes a very good teacher, as well as the most appropriate form of professional development.

For example, one assumption policy makers have made since 2010 is that a very good teaching force will comprise “top graduates”, that is to say those with the highest grades at degree level. Thus a system of differentiated bursaries was introduced in 2012-13, with trainees with 2:1s or 1sts in their first degree awarded higher bursaries than others. In addition, policy makers have urged greater rigour at the point of recruitment, supporting the introduction of psychometric testing by PGCE providers, following the reported success of Teach First with this particular method. In addition to academic excellence, and a particular psychological make up the notion of a good teacher promoted in the dominant policy discourse is someone with highly developed professional knowledge of a technical kind which might be associated with a “craft” (Gove 2011).

ITT based on these kinds of assumptions might focus on technical issues of procedure, clarity, transparency, and the application of rules, using instrumental aspects of teaching practice (e.g. targets, performance indicators, and milestones) to measure its effectiveness (Oancea and Orchard, 2012). Meanwhile, the value to teachers of engaging with educational theory as part of their professional development goes almost completely unrecognised in current policy discourse, hence the relaxation in July 2012 of rules regarding the employment of unqualified teachers in state-funded schools in England (Harrison, 2012). This contrasts sharply with the view of quality in teaching informed by research findings and which those currently engaged in ITT often take. This tends to interpret teaching as a situated educative and social action, bound up in an organic relationship with learning that is laden with moral complexity (e.g. Ellis et al 2010).

Is it the case that a very good or excellent degree, a certain personality type and technical competence capture the qualities that very good teachers need? Certainly standards of teachers’ subject knowledge have been an ongoing concern in RE over many years (REC 2007); and understanding the field and/or discipline to be mediated to children and young people surely represents one important dimension of the teacher’s professional knowledge. Necessary, we would argue, but not on its own sufficient; nor would we regard other kinds of knowing that teachers need in a narrowly technical sense.

To know and understand something very well oneself may be a pre-requisite of communicating that understanding successfully to others; but other capacities are needed too: the capacity to mediate that understanding to others. Not that learning comprises of transmitting factual information alone; Bruner (1996) identifies at least four commonly understood and distinct forms of learning, which include but cannot be reduced to knowledge transfer. His “folk pedagogies” also include modelling, co-constructing ideas and critical reflection on established traditions of knowing.

That being the case, the teacher’s craft is more complex still than merely knowing how to transfer knowledge efficiently, while insisting very systematically that the learners being taught manage to behave. Nor is that complexity a technical matter alone, with different approaches to teaching reflecting alternative values and assumptions about what ought to be taught and in what manner. From this appreciation of complexity, a case for educational theory and the need for teachers and those training them to engage with it begins to emerge.
A concern with innovation

However, given the assumptions underpinning policy, the academic dimension of ITT in England is being downsized in favour of new types of employment based learning, while the notion of teaching as a situated, educative and social action is being sidelined. The ‘Teach First’ scheme in particular is set to double in size, although older style, more established employment-based routes into teaching, including the Graduate Teacher Training Programme (GTTP), are being closed down; and the Overseas Teacher Training Programme (OTTP) will no longer be required for teachers who trained in the USA, Canada, Australia or New Zealand.

Mainstream PGCE provision is also set to shift away from partnership arrangements towards School Centred ITT (SCITTs). “Schools Direct” will expand dramatically, with all kinds of schools (formally linked to an HEI) accredited as providers of ITT in their own right. By 2014/15 500 Teaching Schools will be designated such by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), whose increasing position of control over ITT provision has already been noted (see above).

HEI based PGCEs will remain a possible route into teaching in the future, though on increasingly reduced numbers. Even these programmes will need to demonstrate that their programmes are being led by schools. University Training Schools may be an option for some HEIs although this had not been pursued during the time that our study was being compiled. The manifest lack of enthusiasm among policy makers for the traditionally dominant entry route to teaching, the PGCE, is evident in the single passing reference it merits in the implementation plan, Training our Next Generation of Outstanding Teachers (DfE 2011c, 13).

The key argument for radical change among policy makers seems to be the need to address the poor standard of a good deal of present ITT provision (BERA-UCET 2012, 34). Yet this perception is at odds with the high ratings that Ofsted inspectors have consistently awarded HEI-based providers (OFSTED 2011). Reaction of school-based practitioners to the new proposals has been mixed. Some have moved quickly to implement the new Schools Direct route into teaching (established by the 2010 White Paper), while many more have focussed on new opportunities to provide Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers rather than ITT in which they have tended to remain involved with established and familiar ITT partnerships with HE institutions.

The direction of travel of ITT in RE into more school-based provision raises particular concerns for the subject, given that standards of classroom practice across England are so variable, even on a positive assessment. It is simply not clear that the capacity exists across the board to provide school led, subject specific ITT provision, even were it desirable. Nor is it clear that, outside the faith-based sector, schools as institutions are sufficiently supportive of the subject en masse to deliver RE placements through Schools Direct, hence the poor take up and re-allocation to HEIs of RE places in March 2012. In faith based schools, RE is more likely to be regarded a priority and resourced with teaching time more generously (REC 2007). However, the purpose of RE in the faith-based setting, while sharing a number of aims common to RE in other settings, is nevertheless distinct from, the purpose of RE in the community school setting. Faith-based schools make an invaluable contribution to ITT in RE across England, but there would be considerable unease were they to monopolise provision.

Further questions can be raised on a practical level about how even modest standards of teaching in RE can be maintained, if teachers are to shoulder more responsibility for trainees. How will they divide their time equitably between the demands of pupils and trainees, particularly when placements prove challenging and considerable time is needed to engage in what McNichol et al (2011) have described
as “relationship maintenance”? How clear are parents and carers that new arrangements for ITT that is school-based may lead to higher numbers of unqualified teachers honing their skills, while being paid, through practice on their children? Nor can it be assumed that practitioners who are good at teaching children will automatically teach adults to teach very well. Some of the necessary qualities and skills are the same but others are different.

Both UCET and BERA have expressed concern that the definition of ‘school-led’ ITT is insufficiently clear. Furthermore, they have pointed out how strongly many HEI based programmes have been influenced already by schools in England since the early 1990s (UCET 2012, 1). Nor are they clear that downgrading the place of understanding educational research in the preparation of teachers will be of long term benefit to the profession (BERA-UCET 2012, 6). There may be disagreement about the timing of that input into teachers’ professional formation; but a good deal of persuasive argument that it is needed (see ahead). Shortly we will argue that as teachers become more experienced over time, opportunities to engage with and apply the latest findings in educational research, whether into curriculum, effective learning or teacher development, develop and extend the quality of their professional practice. However, the findings of research will be more difficult to channel into schools if links with universities are compromised, even severed entirely.

A concern with employability

In contrast, teacher training is now being positioned in the dominant discourse as a short, intensive preparation for top graduates, psychologically well-suited to a task, which is predominantly technical and craft-like. Furthermore, priority is being given to some subjects over others, with bigger bursaries offered to graduates in those shortage subjects regarded as having a higher status over others. In 2011–12 Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics and Modern Foreign Languages graduates with a 1st class degree training to teach received payments of £20,000 (DfE 2011c), compared with £9,000 for those training to teach RE. Meanwhile those training to teach RE in 2013-14 will receive no training bursary. This move is justified by the DfE on the grounds that there is a lack of demand for new RE specialist teachers entering the jobs market and evidence of an over supply of RE teachers trained over target allocations in previous years (DfE submission to the APPG Enquiry into RE November 2012). This argument is countered by the National Association for Teachers of RE (NATRE) who point to the large number of non-specialist teachers teaching RE in secondary schools in England (REC 2011).

Aside from the empirical argument being waged by religious educators and policy makers on this matter, further problems in principle can be anticipated if equal pay and conditions for teachers falls apart. Once trained, the typical role of the secondary teachers in an English schools includes a variety of responsibilities that are non subject specific and which involve team work. These duties include monitoring the school environment during breaks and lunchtimes, for example, and work as a “form tutor” monitoring pupils’ attendance and offering where necessary pastoral support. The wider role of the teacher relies on a sense of collegiality that will be difficult to sustain as market forces dictate certain teachers be remunerated more generously than others on the grounds of subject. It raises similar problems during the ITT phase too, with the early professional development of trainees dependent on group learning; this collegiality is placed under strain by unequal levels of financial support across groups of trainees. Hence an RE trainee teacher might “outperform” a trainee teacher in non subject-specific dimensions of the teacher’s role, indeed help out that fellow trainee teacher, when the lower performing teacher is in receipt of a generous training bursary. This seems curiously unfair and potentially highly demotivational.

Situated, employment based routes into teaching offer training which is heavily biased by one specific educational setting. Some attempt is made to vary the
trainees experience on these routes so that, for example, a new teacher might be placed in another contrasting school within a federation of schools, to ensure that they have some practical experience of teaching in another context. However, this experience needs further supplementing with sufficient general theoretical understanding to enable teachers to translate ideas and practices successfully from one context to another autonomously. Shortly, (see ahead) we will argue that engaging with educational theory is a necessary dimension of teachers’ professional judgement.

A strong emphasis during ITT on preparation for work may have certain benefits; arguably this is a feature of good teacher training anyway within the existing system. We found evidence of innovative ITT in RE practice among those people we interviewed which operated along these lines (see ahead) and it is the primary motivation of most, though not all, people who undertake a PGCE course. Starting with a “need to know” approach might suit those people for whom learning teaching from immersion in experience is congenial to their learning; and for whom a starting point immersed in educational theory in the abstract is decidedly uncongenial. Beginning teachers in any subject may find reflection on practice difficult without sufficient direct experience of teaching upon which to reflect. They might be better served by time to reflect on educational theory later on, in the second, third or subsequent years of teaching.

PGCE programmes may have attracted students in the past who are keen to study their subject in an applied form and/or education at masters level, courtesy of more funding available from the state than another masters level course might attract. Yet enthusiasm to learn about religion may or may not translate into determination to teach the subject to others. Alternative pathways into teaching can be conceived, and - with the greater flexibility now introduced to provision – potentially created, were suitable partnerships formed between university education departments, theology and religious studies departments and schools. New courses, perhaps at masters level, might combine part time study and part time teaching, enabling good graduates to continue studying while trying out teaching as a possible career without being dependant on the state for funding. A further possible benefit to accrue through this process might be the bridge masters students might form between recent scholarship in their chosen subject area and the equivalent department in a school.

Such instrumental concerns, while valid, should not be allowed to dominate thinking about the future of ITT and CPD in RE. Yet we found little appreciation, if any, of humanistic considerations about the personal and professional growth and development of the teacher in policy documentation. This was so, even though the providers of ITT we interviewed commonly articulated experiences of transformation during their PGCE course; student teachers found it difficult, demanding but ultimately rewarding, because they had “grown” and changed through the process. They described preparation to teach well as an ongoing and unfolding learning experience which led, in some cases, to feelings of self-discovery. Do policy makers assume, in contrast, that good teachers have much of the knowledge and many of the necessary qualities pre-programmed at the start of their training programme, so that ITT is simply a matter of “knocking off the rough edges”? 
Bind two: the down-grading of RE’s status as a curriculum subject

This research project is concerned primarily with the future of ITT in RE rather than the fate of RE as a curriculum subject. However, the further down-grading of RE’s status as a curriculum subject in many schools in England represents the second dimension one half of the double bind in which ITT in RE providers now find themselves and forms an important backdrop to the study. We chart key factors in the general decline in RE’s fortunes briefly next.

A decline in the status of RE has a direct “knock-on” effect in ITT. If RE is regarded as an ‘easy’ or ‘soft’ subject that does not require well trained specialists to deliver it well, then other teachers can be drafted in to cover gaps in the timetable. Thus a falling demand for teachers is recorded in official statistics which go on to affect the numbers of training places which RE is allocated. Although Primary RE lies beyond the scope of this present study, the decline in subject specific ITT provision at this level was identified as a significant issue by the REC in an extensive investigation it undertook into the training of RE teachers (REC 2007). This situation seems to have accelerated since, with anecdotal reports that teaching assistants are co-ordinating RE in increasing numbers of schools.

One frequently cited indicator of the ‘success’ of RE at secondary level in recent years is the numbers of pupils sitting the subject in formal examinations. In 2010 the BBC reported the subject “in the top ten most popular subjects, with entries increasing more than 60% since 1999” (BBC 2010). Entries increased slightly further again in 2012, despite the subject’s exclusion from the EBacc qualification. Meanwhile at A2 Level, there were 23,042 entrants across England, up nearly 700 on the previous year, with 33,600 entrants at AS Level. Certainly the steady rise in exam entries has helped to raise the national profile of the subject. However, there are other factors which puncture this narrative of success in RE based on growing popularity.

The reported quality of RE provision nationally is variable from one school department to another and between areas, depending on the success with which RE is monitored locally by Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACREs). This includes the quality of learning and teaching reported at Key Stage Four when pupils are often being taught GCSE. Research and inspection reports have consistently highlighted ‘substantial’ weaknesses in RE provision across the Primary, Secondary and ITT sectors (e.g. REC 2011, 1, Glasgow University 2011, WRERU 2010). Good RE in England can be very good, hence the high regard in which RE in England is held internationally (Gates 2007, Keast 2006). Conversely, when RE is bad it may well be ‘horrid’, with concerns about the variable quality of teaching, leadership and management and assessment practice featuring persistently in tri-annual subject reports produced by OFSTED (2004, 2007, 2010).

Although the increasing numbers of entries in RS in public examinations indicate the presence of RE provision consistently at KS4, even this may not be an unqualified success for the subject. Too often high standards of teaching and learning at this stage may be equated narrowly with pupil attainment in public examinations; while the capacity of those schemes of work - dominated by teaching to the test and delivered in minimal curriculum time - to address those inherently valuable reasons for including RE on the curriculum at the same time should be questioned. The introduction of the ‘English Baccalaureate’ without RE, excluded from those subjects identified as most academically challenging, has added further pressure on the subject at this Key Stage.
In faith-based schools, RE is more likely to be regarded a priority and resourced with teaching time more generously (REC 2007). Meanwhile in other schools, RE at Key Stage 4 may not only be given inadequate curriculum time, teachers with other specialisms may be drafted into teaching RE with inadequate levels of support, including little or no subject specific professional development (REC 2007). The November 2010 School Workforce Census indicates that of those currently teaching secondary RE over half - 54.5% - have no post A Level qualification in the subject (REC 2011,4) and lack confidence in their work, given they have insufficient training (REC 2011).

At Key Stage 3, the place of RE as a discrete subject has been affected adversely in many schools by the freeing up of the curriculum from prescribed content. The educational reasoning behind this move was entirely sound; we applaud the principle of de-regulation which sought to enable teachers to exercise professional judgement in addressing directly the particular needs of particular pupils. However, in practice the high numbers of teachers with other subject specialisms teaching RE at Key Stage 3 in England (see above) may have been exacerbated by leaders of more autonomously governed schools seeing fit to interpret their new found freedom by paying lip-service to or disregarding entirely their statutory responsibility for RE. Without subject specific OFSTED inspections to check up on them, increasing levels of non-compliance by schools and academies in greater numbers seems likely.

The lack of support RE attracts in many secondary schools is captured memorably by a recent finding that in non denomination schools it was common for less than £1 per pupil per year to be allocated to departments for the purchase of resources (Glasgow University 2011). Michael Gove has argued that, since the subject remains a compulsory part of the school curriculum, nothing has fundamentally changed (BBC 2011); this view is supported by the proposals for the new National Curriculum in England published in February 2013. However, if nothing changes fundamentally in those contexts where expectations in the subject are already low, it will be very difficult indeed for it to flourish. Nor does it seem correct to argue that the status quo is being retained in RE. For in the wider policy context the power of SACREs and Locally Agreed RE Syllabuses has been sidelined, however unintentionally, by the expansion of the academies programme. Evidence of academies who are either ignorant of, or turning a blind eye to, their legal responsibilities to provide RE was presented to the APPG for RE by NATRE in November 2012 (REC 2013) to illustrate what they argue is a widespread and growing phenomenon.

In his 2012 Easter address the Archbishop of Canterbury declared this the “worst possible time to be downgrading the “status and professional excellence of RE in Secondary Schools” (Archbishop of Canterbury 2012). RE has been excluded from the review of the curriculum as a whole so that an independent review of the subject - initiated by the RE Council for England and Wales – is recognised but not supported financially by the Department for Education. That Review, due to be completed during the academic year 2012-13, will doubtless identify features in the subject which, at its best, has a good deal of which it can be proud, including examples of curriculum innovation. Yet serious deficiencies in the subject and variations in standards across schools will also be highlighted, with significant implications for the future of ITT in the subject.
Part Two: providers’ perceptions of the changing nature of ITT in RE

We change focus next to considering the perceptions of practitioners currently engaged actively in ITT in RE. First we consider general experiences of change among this group and the sense they make of these. Then we consider in more depth what a sample of fourteen providers taken from a variety of contexts understand a good teacher of RE to be like and which elements of that need to be included in their professional formation. Next we outline the research methods we used to gather the data on which our analysis is based.

Our research methods

The purpose of the empirical dimension of this research was to evaluate critically the changing nature of initial teacher education in RE in England during the academic year 2011-12, as it was perceived by those engaged in its “delivery”. This included staff in schools, including those employed in training schools and SCITTs, as well as universities.

Two questions in particular informed our empirical research. These were:

1. How are these changes perceived by those engaged in ITE in RE, whether positively or negatively, and what impact have they had on the nature and purpose of their work?

2. Can an “irreducible core” necessary to the professional development of beginning teachers of RE be identified through the findings?

The study was relatively small in scale and comprised three stages. Our original research design identified 3 kinds of data collection: an initial survey or questionnaire through which to elicit first thoughts and responses across a relatively large number of respondents. These initial soundings would help us to identify suitable participants from which to form the focus group we planned for Phase Two of our research, while in the third and final phase of data collection we planned to conduct interviews. However, in response to unforeseen opportunities to consult that arose during the course of the year, we reorganised our plans in ways which we believe have improved the quality of our findings.

The survey

The survey conducted in Stage One was intended to draw attention to common features across the answers given, as well as enabling distinctive views to emerge. For example an opportunity to introduce our project at an AULRE/Culham emergency summit on RE enabled us to target our questionnaires at a group of HEI based religious educators involved in ITT. We then circulated the same research instrument around various RE-focussed web-based discussion fora including the “What is RE?” group, FORASE and the TES RS Subject Forum, although we found the latter group relatively unsuccessful. We used three further RE specific email groups strategically to distribute our questionnaires: those of AULRE, NATRE and the Farmington institute. Although response rates were low this scatter gun approach did generate a statistically significant sample of over 40 responses in total.

The semi-structured interviews

In the second phase of the research we explored those broad brush perceptions in greater depth. Originally a focus group was envisaged for this purpose but having explored this research method in more depth, and discussed our ideas with critical
friends of the project, we decided to gather data through 14 semi-structured interviews, some face-to-face and others by telephone, instead. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, and in our interview schedule we balanced sufficiently closed questioning to enable patterns to emerge; while being sufficiently open to yield high quality data. We wanted participants to feel able to answer freely, determine what they wanted to talk about and how much they wanted to say, within boundaries which we determined.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen over our original intention to conduct a focus group as a better means of gathering in-depth responses from RE ITT providers based in a variety of settings from which we might generate case studies. The interview method was a more suitable choice than, for example, a structured observation of teacher educators’ work given our focus. We agreed to conduct interviews face-to-face wherever possible but recognised that others would need to be conducted over the telephone or using skype given the relatively short timescale to our project.

We discussed our questions with a critical friend and piloted them once each before embarking on our data collection properly. Questions were logically sequenced according to recommended practice for this mode of research (Drever 1995) and structured to allow participants time to talk at some length. Open questions preceded more specific questions to avoid the answers being influenced by earlier conversation. The final question was to be a “sweeper”; e.g. anything else you haven’t had a chance to say? Or want to ask me? Prompt questions were used where necessary to encourage the sharing of more information as well as to ensure all bases were covered during the interview. The use of probes enabled us to push for further information as well as to obtain greater clarity in the answers given by participants where necessary.

We used a “snowball sampling” strategy to select our participants: i.e. we picked key people from our Stage One participants list from HEIs, schools and other settings respectively and then asked them to identify further potential contributors (particularly from the school based ITE sector). Requests for interviews were made in writing, usually by email and followed up by phone or further email. We included written information with our requests to ensure those who participated gave informed consent to participate in the research. In thanking them for their participation after the interview we sent them a copy of our notes and asked them to confirm that they were accurate.

Our sample included both women and men, who were more and less experienced, working across different partnership arrangements for ITE and in four contrasting geographical locations. In reflexive terms, as were the two researchers - a man and a woman - both involved in contrasting ITT in RE settings and at different stages in their careers, one more experienced than the other. From this data we generated 4 pen portraits to capture the experiences of the kinds of actors we found to be engaged in ITT in RE in the changing landscape: HEI-based and school-based teacher educators, old style advisers/inspectors and a new emerging category of ITT provider we termed “hybrids”.

The focus group

In the third and final phase of the research we organised a focus group comprised of experts representing diverse opinions in the field who would reflect on the findings of the first and second stages. These individuals might have participated in phase one of the research but we decided none should have been involved at the interview stage. We shared the philosophical ideas as well as the empirical findings from the questionnaire and the interviews summed up in the case studies to test the findings
of our research and to develop them further through dialogue. The focus group process, as anticipated, enabled both us and them to deepen, clarify and verify our individual experiences among peers and on this basis, develop ideas about what implications, if any, our findings might have for future practice.

We identified the focus group method as being particularly appropriate to this study because we wanted to assess how key messages and actions emanating from policy documents and publications related to the perceptions and experiences of those who work in RE ITT. Wilson describes how focus groups enable the researcher to both "explore participants' perceptions, attitudes, feelings, ideas..." as well as "encourage and utilize group interactions" (Wilson 1997, 211). This is different from a 'group interview' because the focus group seeks "explicitly to exploit group dynamics and analyze the resultant interactions as productions of data" (Wilson 1997, 211). For example, the opportunity for extended discussions stimulated by prompts drawn from our provisional findings enabled us to work through difficult questions about the relationship between theory and practice in RE with both academic experts and expert practitioners. We strengthened and developed the overall argument of the study as a result of the focus group activity too; participant/researcher interaction was genuinely the "integral part of the research process" (Wilson 1997, 211) we had hoped for.

Focus groups are not naturally occurring events (Wilson 1997,217), so we took great care to structure the day for participants very carefully(see below). Many of the participants had met before and most either knew of each other, or of the work they do. However, the particular combination we chose did not draw on any one pre-existing group in particular so that while certain pre-existing power relations among participants (Wilson 1997,215) might have constrained them slightly this was not as evident as might have been the case had we conducted the same set of activities through an established organization or group within the subject. In short, we brought together a small, moderated, group of acquaintances (Wilson 1997, 216) with varying degrees of familiarity with each other and bound together by certain common professional experiences; and in so doing, we brought people together in order to benefit not only our research but to deepen and verify the insights of the focus group participants on this issue. Several told us at the end of the say how much they had enjoyed and valued the opportunity to participate.

Phase One: Questionnaires and surveys
The questionnaires had two main sections, and these generated an uneven set of responses, the second part yielding greater and more meaningful engagement than the first. In the first part we asked participants to consider three possible opportunities or advantages presented by changes to ITT in RE. Asked whether they judged the existing PGCE model to be overcrowded and in need of reform, more agreed (8) than disagreed (4) while 14 did not offer any answer. More agreed (8) than disagreed (4) that the reduced allocations in RE should enable providers to be more selective during recruitment although again the majority (14) did not register a definite opinion. 7 respondents agreed with the suggestion that Curriculum Tutors' practical expertise is not sufficiently valued by universities and that they might be better paid and enjoy improved status were they employed instead by a school; only two disagreed and most did not register an opinion.

We then asked people to respond to a series of statements suggesting a series of potential threats and concerns to ITT in RE. 11 people agreed that the lack of careful and close engagement with evidence was a problem created by the current reforms being proposed while no-one disagreed (14 registered no opinion). 9 people agreed that we do not fully understand yet what makes a good RE teacher, therefore the very good potential candidates we might pick; 1 person disagreed and 15 registered no opinion. 13 people expressed concern that teachers in schools lacked the
expertise to lead professional development in RE, one disagreed and 11 did not register an opinion.

The equivocal and somewhat opaque character of these responses did not lend themselves to clear analysis. The nature of professional experience of policy change was not captured with any great clarity or force by this part of our research tool. However, participant engagement and response improved significantly when, they were invited through the final, open, question to suggest opportunities, advantages, threats and concerns that they were experiencing in their own current professional situation.

Answers given in response to this last question showed the changing policy climate to be generating a fairly balanced combination of opportunities and concerns around a cluster of particular issues and shared concerns. The issues referred to that stand out are, in no particular order, the relationships between relevant bodies such as schools, HEIs, Local Authorities and others, the question of who is best placed and qualified to offer ITT, the significance of education research and pedagogy in ITT, the consequences of the perceived impending diversification of providers, future central government funding priorities, the content of the ITT curriculum, and, as per the nature of the research project, the possible identification of an ‘irreducible core’ to ITT provision.

The responses included both positive and negative reactions to change, pointing perhaps to the pervasive instability and unpredictability that characterises the field at the time the questionnaire was distributed. There appears to be a general atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity in which professionals in the field are seeking to divine the future landscape of ITT in RE and what their own place in it may be. There is agreement that there is much good practice to build on, but also that that same good practice may be rendered vulnerable as structures and funding priorities shift. Likewise there are perceived weaknesses in the field of RE ITT that may be either reformed for the better or exacerbated for the worse as policy changes that are not specifically concerned with RE are implemented more widely. Participants viewed the same policy changes as having both positive and negative possible consequences.

The divergent views on the central issues can be set out as follows: good practice in schools may on one hand be able to feed into better practice in teacher training as ITT provision shifts into schools, but the subsequent weakening of links with and between HEIs may on the other hand reduce the vital role of professional subject networks between schools across regions. Yet for HEIs that develop stronger relationships with schools by having them leading provision, these same subject networks may be strengthened and strategic planning may be improved. At the same time, reductions in allocations for new RE teachers would weaken such networks as schools, for example in the north east, may turn increasingly to non-specialist humanities teachers as the regional supply from HEIs dwindles. Even as schools with the best practice may be able to contribute to better ITT, this may at the same time put unsustainable pressure and greater demands on those departments that are actually doing the best RE. Underlying this concern is an assumption that the best teachers will make the best ITT providers, yet this kind of reform is not understood to be evidence based, and needs to be properly researched and evidenced before such radical changes are introduced.

The changing relationship between HEIs and schools may allow for a realignment of the place of education research in ITT, and in this it could become more relevant, or it may yet be ever further removed from professional practice in the classroom. Yet at the same time pedagogic theory appears to be a relatively low priority in the emerging models of ITT which seem to prioritise practice - in work based routes such
as Schools Direct and Teach First - over either subject specific theory or wider education pedagogy.

If the structures governing the delivery of ITT are to diversify to allow more providers to work in different ways, then this opening up may actually lead to better practice shared in future, and increased specialisation and expertise across different providers, although it may also lead to a growing gap between the most and the least successful providers, with damaging consequences in different parts of the country. The degree to which school leaders, SACREs, HEIs and other interested parties remain committed to better practice in RE ITT is understood to be dependent on EBacc-determined league tables and funding priorities in future. For the latter there is uncertainty about future levels, and for the former there is dismay that RE has been pushed to the edges of the school timetable. There is yet a sense that a crisis may allow RE to emerge in a renewed form in future.

In terms of the curriculum, this may be a time to review and reform it to focus on subject knowledge and RE-specific pedagogy. A less proscriptive curriculum may allow room for better practice to flourish, and for a clearer perception of the aims and purpose of RE to be demonstrated to future RE teachers. The influence of SACREs may be strengthened in curriculum development as HEI allocations are reduced and schools look for local support in delivering ITT, but academisation and the opening of Free Schools may lead to schools outside of the LA ignoring local SACRE practice and guidance.

Out of these various concerns and perceived opportunities some sense of an irreducible core to the professional formation of new RE teachers started to emerge. The issues that mattered in this were as follows: Long term preparation for a career in teaching, building personal confidence, understanding the pedagogy of how children learn, a grasp of school improvement, improved subject knowledge and a focus on skills to do with running discussions and handling controversial issues. Yet at the same time there was a sense that being a ‘Cinderella’ subject has actually meant that the best RE teachers are often ‘maverick’ characters who have had the space to develop their own best practice in their own specific schools - something that national initiatives cannot, by definition, foster or support.

As structures shift and policy changes in relation to RE ITT, there is a sense that new providers may find opportunities; in this the Church of England may emerge as a greater influence in future. Change, then, conceptualised as destruction of the old may actually engender regeneration and renewal for the future of the subject in schools, and hence in ITT.

The questionnaires overall pointed to a set of issues in the changing policy climate that are of central concern to ITT professionals working in the field: the relationships between relevant bodies such as schools, HEIs, Local Authorities and others, the question of who is best placed and qualified to offer ITT, the significance of education research and pedagogy in ITT, the consequences of the perceived impending diversification of providers, future central government funding priorities, and the content of the ITT curriculum. Yet at the same time there was a pervasive sense, guided by sincere and professionally informed speculation, that these changes could go either way for RE ITT; the consequences may be positive, but they may be negative.

Clearer ideas were generated about the notion of an ‘irreducible core’ to ITT provision in RE that will need to be set out in order to safeguard the process of training new teachers in future, and these were, interestingly, not the same as the issues of concern already mentioned: Long term preparation for a career in teaching, building personal confidence, understanding the pedagogy of how children learn, a
grasp of school improvement, improved subject knowledge and a focus on skills to do with running discussions and handling controversial issues.

On the basis of these questionnaires, we might then say that professional experience of the changing policy climate of ITT in RE is far from uniform, but that whilst there is a set of issues commonly understood to be problematic, the nature of their possible consequences is disputed, whilst at the same time it appears that the new policies are concerned with reforms to issues that may not be fundamental to teacher training in RE in the long term.

The experience of writing, administering, collating and interpreting the questionnaires fed into the design of the semi-structured interview schedules which comprised the second phase of the empirical research.

**Phase Two: 14 Semi-structured interviews**

Given the small scale and qualitative nature of the empirical research undertaken our findings, while rich in nuance and particular detail, can only be suggestive of wider trends and are not necessarily statistically significant or representative of the state of the ITT RE sector as a whole. They offer up a snap-shot. Hence, we present our findings in a series of 4 short pen-portraits that set out the experience of a series of fictional possible characters working in different areas of ITT in RE. These pen-portraits address the three questions that this project started with: (i) What impact have recent policy changes had, and (ii) what do they think of that impact, and (iii) can we discern an irreducible core to RE ITT?

Four categories of professional working in the field of ITT in RE emerged from the data gathered:

(i) school based  
(ii) advisory  
(iii) HEI based  
(iv) hybrid

While we assume three of these categories will be familiar and self-explanatory, the ‘hybrid’ category represents a recent and emergent category of ITT provider in the field; one which bridges and criss-crosses traditional divides across theory and practice as well as the state maintained and faith-based sector providers.

Before sketching out the experiences of these different categories of working professional, there are a few preliminary remarks that can be made. Across each of these four there was a shared perception of the downgrading in status of RE as a curriculum subject in recent times; and a general recognition of the subsequent demoralization of the RE teaching workforce. The sense of a diminishing status for RE lead to a general sense of fatigue in many of those we interviewed, which they suggested compromised their capacity to innovate and be creative in ITT, although this was not the case in everyone we interviewed. As several of our interviewees also acknowledged, the current debate about RE and its status on the curriculum had also given rise to some increased lobbying activities, with religious educators finding time and energy to make the case, locally and nationally, for the benefits of RE.

The interviewees themselves came from a range of regions across London, the South West, the Chilterns and the North, lending geographical balance to the findings yielded. There was however little by way of regional variation to note. Rather the significant differences of perception we captured were across the professional categories that emerged. This further supports our decision to present our findings in a generalized way through the construction of composite sketches or ‘pen-portraits’ drawn from the answers that individual participants gave.
Pen Portrait One: the school-based ITT in RE provider
Provider One is an experienced teacher, based in a maintained community comprehensive school, who has responsibility for ITT as a mentor of student RE teachers. He sees promising aspects to the new school-led teacher training being developed in the changing ITT landscape. At the same time he has concerns too, with the breadth of experience of school placement on offer to student teachers and the move away from subject specific training notable issues.

From Provider One’s point of view the best programs at the moment - whether reformed HEI or Teach First - offer personalized and frequent individual support to new teachers, either through regular visits from external coaches or tutors, or by colleagues in school. He sees that the opportunities for regular, individual support for those new RE teachers they supervise have led to real improvements in the speed and quality of their professional development. However, he thinks that the more intense experience of training in one school in particular has meant that beginning teachers of RE do not have the same breadth of experience in two contrasting school contexts which they might reasonably expect through following a more conventional PGCE pathway.

Moreover, Provider One voices an underlying concern that alongside the benefits that are beginning to emerge from the new approaches to ITT, there has also been a move away from subject specific support towards generic professional development. The types of external CPD in which his school is still prepared to invest is very general; it isn’t steeped in RE or those particular concerns to the subject. However, subject specific provision is precisely the kind from which RE teachers, in Provider One’s opinion, particularly benefit. For example, good RE teachers need professional support to ensure that their subject knowledge is fit for purpose and their understanding of pedagogy in RE up-to scratch. The lack of subject specific CPD opportunities has also eroded the sense of subject community across different schools which in Provider One’s opinion, is to the further detriment of curriculum development and high standards in the subject.

This is not to suggest that Provider One does not see any potential benefits at all to the professional development of new teachers in RE from aspects that are generic to all teachers. All teachers should be personally committed to learning, including the learning that takes place through observing the practice of a variety of other teachers. However, RE teachers also need the opportunity to observe the best RE practitioners locally to them, he believes, focused on elements of their practice that need particular development. This requires a grounding in the nature and theory of RE as well as time to reflect on how the theory and personal practice might be integrated.

Pen Portrait Two: the RE advisor contributing to ITT in RE
Budget constraints have meant a considerable broadening of the job description traditionally undertaken by RE advisors, as the example of Provider Two illustrates. Provider Two no longer works intensively with a relatively small group of primary and secondary teachers in one focused geographical area; now she takes in work for other Local Authorities and external agencies such as Ofsted. Provider Two wonders whether this experience might be specific to her particular LA; she recognizes that there continue to be regional variations in levels of support across the country, depending on decisions made at LA level and the priority that in each case RE is afforded.

Provider Two has seen a considerable shift over her time as an advisor so that in her experience CPD and INSET tend to be delivered in schools now by existing teaching staff, such as ASTs, rather than external providers. Therefore she has seen opportunities for developing subject networks across schools decrease.
Academisation has exacerbated this trend, she argues, reducing the relevance of the locally agreed syllabus and of collegial working relationships between teachers and schools more generally.

This means that the quality of provision offered in each and every school is critical. Yet the technical and subject specific elements of RE, such as assessment and the use of levels, are not always properly understood by those offering generic professional support. School based mentors need appropriate training, and effective partnerships with those outside bodies where subject specific expertise is located (at the moment in Local Authorities, HEIs and other bodies) to ensure they get both the ‘bigger picture’ and the appropriate level of pedagogy and teacher education theory, not just the valuable experience-based practice that schools themselves can offer.

Provider Two identifies a number of elements that are necessary to ITT in RE, including a willingness to continue learning through intellectual engagement with debates within and about RE. Issues that good RE teachers need to reflect upon throughout their teaching career include pedagogy in RE and the subject matter of Theology and Religious Studies. Attending RE CPD and being part of a wider network of other RE specialists are necessary ways in which intelligent and academically passionate teachers can be supported to do these things. Learning from other experienced RE specialists and being guided and mentored by them as they reflect on their own practice are the necessary practical counter point to being theoretically informed and engaged.

Pen Portrait Three: the HEI-based ITT in RE provider
ITT tutors based in HEIs are experiencing and responding to the current policy changes in different ways and religious educators like Provider Three are now under considerable pressure to review, develop and improve their practice so that it is demonstrably “school-led”. Implicit to the kinds of changes he is expected to make is the assumption that teacher quality will improve (and teachers will chose to stay in teaching in greater numbers) when their initial training is less cerebral and critically reflective, more directed to the practical demands of classroom practice. There is an increased expectation that PGCE programmes will be structured around compliance with Ofsted standards.

Tougher competition from other providers as allocations generally are diverted from HEIs to other schemes including Schools Direct and Teach First is piling further pressure on religious educators like Provider Three. Numbers of allocated places in RE have been particularly badly affected relative to other secondary subjects for reasons we have already highlighted (see above). Tutors in HEIs who fail to innovate successfully face further reductions in allocations, and closure of their courses as the numbers become financially unviable.

On the one hand, Provider Three observes wryly, with more schools leaving LA control to become Academies, and SACREs and Locally Agreed Syllabuses consequently sidelined, the way the subject itself is taught is becoming more varied across different kind of schools. Yet, as ITT becomes more school-led, fewer new teachers are being trained for more varied RE provision found across different kinds of schools that they might face once they finish their training and for which the PGCE model is better equipped. Provider Three believes that the provision and curriculum that HEIs offer in the future has to be more closely personalized to new teachers’ professional needs and interests than it may have been in the past, but that a modified version of the PGCE represents the best possible preparation for the great variety of schools that new RE teachers will go on to work in.

Provider Three recognizes some necessary elements to ITT in RE that are generic to all secondary teachers, while others are more subject specific. In general, ITT ought
to be about continuing learning, reflecting and experimenting effectively through exposure to great practice, he believes, and should continue after teachers have qualified as and on-going dialogue with professional colleagues and others about the nature of the work of teaching. Specific to RE ITT, Provider Three suggests, would be a readiness to take risks in personal practice, based on reflection and engagement with other RE specialists, as well as keeping up to date with subject knowledge. Ways in which this might be done include professional subscription to RE publications including the regular RE Today mailing, as well as engaging practically and theoretically with various of the pedagogic theories of RE.

Pen Portrait Four: the ‘hybrid’ ITT in RE provider
With the monopoly that HEI-based ITT has traditionally enjoyed being challenged by recent changes to provision in England, new opportunities for religious educators have opened up within federations of schools and those third sector organisations that have entered this developing market. Within certain limits this creates spaces for suitably experienced and entrepreneurial individuals to develop alternative models of ITT practice. We have called providers of this kind ‘hybrids’ because typically they combine part time innovative work on new pathways in ITT with part time work in any one of the established roles we have highlighted in the previous pen portraits.

Provider Four was a senior leader and RE specialist teacher based in a school until very recently. Having taken early retirement, she took on a part time responsibility for ITT and CPD across a federation of schools to which her own former school belongs once the group became large enough to make such an appointment financially viable. She works both cross phase and across curriculum subjects to plan programmes for the new teachers she supports that are tailored to their individual needs and progress. Her practice has been so successful that she has recently been employed on a part time basis by her local HEI which is keen to integrate the most successful aspects of her work into all its work in CPD and teacher training.

Provider Four regrets that (due to the changing status of RE on the curriculum, she assumes) she has fewer opportunities than ever before to support new RE teachers specifically through their training. Those who she does encounter enjoy being part of a cohort comprising a whole range of subjects across the federation and learning from each other what makes good practice together. On this scheme new teachers also receive a good deal of highly directed individual and personal support, more so than on a conventional PGCE programme, Provider Four argues.

The danger, Provider Four accepts, of a generic professional development model catering for teachers of all subjects is that this comes at the expense of developing wider networks in the local and national RE subject community. To counter this, Provider Four buys in the services of a highly-regarded curriculum development expert and teacher trainer to work with groups of trainee RE teachers across the region. He is extremely popular with trainees, bang up to date with best practice being promoted in RE nationally as well as the requirements of OFSTED. He is not only a subject specialist with a first degree in TRS and Philosophy (an ongoing professional interest on which he draws at several point in the workshops he runs with trainees) but he has a Masters Level qualification in Religious Education too and he is able, for example, to introduce the pedagogies of RE into his workshops at suitable points; Provider Four repeats several times during the interview just how good his input is for her course.

Those elements which Provider Four identifies as necessary to ITT in RE must balance those skills that apply generally to good teachers across the board with those that are subject-specific. Good ITT in RE programmes will draw strategically on the expertise and experience of other RE specialists, particularly where those figures are inspirational curriculum developers. Good RE teachers will be creative...
and innovative, Provider Four believes; being willing to reflect on personal practice and take risks in striving to improve by trial and error is an important aspect of that process. Becoming part of a professional network of other supportive RE specialists and being willing to sustain those professional relationships is necessary to sustaining good ongoing professional development, in Provider Four’s view. While there is a place for engaging with theory in her conception of good professional development, for the most part her agenda is driven by the practical demands of the classroom and OFSTED criteria for what makes outstanding teachers.

**Phase Three: the Focus Group**

The focus group took place over the course of a working day in a university education department. A structured programme for the day was drawn up and circulated around the participants in advance to allow them to consider the nature of the project as well as its research methods. About a week before the focus group took place a further document, an executive summary of our provisional findings, was circulated to enable those participants who had the time to do so to look through the key ideas and claims we wanted to advance and to prepare their responses.

The day was divided into five sessions. In the first, we presented an overview of the project and a summary of key findings. In the second the evidence from the questionnaires was presented; and in the third we shared with participants the pen-portraits derived from the interviews.

Session four took place in the afternoon and focused on the question of whether an irreducible core to ITT in RE could be identified drawing on the findings of the wider theoretical literature. In the fifth and final session participants were asked to respond to broader issues of how the theoretical, philosophical and empirical elements to the project as a whole fitted together; could the theoretical model be related successfully or not to their experience of ITT in RE practice. The nature of the discussion that arose in the course of these five sessions, and the critical and theoretical considerations it generated then influenced the final writing up of the research in this current report. The issues these discussions covered can be summarized briefly in these terms.

The general discussion of RE and its changing fortunes of RE in relation to ITT and the discussion of our empirical findings in sessions two and three for the most part resonated with the perceptions of the focus group participants, based on their varying professional experiences. In particular, the pen-portraits of the four categories of ITT in RE provider were recognized and explored critically. One particular concern to emerge from the discussion was whether the drive toward ‘marketisation’ of ITT, whereby the government sets out only a ‘thin’ account of the good teacher and good teacher education, leaving the details to individual providers to sort out in competition was desirable. Furthermore, to what extent, given the rhetoric of freedom which underpins the overall direction of reform, the market enabled providers in practice to be free to provide the ITT the schools and the subject community really wants.

Participants interrogated the shift in argumentation between the philosophical and practical particularly closely during the fourth session, focused on philosophical ideas about the notion of an ‘irreducible core’ to ITT in RE. Tensions between such ideas and dominant instrumentalist and examination orientated models were highlighted. There was a concern to ensure that the messages of the theoretical perspective were applied more rigorously and systematically to RE specifically. “What does all this have to say for RE?” one participant asked. Others were interested to pursue how the hypothesis that practical wisdom and theoretical knowledge distinguish the very best RE teachers from others might be tested empirically in a further study. Given the agenda of building a ‘world class education’ system in England, such a study could
be of tremendous benefit to the ongoing quest for higher standards of learning and teaching in the subject.

In the final session concerns over the logical structure of the study began to crystallize as a key issue to emerge from the focus group exercise. The existing analysis of the downgrading of the status of RE in schools, and changes to ITT overall as it shifts into schools, so that ITT in RE is changing radically, seemed to resonate well with the perceptions of participants. However, some confusion was detected in the story we were seeking to tell about various accounts of the good teacher and good teacher training and CPD which policy makers, ITT in RE providers and philosophers respectively had provided.

“Clarify that story and ensure it structures the overall narrative of the research”, three key voices in the focus group in particular argued. Others seemed to agree that this was right. “You seem to be saying this: that policy assumes a very thin notion of good teaching and teacher training indeed, while the perception of the professional providers of ITT in RE you interviewed was of something that needs to be much thicker. However, neither policy makers nor practitioners appear to capture the thicker conception of good teaching and teacher training which a model based on practical wisdom would require and which, you seem to be arguing, encapsulates very good teaching.” If that was our argument, they suggested that we needed to be clearer in trying to spell this out.

RE needs a compelling account of the good teacher that will keep teachers teaching for longer, our focus group participants seemed to agree, and religious educators need to identify and articulate robustly the aims and purposes of the subject if it is to survive. The notion of “blended theory” being alluded to in the account we gave of practical wisdom and the kind of personal and professional development that would foster it seemed attractive to many participants, although they disagreed about the desirability of the particular model based on practical wisdom we had provided. One participant sought to sketch out his own alternative model. Another suggestion made by the group was that perhaps the notion of ‘ITT’ ought to be abandoned entirely to be replaced by a conception of ‘teacher education’ as a career-long ideal of the learning teacher.

This account illustrates the potential of the focus group method to offer constructively critical ‘peer-review’ as part of the ongoing research process. The underlying narrative of the study was sharpened and revised in the light of the perceptive responses of focus group participants. Moreover, peer review in this case combined academic and practitioner perspectives which are of particular value to an applied mixed methods study of this kind. Finally, engaging in the focus group process both improved the quality of the final research ‘product’ as well as offering a professional development opportunity for those who participated. Not only did the focus group provide the opportunity to network with co-religious educators but several educationalists from the wider research community were involved, modeling the emerging theme of the study that this is a positive direction for RE to take in the future.

Analysis of Phase Two findings

“Defining the qualities associated with outstanding teaching is a complex exercise. We support the Government’s new bursary scheme, which offers financial incentives for trainees with higher class degrees: we trust that this will attract more people to consider the profession, but caution that this approach alone will not do the job. Whilst strong subject knowledge is vital, particularly at secondary level, greater effort is needed to identify which additional personal qualities make candidates well-suited to teaching” (Education Select Committee 2012a,3)
These findings, taken from the House of Commons Education Select Committee Report published in May 2012, recognise the inherent challenges to research in this field. More work needs to be done, they suggest, to identify those personal qualities which seem to cause some people to be much better at teaching than others. In the final section of this report we will contribute to that ongoing and developing effort with particular reference to the subject of RE. The Select Committee report goes on to argue that:

“The benefits of professional development opportunities are various and profound. For individual teachers, CPD provides opportunities to update subject knowledge, to keep up to-speed with policy and practice changes, to learn from colleagues in different schools or settings (and thus gain a valuable wider perspective, particularly crucial given the short length of ITT placements), and to develop new pedagogical techniques” (Education Select Committee 2012a,38).

Two points are significant here. Firstly, the Select Committee report seems to support the assumption that good teachers are not only made, rather than born, but continue to be re-made throughout their working lives, given appropriate support. Secondly, this is a particular concern in RE where there are relatively poor levels of subject specific support open to them in school provision. This is a well-established concern (REC 2011) reinforced by our own more recent findings.

A ‘thin’ shared conception of what needs to be included in ITT in RE does seem to emerge from both our analysis of policy recommendations and from the people whose opinions we sought. This agreed core includes initiation into competent levels of teaching practice as a craft, with notions of good practice determined by established conventions and expectations. There seems widespread agreement too that initiation of this kind depends on learning from observation of practice modelled well by teachers, with the beginning teacher expected to replicate these practices with ever increasing degrees of competence and independence. There is widespread agreement too that opportunities to reflect both on the failures and successes of the classroom with a more experienced practitioner are needed as well as some kind of accreditation/licensing.

There is widespread, though not universal, agreement that good teachers need to prove academic ability in a closely related subject area at degree level. Personal presence in the classroom that inspires both confidence and passion for the subject is widely identified as necessary but not sufficient to good teaching. We found that the assumption that good teaching is enquiry focused, so that good teachers are both skilled questioners and keen themselves to enquire are shared; while the assertion that good teachers are willing to take risks and be creative was widely shared among the people we interviewed. Some were more tolerant of the opportunity to make mistakes during attempts to innovate than others, with teachers in particular voicing concerns about the potentially negative impact this might have on their pupil’s progress.

Of common concern to providers and policy makers alike was the need for RE teachers who are able to engage pupils’ interest effectively. The DfE has no plans to address the shortage of specialist RE teachers currently delivering the subject in secondary schools, particularly at Key Stage Three. Yet non-specialists who currently do this job lack (by their own admission) the competence, confidence and subject knowledge to do this well (REC 2011).

Moreover, as ITT in RE is increasingly school-led, these may be the very teachers from whom new entrants to the profession will learn to ply their trade. The providers we interviewed emphasized the importance of learning how to teach from the experience of observing excellent RE teaching. However, this will continue to be
difficult to organize systematically in practice, given the variable quality of RE teaching in schools.

The formation of good teachers cannot be concerned with the initial phase alone but must also be concerned with CPD; we have already shown that in RE such opportunities may not be readily available. It could be that were RE teachers encouraged to engage with wider thinking in education outside the subject area more systematically from the start, they might be more predisposed towards and able to take more from the generic opportunities for CPD which are still readily available to them. Where a small number of teachers with specialisms other than RE have engaged with a broader conception of theory, they might have a certain advantage over RE specialists without this to bring to their classroom practice. This might then explain the phenomenon of very good RE teaching practice among some non-specialist teachers of the subject, leading to the development of the more positive phrase “teachers of RE with other specialisms” which developed out of a NATRE/Brunel University school effectiveness project in the late 1990s.

A ‘thicker’ conception of the good teacher still than that which was articulated through policy documentation was revealed through our investigation into the perceptions of RE ITT providers. Further characteristics they identified needed included these. Firstly, a clear sense of the purpose of RE; its pedagogy, curriculum content and community politics. Secondly, an understanding of how to use, adapt and blend RE pedagogies. The need to be able to reflect critically on practice was a further quality identified by the RE professionals we interviewed, not only during their initial training but as an ongoing feature of CPD over a career in teaching too.

However, as Foreman-Peck has argued (2012), theory has a particularly important role to play in teachers’ ongoing development over time, for example as a guard against professional stagnation. Yet references to theory were very limited in the answers our respondents gave us, with teachers whose route into the profession was through the nine month PGCE option in particular barely touching on wider educational theory in the answers they gave us.

It would be unfair to suggest that no providers at all mentioned wider educational theory in their answers. Where respondents did have those resources upon which to draw, this was reflected in an additional dimension to the answers they have us. Take the response from one HEI-based provider to our questionnaire who argued “Good practice in RE is not properly researched. This weakens us both in ITE (we can’t tell trainees with any assurance REALLY what works, pedagogically) and in the academic community (we can’t justify our practice to others)”. More typical was the tendency of our respondents to equate theory in RE with the well-known set of pedagogies articulated in Michael Grimmitt’s classic texts. Arguably these ideas represent schools of thought in RE and are not properly pedagogical. Hence we found little evidence of characteristic pedagogical concerns in the answers our respondents gave us. In the next and final section of our report we will argue that this omission is significant and one which ought to be addressed in future ITT in RE provision, whatever particular form this takes.

One possible reason why no one mentioned theory very much could be that the instruments we used to conduct this phase of our research were insufficiently well attuned to elicit suitably relevant responses. We will review this when we repeat or research with primary ITT in RE providers in a planned follow up study, noting that we did elicit suitable relevant responses in this area from a minority of respondents. Another alternative is that it is simply not recognised as a concern (whether positive or negative) among secondary providers of ITT in RE. This raises a further question (as to why not) which we will also pursue in further research building on this study.
Our over-arching concern has been to explore notions of what makes a good RE teacher, how very good teachers get to be so good. Our choice of the word "good", over "effective" for example, has been deliberate, signalling an assumption that notions of best teaching practice necessarily comprise moral and/or ethical dimensions as well as one associated with technical competence or skill. However, very few of our respondents if any made reference to the moral qualities or virtues of teachers when we asked people to describe very good teachers indeed. This finding is made more interesting still perhaps, given the core concern with beliefs and values with which RE as a curriculum subject may be characterised. Did they take this as read? Or are their judgements influenced by a wider technicist discourse of best professional practice within which they are used to operating? Some concern was expressed in a minority of answers that “character” matters to becoming a good RE teacher; others mentioned ‘professional judgement’ but in a narrowly focussed sense concerned with learning and teaching technically.

If this moral dimension to teaching is taken seriously, teachers should be encouraged to consider they have a sense of duty not only towards their work and to the pupils they teach and the communities they serve; but to themselves and their own personal well-being, along lines suggested by Chris Higgins (2011). His notion of the “self-ful” teacher may be highly significant to radical change of RE teachers ITT and CPD. To sustain their energies in the classroom in the longer term, teachers should maintain an inquiry orientation towards practice as well as the recognition of a need for external stimulation, Higgins continues. Very good teachers are or become committed to it over time and are not simply passing through for a matter of a few years. As teachers (and those “training” teachers) become increasingly divorced from wider research in education they are less likely than ever to encounter this kind of unconventional thinking.

Higgins’ ideas, and those of Foreman-Peck mentioned earlier (see above), are taken from an emergent literature in the philosophy of education concerned with notions of the good teacher, the future of teacher education and the form that this should take. In the final part of this report we offer a brief overview of ideas being developed by these educationalists and being to sketch out the implications of these findings for RE and future ITT provision in the subject.
Part Three: a philosophical perspective on the future of ITT in Secondary RE

In a wider literature concerned with the future of teacher education (see Orchard and Foreman-Peck 2011) we have found considerable support for the suggestion that practical wisdom is what distinguishes the very best teachers from others. We offer a basic account of that idea briefly next. Then we show how this idea has been developed in the emerging literature to which we have just referred before going on to apply the model to secondary RE teaching.

Practical wisdom, an overview

The notion of practical wisdom as it is described by Aristotle in the Nichomachean Ethics combines theoretical and practical forms of knowing and understanding to include learning from principle with learning from experience. If justified, the account goes some way to reconciling those ideas being promoted within the dominant discourse that promote teaching as mastery of the classroom craft. At the same time it supports the belief that an ongoing partnership between schools and HEIs is necessary to the professional formation of very good teachers indeed because good teaching cannot be reduced simply to a craft.

Philosophers of education (e.g. McLaughlin, 1999, Carr, 2007) have long highlighted the importance of practical wisdom to very good professional practice. McLaughlin (1999) argues that judgement and character, qualities of reflection that enable them to stand back from engagement in action, distinguish the very best educational practitioners from others. Like him, we judge the idea of practical wisdom developed from Aristotle a helpful means by which to describe such qualities, accepting as he does that they are very difficult indeed to capture with precision. Moreover, like McLaughlin we do not follow Aristotle’s ideas slavishly but adapt the general position he proposes to the context of education situated in a contemporary democratic society. However, unlike McLaughlin we draw on the work of another philosopher of education concerned more generally with vocational education, Christopher Winch, to illustrate the role that theoretical and technical knowledge and understanding play alongside judgement and character, in the work of a teacher who is practically wise.

Aristotle took education to be concerned with enabling people to lead flourishing lives. Concerned with “reasoning” in an abstracted sense, seeing it as the ergon (“function”, “task”, “work” – Kraut, 2001) of being human and what distinguishes people from other forms of life, he saw the acquisition of theoretical forms of knowledge (episteme) as a necessary, though not sufficient kind of knowing that brings about eudaimonia (“happiness” or “flourishing”) which he understood to be the fundamental purpose of human life. However, for Aristotle reasoning must also be of a practical kind that is grounded in human experience. He distinguishes between two “non-theoretical” (Dunne, 1993: 243) forms of knowing necessary to human flourishing alongside episteme: techne and phronesis.

Techne

“Techne” is the term Aristotle employs to describe the knowledge required to undertake activity (poiesis); that is, knowledge that is concerned with making or production, thus aimed at a pre-defined outcome (telos). The purpose of knowing of this kind might be either to bring about the creation of an object or – in a more abstracted sense – a particular state of affairs. Aristotle likens knowledge of this kind to that of an expert craftsman creating, for example, a finely turned wood-carving. Dunne suggests that for the master craftsman to excel, he requires “a clear conception of the why and wherefore, the how and with-what of the making process and enables him, through the capacity to offer a rational account of it, to preside over his activity with secure mastery” (Dunne, 1993: 9).
In the more abstract sense of bringing about a desired state of affairs, we see how practical wisdom may be overlaid with a moral dimension while remaining a form of practical knowledge concerned with being productive. Productive activity may at the same time be weighted with a concern for doing the right thing for its own sake (Dunne, 1993: 265). Hence, RE teachers might typically be concerned to ensure that pupils come away from their lessons not only knowing more about religious beliefs and values different to their own but with certain moral assumptions about living in a diverse society, as well as understanding how they might contribute to achieving that.

**Phronesis**

Aristotle identified a second kind of practical knowledge, “phronesis”, concerned with judgement; that is to say, determining the right course of action in particular circumstances, having identified and taken into account all relevant considerations. Other kinds of knowing will support the capacity to judge situations well; however the focus of Aristotle’s point is the moral sense of what ought to be done, to what degree and according to the particular circumstances. Such knowing is not fixed; it concerns the ability to innovate and improvise; judge what ought to be done even in situations which one could not have foreseen. Dunne suggests (1993: 10) that phronesis is characteristically a personal and experiential kind of knowledge.

For Aristotle, “phronesis” is bound up with his understanding of the virtues, a range of desirable dispositions which good judgement enables people to identify and which, once adopted, enable them to flourish, both individually and as members of the polis, or wider society. Some virtues are concerned with the proper regulation of emotions: for example, courage is concerned with regulating the emotion of fear; self-control the virtue of regulating anger. Others, like temperance, are concerned with the capacity to show restraint in relation to one’s bodily desires, thus refraining from behaviour that is greedy for example. Aristotle also suggests dispositions that are appropriate to the citizen of a polis, like justice, liberality and “great-souledness” (see below).

With an appropriately well-developed sense of judgement, people behave virtuously and desist from those inappropriate extremes of behaviour which Aristotle identifies with vice. Virtue, he argues, may be found at the mean point between excess and deficiency. Hence, for example, the virtue of courage is a disposition to act which is neither excessively fearful, or cowardly; nor insufficiently sensitive to the potential danger a course of action might entail, foolhardiness; but striking an appropriate balance.

That point of equilibrium will depend on the particular circumstances faced and may not be equidistant between the two extremes: that is the appropriately courageous disposition in one context may err on the cautious side, while in another situation a more devil-may-care approach may be morally justified. There are no universal rules to determine the mean for virtues and these vary greatly from one occasion to another. Aristotle does hold that certain emotions (for example spite, shamelessness, envy) and actions (adultery, theft, murder), are always wrong regardless of the circumstances (Aristotle, 1953: 1107a 8-12).

All normal people are capable of developing phronesis over time, given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. From childhood, virtuous people develop appropriate habits as they become increasingly habituated into the moral norms of the society in question. Aristotle assumes that their understanding of the good is reinforced by the feeling of enjoyment experienced when one is engaged in virtuous activity. As their rational faculties develop, people begin to reflect on what it is about the virtuous activities in which they are engaged that causes them to feel worthwhile, a process in which emotion and intellect combine. From this they are able to deduce the virtuous course of action whether or not they have previously encountered that
particular virtue; indeed regardless of whether or not that virtue had previously existed, the virtues being dependent on the circumstances in which they are situated.

**Practical wisdom and the good RE teacher**

How might the notion of practical wisdom we have just described resonate with other theoretical work being developed by philosophers of education and teacher educators with a view to capturing the distinguishing qualities of the very best teachers? Moreover, if resonances can be detected, how might these ideas best be applied? We seek to do this now, sketching out at the level of principle an account of a very good secondary RE teacher along these lines.

**Technically skilled good RE teachers?**

The suggestion that good teachers must be technically skilled at what they do is both relatively uncontroversial and consistent with the emphasis on teaching as a “craft” currently favoured by policy makers. For example, teachers need to “know how” to plan a lesson according to the accepted conventions of the school in which they work. In developing these plans they know how to account for the differentiated needs of pupils in their classes, so that they can construct writing frames, for example, to support or “scaffold” tasks that they have set in order to make them accessible to those whose literacy skills are limited.

Moreover, although this notion of the good teacher is not yet supported with research specifically in RE, there are more general educational research findings which support this line of argument. Hattie (2009), for example, highlights the ability of successful teachers to identify and respond to pupils’ difficulties in various way so that they understand the material they have been presented. Hence, for example, good teachers know how to assess pupils’ work accurately according to agreed criterion of success; this is a necessary if not sufficient quality of good teachers of RE.

This kind of excellence is developed, for the most part, on the job through immersion in teaching experience. By observing and seeking to model very good practice exhibited by experienced professionals, new teachers develop their own practice, some more quickly than others. This understanding underpinned the radical changes to teacher education in England introduced by pioneering schemes including the Oxford Internship programme (Benton et al 1990).

School placements are an important and well-established dimension of initial teacher training in England. From the early 1990s onwards i.e. for nearly two decades, 60% of the 10 month PGCE programme in England has been devoted to school-based learning. Similarly, undergraduate degrees in education studies combined with QTS require students to spend significant periods of time in school, learning classroom skills from practice. The importance of technical skill to teaching well is very widely accepted.

Other technical skills that a good RE teacher in England would be expected to acquire might include knowing how to plan lessons which translate general strategies to promote learning to the particular requirements of the agreed syllabus they follow, given the subject is determined locally. A significant RE-specific skill identified in a number of the responses we received to our questionnaire in Phase One of the research was the capacity of very good RE teachers to handle discussion activities on controversial issues very well. It was very important student and early career teachers have opportunities to acquire this capacity through
observing others and the time to practice participants argued, as a key element of their professional development.

The professional knowledge the RE teacher needs to do this cannot be reduced to technical knowledge alone. Even in the few examples we have given already, it becomes clear that technical competence in RE teaching is infused with theoretical forms of knowing; about learning and about religious and belief systems. However the technical forms of ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how’ are significant to good RE teaching as well. We will not pursue examples of technical skills because they seem fairly apparent and uncontroversial.

**Theoretically well-informed good RE teachers?**

More contentious is the claim that very good teaching indeed is informed by a knowledge and understanding of educational theory. In a recent UCET position paper, Gordon Kirk (2013) supports this view, setting out clear reasons why universities should continue to play a distinctive role in the professional development of teachers. Elsewhere, philosophers of education and teacher educators in particular are also spelling this assertion out with ever greater force (see Orchard and Foreman Peck (2011), Ellis and Orchard (eds, forthcoming 2014) for examples). Here we illustrate the point with reference to ideas developed by Christopher Winch (2012), a philosopher who has developed a clear understanding of the characteristics of very best vocational education and training practice over a number of years.

Winch argues that teachers need a conceptual framework to teach well, built on knowledge and understanding of educational theory. Like any worker who is required to perform activities unsupervised which involve tasks that are more complex than mindless routines, he argues, teachers need to be able to understand thoroughly what they are doing. Very good teachers do rather more than reproducing apparently successful teaching activities by rote.

Rather, they draw on evaluative principles that they have developed with reference to educational theory so that they are able to distinguish, from the range of possible strategies which might be used in their classroom, those that are appropriate over those that are inappropriate. Their professional judgement requires a degree of technical competence, in the capacity to re-enact successful teaching strategies they have encountered, whether because they have read them, learned about them on a course, or seen them modelled in the practice of a fellow professional. However, this is combined with the capacity to read or interpret particular situations and individuals. Very good teachers indeed do not merely copy the original idea but revise it to suit the specific context in which they are working in ways that are nuanced and sometimes highly creative.

Teachers should also be able to understand at a theoretical level how knowledge in their chosen subject is organised so that they are able to re-arrange it into pedagogical useful forms, according to the particular developmental needs of the children they are teaching (Winch 2012). Subject mastery, combined with experience, on its own is no guarantee that a teacher will be successful in the classroom. On a subject-based view of the curriculum in particular, such understanding is a necessary dimension of professional knowledge, but it is not sufficient. If high quality education is being argued for, teachers must be able not only to mediate factual information, model ways in which successful academic practice works but recognise, as Bruner argues (1996), other ways in which we understand learning to take place, including the development of children’s critical capacities. Good secondary teachers need a wider pedagogical understanding than that which is dictated solely by their subject and its recognised methods.
Hence, teachers also need to know what makes for credible empirical research into education, so that they can make critically informed judgements about how which of the myriad pedagogical understandings available to them they should apply to their practice, and which they should set to one side. Too often, Winch complains, teachers are encouraged by school leaders and policy makers to take up educational fads uncritically, based on dubious research, such as that into learning styles (authoritative critiques include those by Coffield et al. (2004) and White (1998). There are certain established criteria in the philosophy of social science which can be used to make judgements when seeking to distinguish good educational research from bad. Teachers will need educating into these if in the future they are to exercise their own professional judgement freely, although it is unclear how a school-based ITT model which greatly reduces the university-based component will cope with this.

Moreover, if teachers are to understand what they are doing, they will need not only to understand the research itself but be able to interrogate it critically. Knowing what those theories are on its own, Winch points out (2012), does not enlighten teachers. It suggests in general terms what the actions are; but it doesn’t justify why they should be adopted in any particular circumstance. Knowing a particular theory may give teachers ideas of a rough direction they might take in developing their professional practice without indicating in sufficient detail how to make very good use of the approach they have encountered. Without the capacity to critique theory, teachers may struggle to adjust or adapt their teaching reliably and systematically, for example in the light of feedback from their pupils. The teacher would need to know and understand in some detail the research that actually took place for this to happen, what the findings were, how these might need to be interpreted for their own and their classes’ particular needs and circumstances.

Traditional, theory-heavy approaches to teacher education in England may not have articulated the role of theory or developed university-based programmes on these lines. Lectures in the educational foundation disciplines, while fascinating to some, may have left many other vocationally motivated beginning teachers, "just" wanting to be an effective practitioner in the classroom, cold. Such trainees do not understand why they need to know theory; these traditional approaches have not been mediated or blended sufficiently well with their practical considerations to persuade them to think again. To some extent attempts by the Oxford internship programme (Benton 1990) and other university partnerships influenced by the Oxford Internship model since early 1990s across England have addressed this problem, promoting the notion of an iterative relationship between theory and practice. In other respects this area of the traditional PGCE programme urgently needs re-visitng.

Winch (2012) suggests one reason why the need for theory to inform teachers’ professional is so poorly understood may be attributed to the popular and influential idea of the good teacher as 'reflective practitioner’. There is nothing wrong, he suggests with the basic idea that good teachers are people who reflects on their practical experience and change their practice accordingly. However, the ability to do this lacks intellectual rigour. It is simply not the same as the ability to reflect on theory and research findings, on that basis to formulate suitable principles of future action.

To what extent are the features of professional formation which Winch identifies reflected in the notions of good practice articulated by Secondary RE ITT providers? When we asked them to describe the features of very good professional development for RE teachers, their thinking sometimes resonated with Winch’s. In the questionnaire responses particularly, a narrow understanding of pedagogy, defined as how children learn, was often identified as a necessary element. The importance of knowing about and seeing particular methods of teaching RE modelled by more experienced and skilled practitioners was also understood to be necessary to the development of new teachers. This observation by one of our respondents is
perhaps the closest anyone came to articulating the kinds of critical philosophical concerns Winch outlines.

She explained:

“You can never know everything in RE so also there is also need for intellectual humility and continual searching for what else there could be to be understood. An awareness of intellectual fallibility for a teacher can lead to a better approach to the subject with the children; sense of co-enquiry. The really good RE teachers are people who have antennae out for ethical/moral/philosophical issues...They are to some extent translators of these issues for the children and the inclination/ for these needs to be picked up at interviews for ITE candidates”.

In other ways, though, the responses we heard lacked the breadth and rigour or theoretical engagement proposed by Winch. Again, it is important to recognise this may be a limitation to the research instruments we used to elicit responses, rather than any lack of understanding on the part of our research participants. We will review this issue in any follow up work we undertake. Certainly to reflect on theory and research findings, and for that to inform future actions, requires the thinker to process a number of interconnected and complex ideas. If this is right, and if so many of those teachers currently “delivering” RE in secondary schools are not trained at all to teach the subject, it is unsurprising to find that standards in teaching are subject to so much criticism by OFSTED and others. It is not enough for good RE teachers to have appropriate experiences upon which to reflect. Rather they need to know and understand formal theoretical structures with which to make sense of any relevant experience they might have, both to their current, particular situation and to their understanding of the issues involved at a more general level of principle.

To acquire this degree of knowledge while learning the basics of how to teach is asking a great deal of teachers in the very early stages of their professional development, some of whom may be capable of little more than “reflective practice” in the much narrower sense. The complex, challenging but potentially rewarding form of reflection on practice which Winch has in mind here may be better suited to those teachers with more and varied experiences and reflections on which to draw and consider. This may mean a more radical revision of the way in which they are trained so that, for example, the emphasis on developing theoretical knowledge and understanding shifts away from the initial phase of teacher formation to a later stage of their professional development. The point being made here is that in the longer term all good teachers do need to be well-informed theoretically.

**Good RE teachers are virtuous?**

In the minds of some for whom, perhaps, the distinction between religious education and religious instruction remains blurred, there may be a self-evident truth in the claim that RE teachers are virtuous. However, the notion of professional virtue we argue for here should not necessarily be confused with morality conventional to any one particular religious tradition or worldview, although it applies with equal force to the RE teacher working in a faith-based setting. Here, we argue that good teachers exercise professional judgement in ways that are morally appropriate to the context in which they are operating. In schools in England this will include acting consistently with those democratic values and principles that are characteristic to that setting.

Hence, very good teachers indeed, in addition to their subject knowledge, craft abilities, and understanding of educational theory will be sensitive as well to the wider school environment in which they operate, those values and principles which constitute it, so that they can make morally appropriate judgments both within and outside the classroom. The virtuous teacher, or phronimos, is capable of deciding reliably and consistently the best course of action in any given professional situation.
She identifies those actions it would be best to take within concrete situations and undertakes them, so that the desirable end result is reached.

‘Ethical goodness’ when engaging in practical reasoning, Dunne (1993) argues, brings knowledge of ethics and the capacity to act ethically into an iterative relationship with one another; such knowledge is both “constantly protected and maintained by good character” (p. 277). Pat Mahony (2009) has suggested that “ought” should be “taught” as part of the professional formation of teachers with notions of right and wrong, ought (not), good and evil ought to be included on the curriculum. Ethical forms of knowing may be grist to the mill of the teacher of RE required to teach such theories to their students as part of the curriculum.

She falls short of suggesting teachers need to become experts in morality, in the sense of being super moral themselves or in knowing what others ought to do; rather, that they need to be “ethically” literate. “Ethically literate” teachers, Mahony suggests, might better appreciate the inherently political and contested nature of decision making in education, recognise occasions where educational professionals shift beyond expression of informed opinion to claiming a degree of moral certitude in the field which renders them completely intolerant of the perspectives of others. These ideas in the sphere of ethical decision making do resonate with the notions of good professional judgement concerned with pedagogy and the science of good teaching raised by Winch (see above).

Ethical literacy as Mahony describes it may be necessary to the notion of ethical goodness outlined by Dunne but is not on its own sufficient. The virtuous RE teacher indeed will also live out ethical ideals through their professional practice. Arguably they may find themselves under greater pressure to act virtuously as a teacher of RE, given the terrain the subject covers, than colleagues in other curriculum areas. Lessons in which explicit mention is made of divorce, suicide, abortion, death, even child abuse, may well stir up the feelings of pupils and it is one of the great privileges of being an RE teacher, as well as a demand, to be able to deal with such situations in the right way according to the particular circumstances the teacher faces.

Yet ITT providers we approached rarely articulated the ethical dimension of teaching when offering conception of the very good teacher indeed. Where they did, they tended to refer to the need for RE teachers in particular to understand the wider cultural backgrounds of the pupils they teach, given the nature of the subject’s curriculum, and to adjust some of their practices accordingly in the light of that appreciation. In other words, the reasons were concerned with conformity to cultural expectations rather than a sense of acting on principle that had been reasoned through on ethical grounds. While too much should not be read into this finding, as the sample size was small and the research instruments may be the root cause of this omission, this matter is significant and warrants further investigation.

**Challenges to the notion of the practically wise teacher**

We recognise that the notion of the good teacher promoted along these lines is contested and challenged by teacher educators as well as philosophers. Some have suggested that meaning of the term ‘practical wisdom’ is unclear; phronesis has been translated into a number of different English phrases, indicating the difficulty in capturing its full meaning adequately from the classical Greek. These translations have pointed to different important facets of the Aristotelian concept of phronesis – as an intellectual virtue, or the capacity to act wisely and appropriately within a practical situation; as moral discernment; or as ‘prudence’, a term which adds a note of caution when it is used in today's society.
Some have argued that the caution and conservatism implicit in notions of practical wisdom make the term unfit for purpose in this context. The qualities of very good teachers indeed cannot be captured by this framework, they argue, because it fails to do justice to the very good teacher’s art. Noel argues (1999) that practical wisdom, fails to capture adequately the complexities of thinking that make up teaching (p. 277), for example. Also that the concept of practical wisdom does not focus adequately on the contribution of the emotions or imagination to very good teaching.

Others have taken the concept of practical wisdom and developed it from the very basic formation we have sketched in this paper into other quite distinctive articulations. For example, Ruth Heilbron (2011) philosopher of education and teacher educator, has used Dewey’s pragmatist ideas which are loosely in the Aristotelian tradition but distinctive, to develop a rich and nuanced account of teachers’ professional judgement. In any follow-up study we undertook, it would be desirable to consider Heilbronn and other thinkers’ ideas.

We have offered merely a very brief sketch which needs considerable work and further refinement. However, we maintain that consideration of practical wisdom along these lines provides a useful and relatively accessible theoretical framework upon which to build a more adequate and balanced conception of the good teacher than that commonly promoted by policy makers and practitioners. We are supported in our judgement by philosopher of education, and one time Secondary ITT in RE provider, Jan Derry. There may be a domain of knowing, Derry asserts, that is “nuanced and not consciously acted on, but which nevertheless rich in conceptual content, is often ignored by policy makers to the detriment of their intended aims and outcomes.” (Derry, 2000, p. 154)
Conclusions and proposals for future action

Concerns about the changing nature of ITT in RE in England and the implications for its future are not merely longstanding but becoming increasingly acute. Yet even in such unpromising circumstances we found evidence of feelings of hope, as well as considerable consensus of opinion among those people we consulted about what that provision in the future should be like. We were also able to identify religious educators still “bold, brash and self-confident” enough to be engaging positively with initiatives generated in the new ITT landscape who were generating promising examples of new ITT in RE practices.

These examples included religious educators seeking to bring “top graduates” into the teaching profession through their involvement with Teach First; as well as entrepreneurial individuals exploiting new found flexibility within the sector to develop alternative and highly valuable ITT practices among federations of schools, within HEI partnerships and in conjunction with commercial providers. Focussed on equipping trainee teachers with creative and practical strategies for lesson planning and effective assessment, these innovations were at their most successful when they drew heavily on existing professional networks within the subject. People we interviewed were more qualified in their appreciation of those generic professional development strategies ideas reported as the mainstay of CPD in their schools and regretted the lack of opportunity to engage widely with other subject specialists.

Examples of RE provision combining elements of on-line learning with face to face interaction were also identified consistently by our interviewees as being important to teacher’s ongoing professional development. However, the quality of ITT and CPD provision in RE available online is reported as being variable. They suggested to us that teachers needed more support to be able to separate the ‘wheat’ from the ‘chaff’ in the material available.

The value of understanding theory to very good teaching practice featured in the answers of some of the people we interviewed but not others. Of those who mentioned theory, widespread use of the term ‘pedagogy’ was evident in their answers, in the RE-specific sense that has developed since Michael Grimmitt (Grimmit 2000) brought together in one volume under that nomenclature certain subject specific teaching methods. Missing from many of these accounts tended to be references to pedagogy in its broader sense.

For example, very little if any mention was made of the capacity of very good RE teachers indeed to be able to interpret professionally the wider socio-cultural context – gender, class, ethnicity - in which their practice is situated. Few demonstrated in their answers evidence of engaging critically with the findings of the latest educational research into effective teaching, along the lines advocated by Winch. Hence while a knowledge and understanding of wider educational research might help RE teachers to evaluate for themselves the relative worth of material on RE specific on-line resources without need for direction by RE experts; we found little evidence of this kind of thinking among the small sample of people we interviewed.

The dominant direction of change in ITT currently being pursued in England is distinctive and will yield different teachers of RE and alternative forms of ITT but not necessarily better ones. The changes that religious educators we interviewed welcomed included: the emphasis on coaching found in the Teach First model of ITT and the creative and practical suggestions for classroom teaching offered by RE Today consultants. It should be noted that Teach First is more expensive route per trainee than the standard PGCE route into teaching (Education Select Committee 2012b) raising questions about whether existing provision could improve were similar
levels of resources to be invested. The RE Today CPD programmes are highly valued by tutors and trainees but as one part, not a complete ITT package.

The way in which traditional Secondary PGCE provision has been structured - so that all new teachers experience a brief but intensive course in educational theory at the beginning of their teaching career - may indeed warrant radical change. On one hand, poor levels of theoretical knowledge in the subject to be taught have been identified as an issue in RE over many years. More attention to theory in this sense in the initial stages of teacher education where it is an issue could indeed help to raise standards in the subject, although it is complicated by the contested nature of RE.

For example, the (poor) quality of subject knowledge which many RE teachers bring to their classroom practice has been a longstanding concern. It is widely conceded that too many RE teachers know little more than their pupils do with regard to curriculum content, so that they are one or two steps ahead in the textbook. This is unlikely to make for challenging and rigorous RE lessons. However, the subject community for RE does not agree about which intellectual structures should inform teachers' knowledge of curriculum content. Some, for example, will identify Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) as the clear “mother discipline” to the subject, perhaps those teaching in faith-based settings in particular. Others meanwhile may align their practice more closely to any one of a number of disciplines or fields of study to feature in the Higher Education curriculum, including Philosophy, Social Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology and Cultural Studies, even History. There is a good deal of further work to be done with regard to this issue.

We have suggested (see above) that, while some engagement with theory in education is necessary to good teaching in the longer term, it might be in the interests of some new teachers at least to review the stage of a teaching career in which this is currently introduced. In particular, if Winch is right to set the bar as high as he does for teachers' theoretical knowledge and understanding, this might be postponed for several years.

In their initial training, some new teachers at least would have the option to develop their craft skills in the classroom first, leaving engagement with theory to a later stage in their professional formation. Teachers would need to show they had mastered educational theory to a certain level and in the necessary depth to progress in their career. However, the means of achieving this should be more flexible and the relationship between theoretical and technical forms of knowing better blended.

This latter point is significant because across the RE Community as a whole, the value of educational theory to good teaching practice in the longer term would appear from those people we interviewed to be insufficiently widely appreciated. Some policy makers and some practitioners have suggested that educational theory is largely irrelevant to such a model and theoretical understanding of education on its own, and this view was reflected in the responses of a minority of the religious educators who we interviewed.

Most did appreciate that theory had a role to play in teachers' professional formation, but the understanding of theory they articulated tended to focus narrowly on subject specific literature. However, the notion of the “practically wise” classroom teacher was neither widely nor routinely articulated. In particular, very little if any appreciation of the ethical role of the teacher, as articulated by Mahony, could be detected in the answers we were given. It should be noted that this issue may not be particular to RE but common in professional attitudes more generally in England. A much larger research project would be needed to establish this more point conclusively.
If ITT is led predominantly by schools in the future, this lack of an appreciation of the role of wider educational theory at an appropriate point in teacher professional development may present significant problems in the search for better standards in teaching, some particular to RE. While its role may have been misconceived, its teaching poorly executed, good arguments have been advanced for an ongoing place for theory in the professional formation of teachers, hence a continuing and distinctive role for HEIs in partnership arrangements. In RE specifically, while the overall quality of teaching in schools in England continues to be so variable, poor standards are likely to be replicated by ill-equipped teachers lacking confidence in their own professionalism. Unless they engage with educational theory systematically, how will RE teachers distinguish the very best educational ideas from others autonomously? They will be restricted to making judgements instead on the basis of a perception of “what works” in practice.

Finally, the findings of university based research and development will not be introduced into RE teaching practice more broadly and systematically, hopefully supporting higher standards in teaching and learning, if such links are to be severed. It is hard to see how good practice can be sustained across the school system as a whole in the longer term, let alone improved, given the changes that are being introduced to ITT and to schooling. Where departments and teachers demonstrate practice which “bucks” the more general trend and their energies are already taken up with sustaining very high standards in RE, those same practitioners cannot be expected to shoulder the responsibility for training the next generation of teachers by themselves. Nor should it be assumed that those who teach children well in schools will necessarily adapt to the related but distinct skill of teaching adults; yet teaching adults in something in which universities specialise.

However, competitive and market led approaches to ITT introduced by recent policy changes have left the future of many HEI-based providers either under serious threat or extinguished entirely. Comprehensive national coverage of ITT in RE will be hard to sustain if those places are allocated entirely by market means. Nor can it be assumed that the excellent practice and reputation of individual practitioners will definitely safeguard it: Shock waves were sent through providers by the announcement that the highly esteemed PGCE course at Warwick was to close in 2011: small subject strands deemed financially unviable will not survive in other institutions – HEIs or schools - where managers see little reason to invest proactively in RE’s longer term future.

The changing nature of ITT in RE is of great concern to all those who value RE - including practitioners, researchers, members of society at large and policy makers - and who wish to see critical reflection on beliefs and values flourishing in schools. Raising the overall quality of teaching of RE in schools in England stands out as a central issue in the wider campaign to assert a positive future for the subject. There are reasons to be cheerful enough to make the best of the new ITT landscape; such as the relaxing of regulations leading to some innovative hybrid practices. However the future does not lie simply in religious educators’ hands. There are structural disadvantages and conflicting interests at play which appear, even on a charitable interpretation to have overlooked the state of play currently in RE. This will make the changing nature of ITT in RE very difficult indeed for some religious educators to navigate, whatever their degree of skill, experience and dedication to practice.
References


UCET (Universities’ Council for the Education of Teachers), (2012). Letter to the Secretary of State ITT Allocations for 2012 and Beyond.


Appendices

Appendix I - Stage One: project description, questionnaire and informed consent declaration, serving also as Stage Two informed consent declaration.

The Changing Nature of Initial Teacher Education in Religious Education in England

Dr Janet Orchard and Dr Hugo Whately

What our project is about?

Our project aims to examine the implications for RE of the current round of changes to Initial Teacher Education (ITE/ITT). Already the number of funded places at secondary level have been dramatically reduced by the Department for Education (DfE), which argues that the falling numbers of pupils of secondary age and low teacher turnover mean that fewer teachers will be required. Moreover, the DfE is reviewing how teachers are selected, trained and accredited. A raft of new policies promotes provision that is demonstrably school-led and employment based. They advocate a move away from the traditional model of a university based PGCE route into teaching that has dominated ITE for many years.

Cuts have been particularly severe in a few curriculum areas, like RE, where reforms have led to an even more marked decline in teacher recruitment. Four university-based Secondary RE PGCE programmes will have closed by September 2012 with numbers on many other courses so dramatically reduced they may soon be rendered financially unviable. While its omission from the “English Baccalaureate” represents the most recent evidence that RE’s star is on the wane, erosion of the status of the subject in schools has deeper roots. The end of full subject inspections by OFSTED has enabled those schools who do not value RE highly to cut curricular corners without fear of being found out. Some schools have interpreted the freeing up of National Curriculum orders at Key Stage 3 in England as permission to collapse discrete RE lessons into Humanities provision delivered predominantly by History and Geography specialists, further reducing the demand for new RE teachers.

Our research seeks to make sense of these changes, with particular reference to three key questions:

1. What impact have these changes had on the various providers of RE specific training, whether employment i.e. school or university based?
2. How are these changes perceived by those engaged in ITE in RE, whether positively or negatively, and what impact have they had on the nature and purpose of their work?
3. Can an “irreducible core” necessary to the professional development of beginning teachers of RE be identified through the findings?

We are conducting this research in the capacity of independent researchers who have been funded by, Culham-St Gabriel’s. They have approved our proposal, asked us in particular to seek constructive ways forward for future RE ITE provision; also, to be diligent about disseminating our work publicly.

Why we need your help:

In part our research involves participant observation. It is rooted in direct experience of change because we are both teacher educators. Our experiences are also very different. For example, Janet is employed part time on a traditional university based RE PGCE course, while Hugo has a number of part time roles, as a school teacher, educational researcher and visiting tutor on two contrasting TE programmes, including “Teach First”. Nonetheless, our insider perspective is partial and we need your help to understand other perspectives on the
changes that are happening to RE ITE. For our findings to be valid and therefore helpful in the future, we must ensure our understanding is rich and nuanced; accurate and informed.

3 ways in which you can help us:

1. Please ensure you type your name and the date into the ‘informed consent declaration’ below. Then please comment on our analysis above and in the attached powerpoint by typing in any thoughts into the table below and attach in an email to either of us: janet_orchard@xxxxxxxxxx or hugo.whately@xxxxxxxxxx

2. Please let us know if we can follow up your answers through a semi-structured interview, in person or over the telephone/ by Skype.

3. If you are particularly interested, volunteer to join a focus group with whom we will share provisional findings in more detail to double check that our interpretations are accurate and to generate further analysis from the data. The meeting will involve a 24 hour conference in the next few months and before the next academic year starts at a time and place that is mutually convenient.

The Changing Nature of ITE in RE

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<tr>
<th>Opportunities and advantages</th>
<th>Threats and concerns</th>
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<td>1. The existing PGCE model is overcrowded and needs to be reformed</td>
<td>1. How carefully, and closely related to evidence, are the current reforms that are being proposed?</td>
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<td>2. The reduced number of places available should enable providers to be more selective during recruitment</td>
<td>2. Do we fully understand what makes a good RE teacher, therefore what very good candidates to pick?</td>
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<td>3. Curriculum tutors’ practical expertise is not sufficiently valued by universities; they might be better paid and enjoy improved status were they employed by schools</td>
<td>3. There is insufficient teacher development in RE expertise in schools</td>
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This table contains some potential advantages and disadvantages to changing the current state of ITE in RE which have been identified so far by providers.

Please type in your own thoughts on whether or not you agree with these observations. We have left empty boxes underneath in which we hope you will add your own sense of the ‘pros’ and ‘cons’.
The research will go on to identify factors which might be regarded as part of an irreducible core that ought to be part of an ITE programme for beginning RE teachers. What do you regard as irreducible aspects of ITE in RE?

Informed consent declaration
1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet provided and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I understand that any personal information that I provide to the researchers will be kept strictly confidential.
4. I confirm my willingness to take part in (please circle as appropriate)

Focus group

_____________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________

Name of Participant                                               Email

_____________________________________________________

Date                                                             Signature

Explanatory notes
Any data and/or personal information we gather during the course of this project will be stored securely. Raw data will be available only to us, the named researchers, and we will destroy it on completion of the project. Any use we make of particular examples will be anonymised so that they cannot be traced back to specific participants.

If you have any questions or concerns about the nature, procedures or requirements for participation do not hesitate to contact the researchers. Should you decide to participate, you will be free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. Final research findings will be made available to you on request. Please contact the researchers by email with any further enquiries.

Many thanks in anticipation of your willingness to contribute to this project in whatever way.
Janet Orchard and Hugo Whately

E-mail contacts: janet_orchard@xxxxxxxxxx or hugo.whately@xxxxxxxxxxx
Appendix II - Stage Two: Semi-structured interview schedule

The Changing Nature of ITT in RE

1. The good RE teacher.

Can you tell me about an RE teacher who has really impressed or influenced you?

How do you think they got to be so good?

How could more RE teachers like this be recruited in future?

2. The nature and content of ITT courses.

Can you tell me about some RE ITT that has impressed either you or others?

What kinds of changes, if any, have affected your work over the past 3-5 years?
What differences have they made?

If you could, what kinds of changes would you make to ITT in RE? Why?

Your role and responsibilities.

Are you mainly school or HEI based, or mixture of both?

Can you explain briefly what this entails and roughly how your time is divided?

In terms of remuneration and workload, do you feel that your work is valued and understood by others?

To what extent could your role be carried out effectively by someone who was either more HEI or more school based than you are?

What do you see as the distinctive contribution to ITT from each of the HEI-school partnership?
Appendix III - Stage Three: project description and informed consent declaration for focus group

The Changing Nature of Initial Teacher Education in Religious Education in England

Dr Janet Orchard and Dr Hugo Whately

What our project is about?

Our project aims to examine the implications for RE of the current round of changes to Initial Teacher Education (ITE/ITT). Already the numbers of funded places at secondary level have been dramatically reduced by the Department for Education (DfE), which argues that the falling numbers of pupils of secondary age and low teacher turnover mean that fewer teachers will be required. Moreover, the DfE is reviewing how teachers are selected, trained and accredited. A raft of new policies promotes provision that is demonstrably school-led and employment based. They advocate a move away from the traditional model of a university based PGCE route into teaching that has dominated ITE for many years.

Cuts have been particularly severe in a few curriculum areas, like RE, where reforms have led to an even more marked decline in teacher recruitment. Four university-based Secondary RE PGCE programmes had closed by September 2012 with numbers on many other courses so dramatically reduced they may soon be rendered financially unviable. Furthermore the omission of RE from the “English Baccalaureate” and its exclusion from the National Curriculum review offers recent evidence that as a subject, RE’s star is waning.

Our research seeks to make sense of these changes, with particular reference to three key questions:

1. What impact have these changes had on the various providers of RE specific training, whether employment i.e. school or university based?
2. How are these changes perceived by those engaged in ITE in RE, whether positively or negatively, and what impact have they had on the nature and purpose of their work?
3. Can an “irreducible core” necessary to the professional development of beginning teachers of RE be identified through the findings?

We are conducting this research in the capacity of independent researchers who have been funded by the Culham-St Gabriel’s Trust. They have approved our proposal, asked us in particular to seek constructive ways forward for future RE ITE provision; also, to be diligent about disseminating our work publicly.

Why we need your help:

In the third and final stage of our research we have put together a focus group who will reflect with us on the findings of the first and second stages. The focus group approach is particularly well-suited to research participants whose working lives are directly affected by the changes being discussed in the report. We have chosen you because you bring expertise on RE and ITT/E from a variety of perspectives and in different educational settings. Some of you kindly responded to our questionnaire in the first stage of the research but none of you were interviewed by us in the second stage.
A focus group is intended to “explore participants’ perceptions, attitudes, feelings, ideas...” as well as “encourage and utilize group interactions” (Wilson 1997, 211) by bringing together professionals in the field of RE ITT. A focus group is commended by Wilson as “a final, integral part of the research process” (Wilson 1997, 211). We hope to test the findings of our research with you for authenticity and accuracy; also to develop our ideas further through the dialogue on RE and ITT which we hope to facilitate in Oxford. We hope that you will benefit from and enjoy the opportunity to reflect, clarify even deepen your own thinking on this subject by sharing your own experiences with others.

Informed consent declaration
1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet provided and that I have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I understand that any personal information that I provide to the researchers will be kept strictly confidential.
4. I confirm my willingness to take part in the changing nature in ITT in RE focus group exercise on Monday 26th November 2012 in Oxford.

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Explanatory notes
Any data and/or personal information we gather during the course of this project will be stored securely. Raw data will be available only to us, the named researchers, and we will destroy it on completion of the project. Any use we make of particular examples will be anonymised so that they cannot be traced back to specific participants.

If you have any questions or concerns about the nature, procedures or requirements for participation do not hesitate to contact the researchers. Should you decide to participate, you will be free to withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. Final research findings will be made available to you on request. Please contact the researchers by email with any further enquiries.

We are very grateful to you for giving up your time to join us in Oxford on Monday 26th November.

Please do not hesitate to email us or phone if you have any further questions about the research or the day. Looking forward to seeing you soon

Janet Orchard and Hugo Whately

E-mail contacts: janet_orchard@xxxxxxxxx or hugo.whately@xxxxxxxxxx

Telephone contacts: Janet @ XXXXXXXXXX or Hugo @ XXXXXXXXXX