



**Evidence for
Excellence in
Education**

Key Findings Summary

Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics in Primary Education

National Foundation for Educational
Research (NFER)



Key Findings Summary: Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics in Primary Education

Hilary Grayson
Sharon O'Donnell
Claire Sargent



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1 Introduction

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has produced this ‘audit’ of the provision of education about religions and beliefs (ERB) and ethics education to inform the ongoing development of a curriculum for ERB and ethics, which is a key part of the Irish Government’s commitment to supporting greater inclusion and diversity in primary schools. Compiled for the National Council for the Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the report focuses on 14 jurisdictions:

- Australia, Queensland
- Canada, Québec
- England
- Finland
- France
- Ireland
- Netherlands
- New Zealand
- Northern Ireland
- Scotland
- Singapore
- Sweden
- USA – Massachusetts
- Wales

The jurisdictions included in this desk study include those with a similar education landscape to that in Ireland; countries which have recently undertaken significant development at the primary level; and also countries considered ‘high-performing’ in the 2011 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the 2011 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Québec is included as it has recently introduced an Ethics and Religious Culture curriculum into the primary school system.

The full report comprises this key findings summary and an accompanying technical appendix of consolidated country tables, including full bibliographic references, for each of the 14 jurisdictions.

The study focuses on children from age four to 12 years and on two lines of inquiry:

- the curriculum for education about religions and beliefs
- the curriculum for education in ethics.

Information was collected by desk research and the frameworks used for data collection for each line of inquiry, and on which this report and the detailed country tables are based, are included as Appendix A.

All 14 jurisdictions use their own terminology to describe the provision of education about religions and beliefs and education in ethics. In producing this report, we have aimed to ensure consistency with the working definitions relating to the teaching of religious education recently produced by NCCA; see Appendix B.

The primary audience for this key findings summary and the technical appendix includes NCCA staff and members of Council and its enabling structures (committees). It also includes school principals and teachers, others with a particular interest (if not profession) in education, and prospective or current researchers from within or outside the classroom.

2 Context

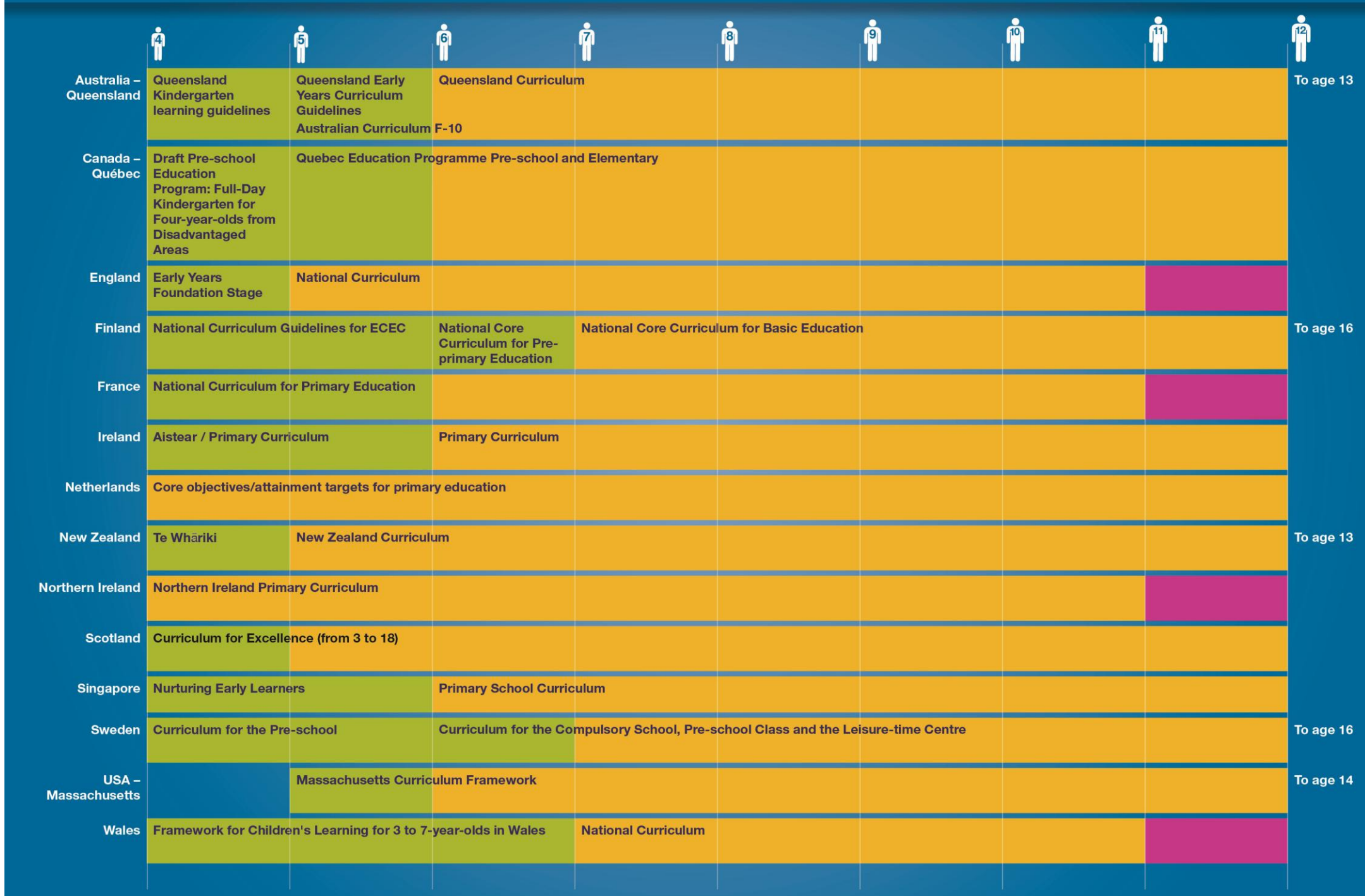
2.1 Curriculum structures and stages of primary school

The desk study focuses on provision for children from age four to 12 years and the curriculum frameworks for this age range across jurisdictions. The reason for selecting this age range is to facilitate comparison with the Irish context, where almost 50 per cent of four-year-old children are enrolled in primary schools (although the statutory school starting age is six).

In some cases ([Australia – Queensland](#), [England](#), [Finland](#), [Ireland](#), [New Zealand](#), [Singapore](#), [Sweden](#) and [Wales](#)), there are specific curriculum frameworks for younger children in pre-school/kindergarten settings. In others ([Canada – Québec](#), [France](#), [the Netherlands](#), [Northern Ireland](#), [Scotland](#), and [USA – Massachusetts](#)), although in most cases pre-school provision is not compulsory and offered in a different setting, the same curriculum framework applies to pre-school and primary provision.

Figure 1 identifies the phase of education and the curriculum framework followed by children aged four to 12 (green = pre-school/kindergarten; yellow = primary; pink = secondary).

Figure 1: Ages, Stages and Curriculum Frameworks for Children aged Four to 12 Years



2.2 Religious context for education about religions and beliefs and ethics education

Secular or religious identity of jurisdictions

Several jurisdictions selected for their comparability with Ireland share its Christian heritage. In some of these, one or more Christian denominations enjoy a degree of prominence, at least regarding formal or ceremonial occasions. The Church of England remains the established church in **England** (in contrast to the Anglican Church in Wales, which is disestablished¹) and religious education in the United Kingdom as a whole is, in the main, Christian in nature. Although around 77 per cent of Finns belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of **Finland**, the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion and conscience to all and, while religious education is largely faith-based, schools and churches are separate and sacramental preparation does not take place during school time.

A number of the studied jurisdictions have secular identities, yet explicitly recognise individuals' right to practise the religion of their choice, or none. In **Massachusetts** (and across the USA) for example, the US Constitution enshrines the right of freedom of belief, there is no officially recognised state religion and no particular religion may be taught in publicly-funded schools. The Constitution does, however, protect religious activity that is initiated by private individuals, meaning that there is nothing in the Constitution to prohibit any student in a publicly-funded school from voluntarily praying at any time before, during, or after the school day. Students may also pray with fellow students during the school day on the same terms and conditions that they may engage in other conversation or speech.

Singapore is a secular state with no state religion. The Ministry of Education's policy and guidelines to public schools on the conduct of religious activities are guided by the need for schools to provide the common space where young people from all communities can grow up together, build bonds and develop shared identity as Singaporeans.

Existence of faith schools and denominational influence in education management

There is a varying picture, with **Ireland**, where 95 per cent of primary schools are denominational, at one end of the continuum and **France**, where *laïcité* (secularism) is a key pillar of the state, and the secular charter is prominently displayed in every state school, at the other. In the **USA - Massachusetts**, the First Amendment forbids religious activity that is sponsored by the Government and in consequence there are no denominational publicly-funded schools.

¹ An established religion is the official religion of a country. In Wales, church and state separated, known as disestablishment, in the early 1920s following the 1914 Welsh Church Act.

Where faith-based schools exist, they may or may not be state-funded, and may or may not be integrated with the state system. There are some interesting regional comparisons and contrasts. In Australasia, for example, 17 per cent of **Queensland** primary schools are private Catholic schools which are outside the government school system, whereas Catholic schools in **New Zealand** have been enabled to integrate with the state system and receive public funding while retaining their Catholic character. In **England**, 37 per cent of primary schools are faith schools whereas in **Wales** 14 per cent of publicly-funded schools are faith-based. In **Finland** schools and churches are separate; in **Sweden** grant-aided independent schools can have a particular orientation, which can be a religious denomination.

Several secular jurisdictions nevertheless have schools in their state system that are operated by or affiliated with religious organisations. The 1848 constitution in the **Netherlands**, for example, separated church and state, but also enabled parents to ask the state to establish a school for their children at state expense; many schools so established are affiliated with religions. Conversely, the system in **Québec** is undergoing a gradual structural change from a confessional to a non-religious base, although publicly-funded Catholic schools exist alongside secular schools.

3 Education about religions and beliefs

3.1 Nature of religious education provision

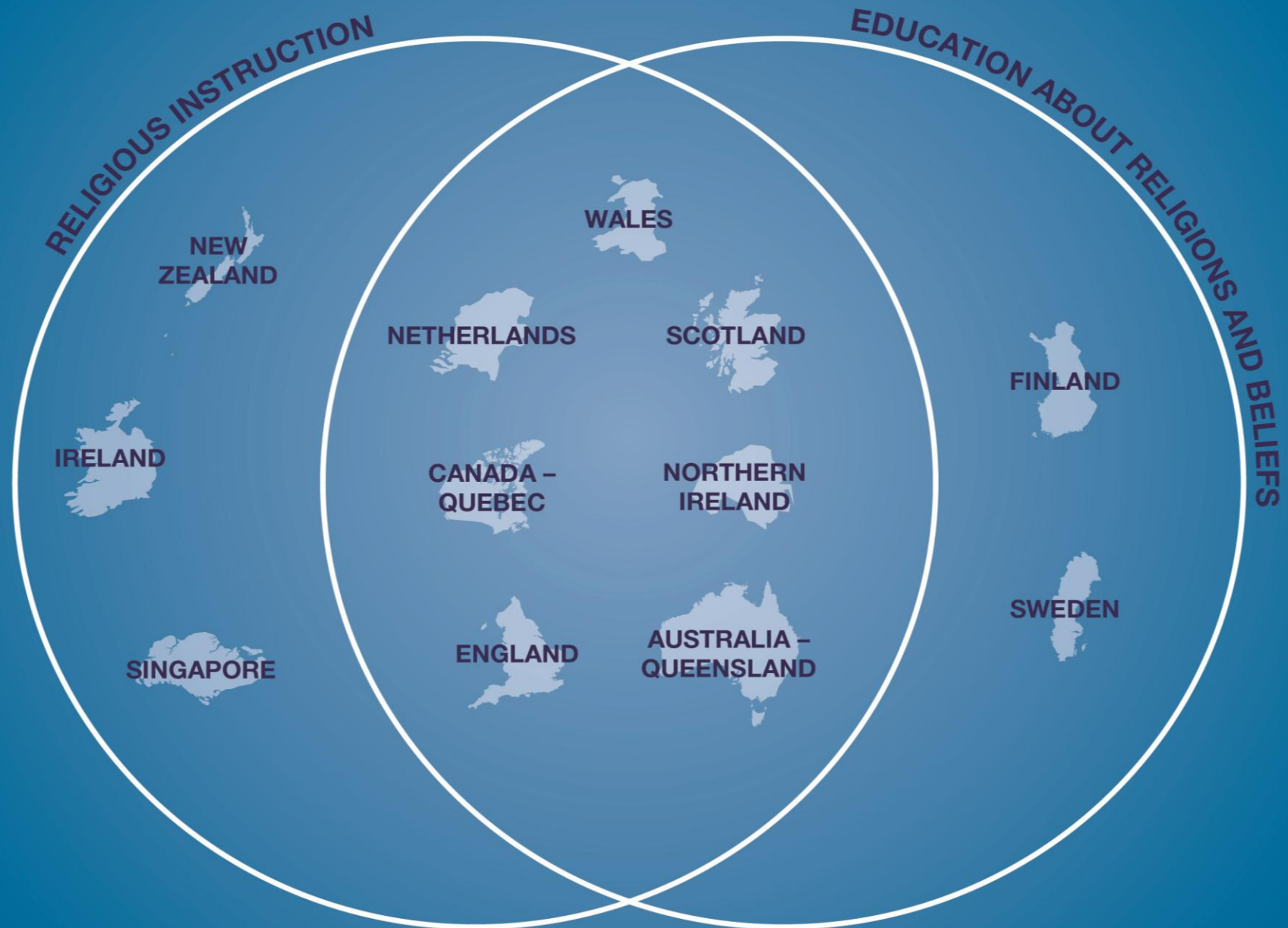
Table 1 indicates the title given by each jurisdiction to its curriculum subject(s) encompassing education about religions and beliefs.

Table 1: Title of religious education provision during pre-primary and primary education

Jurisdiction	Title
Australia – Queensland	‘Intercultural understanding’ as a general capability; can incorporate learning <i>about</i> religions
Canada – Québec	Ethics and Religious Culture Program
England	Religious education
Finland	Religious philosophical orientation (early childhood education) Religion or ethics (primary) – pupils belonging to a religious community receive religious education and the ‘non-affiliated’ are taught ethics
France	Humanist culture (facts only)
Ireland	Religious education; the development of a curriculum for education about religions and beliefs (ERB) is ongoing
Netherlands	Religious and Ideological Movements
New Zealand	No distinct subject (except for Catholic schools: religious education). Teaching <i>about</i> religions is possible within the framework of the New Zealand Curriculum
Northern Ireland	Religious education
Scotland	Religious and moral education (an area of Curriculum for Excellence)
Singapore	No distinct subject; civics and moral education syllabus covers ‘racial and religious harmony’
Sweden	Religion (which is teaching <i>about</i> religion)
USA – Massachusetts	History and social science (facts only)
Wales	‘People, beliefs and questions’ (Foundation Phase) Religious education (Key Stage 2)

Some jurisdictions offer teaching *about* religions and beliefs, whereas in others religious instruction is offered, either alongside or in place of education about religions and beliefs. The position is summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Approaches to Religious Education



Neither religious education nor religious instruction are officially part of the formal curriculum framework in **France**, **Massachusetts**, **New Zealand** or **Singapore**. However, in **New Zealand** and **Singapore**, along with **Queensland**, schools may make arrangements for faith representatives, rather than teachers, to deliver religious instruction. This takes place outside of curriculum time and schools may close for the duration of the session. For example, legislation in **New Zealand** states that primary schools:

may be closed at any time or times of the school day for any period or periods exceeding in the aggregate neither 60 minutes in any week nor 20 hours in any school year, for any class, for the purposes of religious instruction given by voluntary instructors approved by the school's board and of religious observances conducted in a manner approved by the school's board or for either of those purposes; and the school buildings may be used for those purposes or for either of them (New Zealand Legislation, 1964).

In **France**, the school week is organised over nine half-day sessions. The aim of leaving the remaining half-day in the five-day working week free was originally for religious teaching outside school, although it is no longer used for this purpose.

3.2 Principles underlying education about religions and beliefs

Some jurisdictions state specific principles underpinning their teaching about religions; in others there are broader principles informing the wider curriculum. The diverse picture across jurisdictions makes it difficult to make general statements that apply to the majority, but there are several principles that are each common to a number of the jurisdictions.

3.2.1 Freedom of religion

Finland's primary education system is based on the principle of 'positive freedom' under which all pupils are entitled to free instruction in the religion of their own or their guardian's choice. In the **Netherlands**, freedoms of establishment (that is the freedoms to found schools) relate not only to the organisation of teaching but also to freedom of conviction and the principles on which schools are based.

3.2.2 Fostering pupils' awareness of and respect for diversity

In **Québec**, the new Ethics and Religious Culture programme is taught in the context of growing pluralism in society and in **New Zealand**, cultural diversity is a key principle of the Treaty of Waitangi which influences the curriculum. Fostering awareness of and respect for diversity is similarly a key feature of the 'intercultural understanding' capability in **Queensland** and of the core curriculum for religious education in **Northern Ireland**.

3.2.3 Encouraging mutual understanding between peoples

Some jurisdictions seek explicitly to encourage mutual understanding through their curricula for religious education. The common core curriculum in **Northern Ireland**, for example, formulated with the agreement of the four main Christian churches, acknowledges awareness of and respect for differing cultures and faiths, in addition to seeking to prepare young people to live in a diversified society and a multicultural world. In the **Netherlands**, Religious and Ideological Movements aims to acquaint pupils with the main world religions, discuss religious arguments, and gain insights into the various norms, standards and values in pluralist society. The statement of values in the primary education curriculum in **Sweden** indicates that a knowledge of religions and other outlooks is important in creating mutual understanding between people.

3.2.4 Christian heritage

Christian heritage underpins the teaching of religious education in the five jurisdictions in the British Isles. **England** and **Wales** both acknowledge their 'in the main Christian' traditions, whilst **Ireland** recognises the centrality of its Christian heritage, tradition and identity. **Scotland** recognises the place of Christianity in the Scottish context and **Northern Ireland** formulates its common core syllabus with the agreement of the four main Christian churches.

3.2.5 Secular principles

Secular principles are reflected in particular in **Singapore's** six 'core values' informing the teaching of racial and religious harmony - respect, responsibility, integrity, care, resilience and harmony. **Sweden** also provides secular, non-denominational teaching. However, these principles are less widespread than the pluralist approach suggested by the encouragement of diversity, mutual understanding and harmony in these and other jurisdictions, as indicated above.

3.2.6 Teaching about religions and beliefs rather than seeking to convert

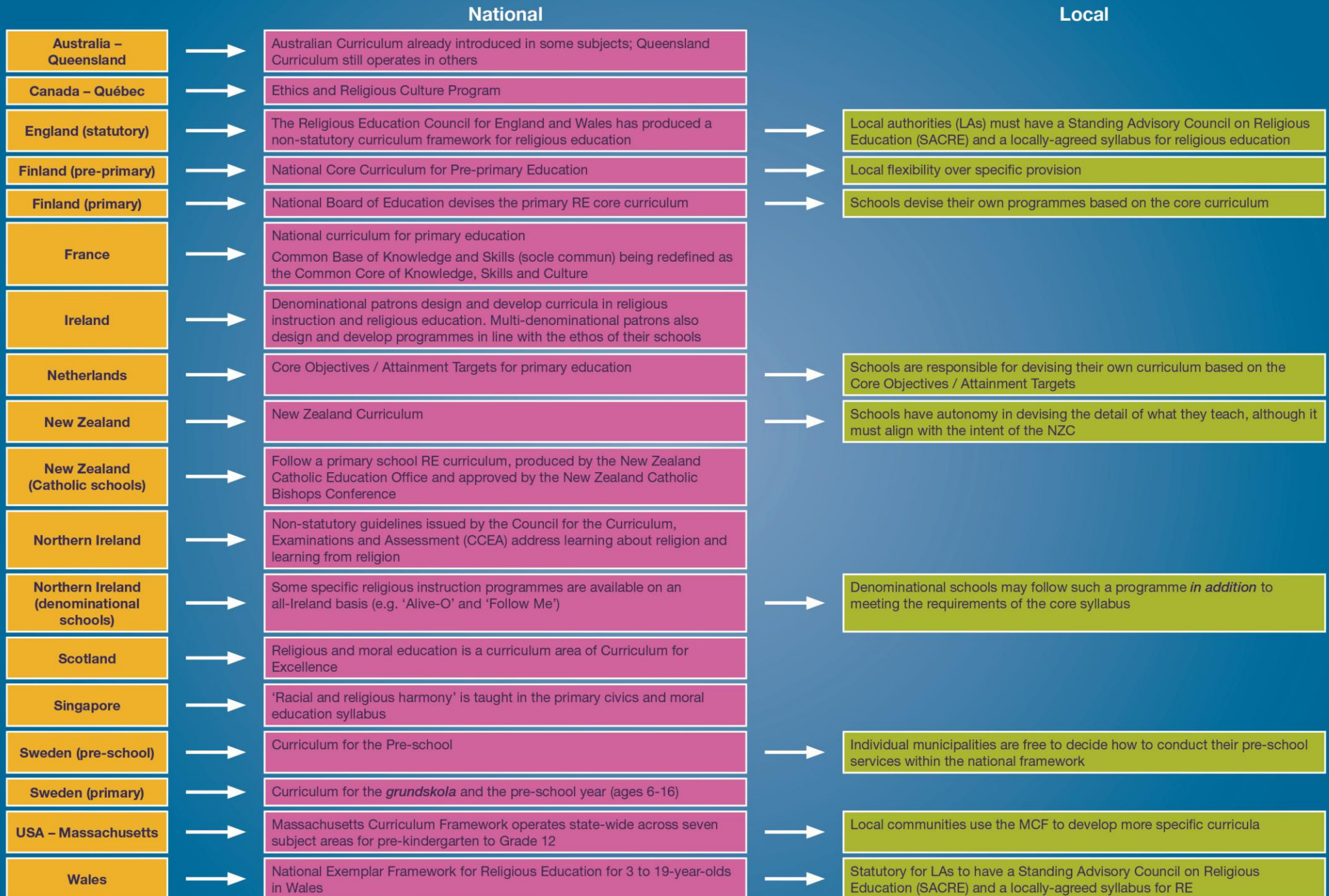
Legislation makes it explicit that the locally agreed syllabus devised by each local authority in **England** must not be designed to convert pupils. In a similar vein, **New Zealand's** Human Rights Commission stated in 2009 that schools are free to teach about religions, so long as they teach pupils about beliefs rather than instruct them on what to believe. In **Finland**, religious instruction includes content based on the respective traditions of different faiths but it does not include elements of religious practice. **Massachusetts**, bound by the US First Amendment ban on government-sponsored religious activity, requires a secular approach throughout its curriculum and, in **France**, the principle of secularism is a key pillar of the state. As a result, respect for the beliefs of pupils and their parents means an absence of religious education, as such, in the curriculum, with a view to preventing attempts to recruit or convert students to a particular religion.

3.3 Curriculum frameworks

Several countries have a top-level national curriculum framework which is then interpreted locally to provide a specific syllabus or programme of study. **Wales**, for example, has the *National Exemplar Framework for Religious Education for 3-19 Year Olds in Wales* and each local authority area has a Locally Agreed Syllabus (as do local authorities in **England**). In the **Netherlands** there are core learning objectives / attainment targets in line with which it is up to schools to determine what is taught. As well as the incoming Australian National Curriculum, individual Australian states such as **Queensland** produce their own specific programmes and guidelines, and guidelines can also be produced at 'sub-state' level.

Figure 3 illustrates the relationships between national frameworks and local curriculum implementation.

Figure 3: National and Local Curricula Frameworks



Education about religions and beliefs can be comparative in nature, for example in the **Netherlands** where a religiously-affiliated school will teach about faiths other than that of the organising group and introduce pupils to the concepts and values of those faiths from a comparative perspective. In this way, similar themes (such as festivals or religious texts) can be explored across different religions. **Québec** also uses a thematic approach: children aged six to eight study 'Family celebrations' and 'Stories that have touched people'; ages eight to ten study 'Religious practices in the community' and 'Forms of religious expression in the young person's environment'; and pupils aged ten to 12 study 'Religions in society and the world' and 'Religious values and norms'.

3.4 Religious instruction

Where religious instruction is offered in the study jurisdictions, the common feature is that it is denominational in nature. Examples are the programmes taught, whether as part of the curriculum or as an optional extra, in **Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, Queensland** and **Scotland**. These are designed by denominational representatives who may be either patrons of the school (as in Ireland) or local faith groups who apply to deliver instruction at school to pupils of their faith (in Queensland, for example). All of these programmes include the following themes in some form:

- missionary initiation
- transmitting knowledge or understanding of the faith, its beliefs, values and attitudes
- education in aspects of liturgy, ceremony or ritual
- prayer (how to pray)
- understanding of and familiarity with the Bible (or other defining religious text)
- education in participating in religious life as part of the community.

Although the focus of religious education in state-funded Catholic schools in **Scotland** is on pupils developing their understanding of the Catholic faith, and in developing and fostering 'the values, attitudes and practices which are compatible with a positive response to the invitation to faith', primary school pupils receiving religious education in Catholic schools also 'learn respect for, and understanding of, other Christian traditions and an appreciation of significant aspects of major world religions' (Scottish Government *et al.*, 2014).

3.5 Jurisdictions teaching neither education about religions and beliefs nor religious instruction

In the secular **French** and **Massachusetts** models, facts about religion are taught only incidentally to the purpose of teaching other subjects – for example, where knowledge of religious matters is necessary to understanding the reasons behind a historical event. In the USA, neither public schools nor charter schools (schools publicly-funded but governed by a group or organisation) may provide religious instruction, but they may teach about religion from a secular perspective. In the ‘humanist culture’ area of the French curriculum, it is specified that pupils must have historical references to different periods of history which help situate them in relation to each other by connecting facts – whether political, economic, social, cultural, religious, scientific/technical, or literary/artistic.

In **New Zealand**, while religious education is not a curriculum subject, schools have considerable autonomy over what they teach and there is scope for them to teach *about* different religions and beliefs, for example under the principle of cultural diversity. Similar scope exists in **Queensland**, where the general capability of ‘intercultural understanding’ within the Australian Curriculum envisions pupils learning to value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others.

3.6 Curriculum content

Religious education can be taught as a discrete subject or integrated into other subjects. **Sweden** teaches religion with social studies for seven- to nine/ten-year-olds and thereafter it is taught both as a separate subject and additionally integrated in the social studies history curriculum. In **Finland**, although religious education and ethics forms a separate subject area in the National Core Curriculum, the principle of making connections between areas and teaching in an integrated way underpins the curriculum. In **Wales**, religious education contributes to the *Curriculum Cymreig*, the Welsh Government’s policy for fostering a uniquely Welsh aspect to the curriculum, by enabling pupils to appreciate the significance, value and impact of the Christian heritage and multi-faith composition of Wales.

3.6.1 Curriculum progression

In general, curriculum progression seems to be from the personal and local (me as a person), through ‘our’ religion in denominational schools and the faiths practised by people in ‘our’ country, to other world religions and non-religious belief systems, and wider considerations about religion and life. This model is exemplified by **Finland’s** objectives in this respect which are to familiarise pupils with:

- their own religion
- 'Finnish spiritual tradition'
- an introduction to other religions
- the cultural and human significance of religions
- ethical living and the ethical dimension of religion.

In several countries, curriculum content areas for the teaching about religions and beliefs are the same throughout primary education, but teaching is carried out in an age-appropriate manner and the level of detail increases as pupils progress through the school years. This type of progressive development happens in **England**, **Finland** and **Ireland** (for example the 'spiral' approach taken by the Church of Ireland and Reformed churches' 'Follow Me' programme), **Northern Ireland**, **Québec**, **Scotland** and **Singapore**.

In **Wales**, the teaching method changes from the play- and investigation-based approach in the Foundation Phase (ages three/four-seven) to the structuring of religious education as a more formal curriculum subject in Key Stage 2 (ages seven-11). **Scotland's** approach is similar. At the early level (pre-school to P1), learning is experiential. Pupils experience stories, images, music and poems related to religions and beliefs. They learn through play and socialising activities, and through celebrations and festivals. As pupils move from the early level to the first and second levels, they explore the specified topics in more depth, discuss them in more detail, encounter a broader range of artefacts and experiences, relate their learning more widely to their own knowledge, experience and beliefs, and begin to consider the influence of Christian beliefs on Scottish society.










3.6.2 Study of world religions

Many countries begin their teaching with the study of Christianity, which has had an influence on the cultural history even of a number of the states which are now explicitly secular. **England** and **Wales** both start from a recognition that the historical religious tradition is 'in the main Christian' but also take account of other religions which have members resident in the UK. However, how this is interpreted in practice varies among the four countries. In **England** pupils are introduced to Judaism at Key Stage 1 (ages five-seven) and to Hinduism and Sikhism at Key Stage 2 (ages seven-11), with Islam and Buddhism studied at Key Stage 3 in lower secondary education (ages 11-14). In **Wales**, Foundation Phase pupils (ages three/four-seven) are introduced to Christianity and either Islam or Judaism, and study all three faiths in Key Stage 2 (ages seven to 11). In contrast, in **Scotland**, from the earliest years of education other religions are studied alongside Christianity and its role in Scottish history, whereas in **Northern Ireland** other religions are not introduced explicitly until Key Stage 3 (age 11, although it is stated that primary children at Key Stage 2 (ages eight-11) should 'be aware of and have respect for differing cultures and faiths').

France and **Massachusetts**, which teach facts about religion incidentally to non-religious curriculum topics, introduce such facts where they are relevant to explaining historical and cultural phenomena. In **France** Islam is first covered with nine/ten-year-olds when they learn the history of Mediterranean trade, for example, with further coverage in lower secondary education; 11- to 12-year-olds are introduced to Judaism. Pupils in Grades 6 and 7 in **Massachusetts** (ages 11-13) study the world outside North America and early Mediterranean civilisations, both of which touch upon religious groups and ideas.

Figure 4 summarises the available data on which religions are introduced to pupils at which stages of education (green = pre-school/kindergarten phase; yellow = primary; pink = lower secondary).

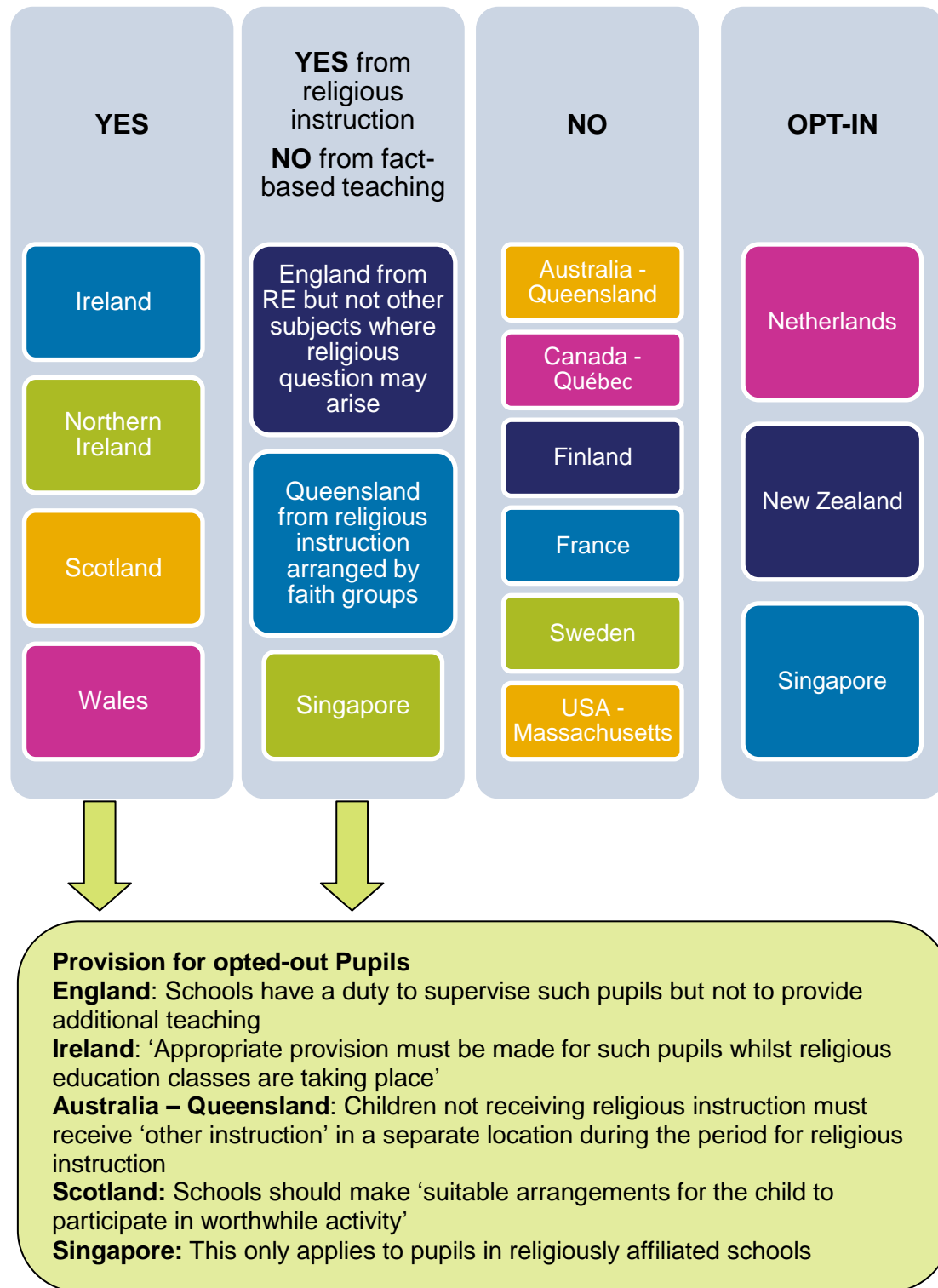
Figure 4: Teaching of World Religions

									
Australia – Queensland		No set programme for	what is taught when						To age 13
Canada – Québec			Grade 1, ages 6-7 and	each year thereafter: Christianity, Judaism and Native spirituality By Grade 2, ages 7-8, and each two years thereafter: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism; non-religiously-affiliated human experience; optionally, other religions					
England		Christianity Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7): Judaism, and optionally other religions		Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11): Hinduism and Sikhism, and optionally other religions					
Finland		Pupils learn only about their own religion, if they have one		Coverage of other religions commences in Grade 1: Christianity, Judaism and Islam are taught					To age 16
France		No religious education as a specific subject							
Ireland		Community National Schools (Multi-denominational programme): Myself and others Learn Together: Belief Systems			Alive-O: Islam Follow Me: Judaism and other faiths			Alive-O: Other Christian denominations Follow Me: Islam	
Netherlands		School autonomy to implement core objectives / attainment targets							
New Zealand		School autonomy to implement New Zealand Curriculum							To age 13
Northern Ireland					Pupils should 'be aware of and have respect for differing cultures and faiths'				
Scotland		All pupils should consider a range of faiths and views, whatever their own situation and local context... the curriculum at the beginning and end of primary school varies in depth, sophistication and detail, rather than in the range of experience expected' (Scottish Government <i>et al.</i> , 2014)		The Catholic RE curriculum usually teaches 'other world religions' (typically Judaism and Islam, optionally other world religions which exist in the school context) from Primary 3 (ages 7-8) onwards					
Singapore						'Religious and cultural practices' are taught explicitly and these include Muslim, Chinese and Hindu practices			
Sweden				Year 1 onwards: Christianity, Islam and Judaism			Year 4 (ages 10-11) onwards: Hinduism and Buddhism		To age 16
USA – Massachusetts		No religious education as a specific subject							To age 14
Wales		Christianity and <i>either</i> Judaism or Islam		Christianity, Judaism <i>and</i> Islam - In addition to the specified religions, schools can choose to study aspects of other religions at their discretion					

3.7 Opt-out from education about religions and beliefs

There is considerable difference between jurisdictions concerning both the existence of an opt-out from education about religions and beliefs and the provision made for opted-out pupils who have exercised such a right; summarised in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Is there an opt-out from religious education?



In **England** and **Scotland**, where there is an opt-out from religious education, schools are recommended to provide parents with information about the content and learning objectives of the religious education syllabus, to help parents make informed decisions. Parents in **England** should have opportunities to discuss the curriculum with their school, and schools may review parents' opt-out decisions with them annually to determine whether they still wish to opt out.

In **Québec** all pupils must follow the Ethics and Religious Culture Program. Canada's Supreme Court rejected appeals from parents in 2012 who wanted to opt their children out of the programme, dismissing their claims that it went against their freedom of religion and violated their constitutional rights.

While there is no formal mechanism for pupils in **New Zealand** to opt out of education about religions and beliefs where this is provided, the Education Act of 1964 allows them to opt out of religious instruction or observances if their parents do not wish them to participate. Following some reported controversies, some principals instead ask parents to opt in to such instruction to avoid contention in this area. In countries which have publicly-funded private schools, such as the **Netherlands**, **New Zealand** and **Singapore**, another form of opt-in exists, as pupils can choose a school with a religious orientation (or indeed choose to avoid such a school).

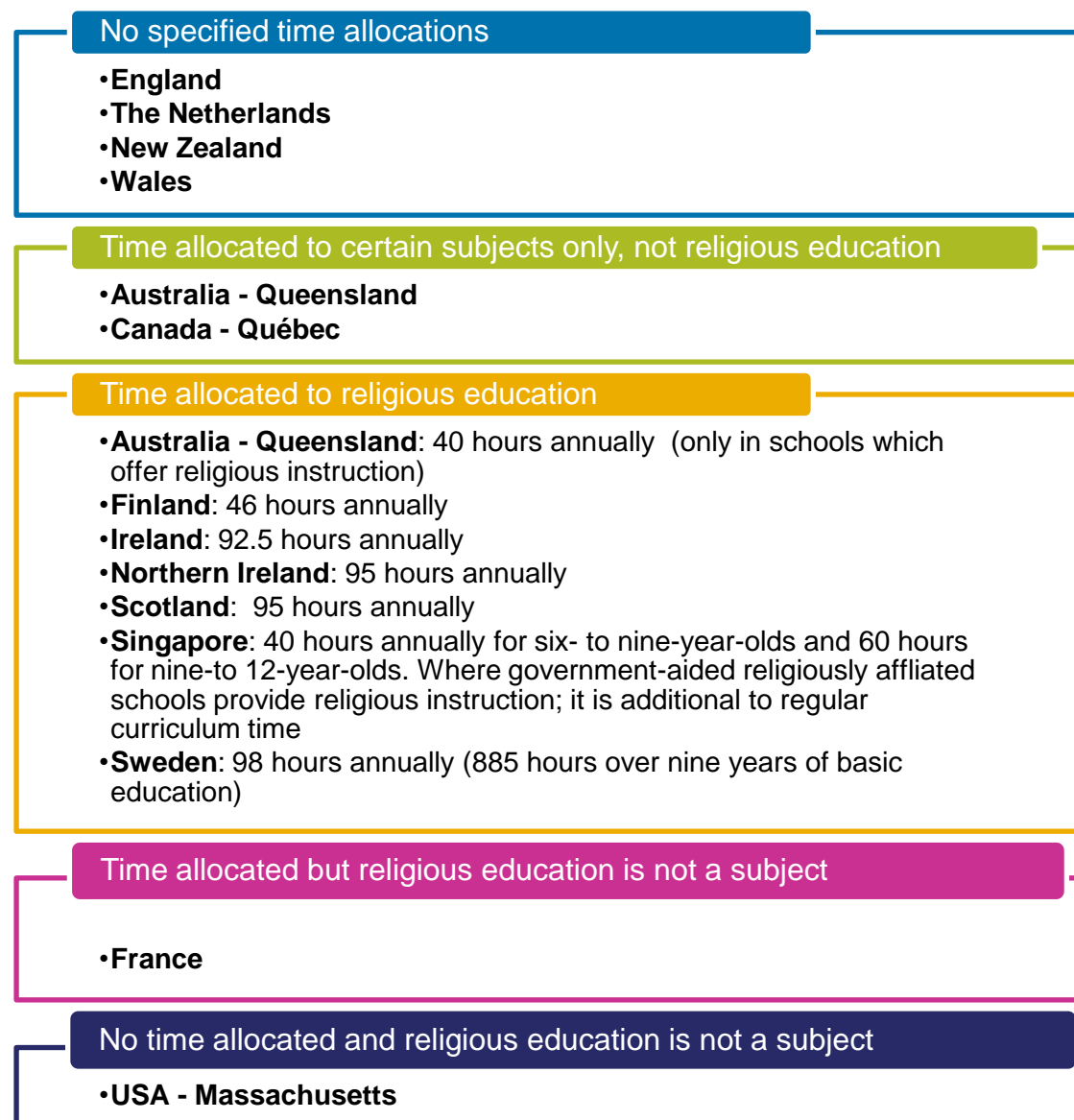
3.8 Time allocated to education about religions and beliefs

Guidelines on the amount of time to be allocated to the teaching of education about religions and beliefs exist in fewer than half of the jurisdictions studied. In some, there is no specific time allocation because education about religions and beliefs is not designated as a subject; for example, in **Queensland**, teaching about religions may take place within the general capability 'intercultural understanding', which is integrated across the curriculum.

In **Finland**, where religion and ethics is a distinct area of the curriculum, a specific amount of time is allocated: 228 lessons of one hour in length between Grades 1 and 5 (ages seven to 12). In **Ireland**, religious education is allocated two and a half hours per week in primary school, but the breakdown between religious education and religious instruction will depend on the programme being followed. **Northern Ireland** and **Scotland** indicate the minimum time that should be allocated (although in **Scotland** this applies only to religious education in Catholic schools and not to religious and moral education (RME) in Curriculum for Excellence). In **Northern Ireland** guidelines stipulate at least half an hour per day, and in **Scotland** two and a half hours per week, both corresponding to 95 hours per school year.

Sweden allocates time to the subject group 'geography, history, religion and social studies' which should be taught in total for 885 hours over the nine years of basic education, or approximately 98 hours per school year. Figure 6 shows how time is allocated to religious education.

Figure 6: Time allocated to religious education



4 Ethics education

The National Council for the Curriculum and Assessment has developed a working definition of ethics education which states that the teaching of ethics includes:

the formation in and the promotion of a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights, the place of justice within society, and the service of the common good. These are all essential to education in citizenship and the proper functioning of democracy. Learning about ethics is important for all but developing modes of ethical behaviour is of central importance to human development (Appendix B).

The aim of nurturing good, ethical behaviour in students, as described in the NCCA definition, is included in the overarching values and aims of many of the education systems investigated in this study. In **England**, **Finland**, **France**, the **Netherlands**, **Northern Ireland**, **Scotland**, **Singapore**, **Sweden** and **Wales**, although the term 'ethics' is not explicitly included in the aims and objectives, the qualities described above are. In **England** and **Wales**, for example, it is a requirement that school education provide a balanced and broadly-based curriculum which is suitable to a child's age, ability, aptitude and to any special educational needs (SEN) which a child may have. A balanced and broadly-based curriculum is defined as one which:

- promotes spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development
- prepares students for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult and working life.

In other jurisdictions (**Northern Ireland**, **France** and the **Netherlands**), it is key that the primary curriculum helps young people to develop as individuals, as contributors to society and as contributors to the economy and environment.

Of the 14 jurisdictions, the Swedish curriculum framework for the pre-school year and compulsory education (children aged six onwards) is the only overarching framework which explicitly includes the term 'ethical' in its fundamental aims:

An ethical perspective is of importance for many of the issues that are taken up in the school. This perspective should permeate schooling in order to provide a foundation and support pupils in developing their ability to form personal standpoints (Skolverket, 2011, p.12).

4.1 Ethics education in the curriculum

Figure 7 highlights how education in ethics is, or is not, provided for children aged four to 12 in the 14 jurisdictions reviewed for this policy audit.

In two jurisdictions (**Massachusetts** and **Ireland**) ethics education is not formally provided, although elements of ethics education may be addressed in other curriculum subjects and, in the case of Ireland, through the patron's programme. In

Massachusetts, for example, ethical ideas are touched on in the [Science and Technology/Engineering Curriculum Framework](#) and the [History and Social Science Curriculum Framework](#). They are also covered by the [Massachusetts Technology Literacy Standards and Expectations](#). By contrast, in **Finland** and **Québec** (but only in primary education) ethics education, combined with religion, is a distinct subject. In both jurisdictions, the main themes of ethics education are:

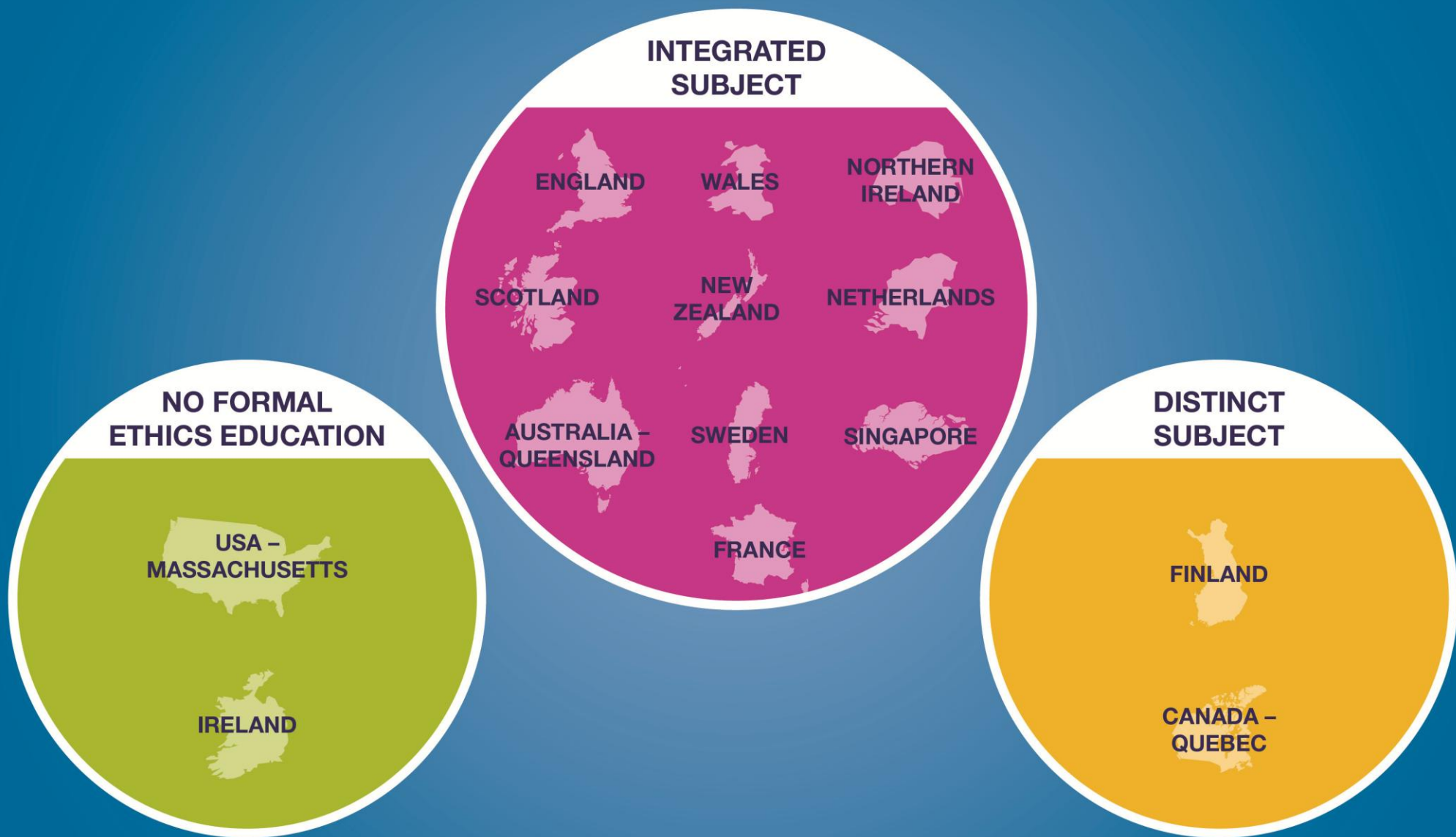
- human relations and moral growth
- self-knowledge and cultural identity (which includes different ways of living, multiculturalism and tolerance)
- the community and human rights (which includes the rights of children, rights and obligations, and human rights; equality, peace, democracy, and the world of the future; and foundations of ethics, moral justification of actions, purpose and consequences of actions, children's own ethical problems and their solutions)
- the individual and the world.

In other jurisdictions, ethics is either a cross-curricular theme or is integrated into other curriculum subjects. In **Queensland**, for example, with the introduction and implementation of the first national Australian curriculum, ethical understanding is being introduced as a 'general capability' (alongside literacy, numeracy, information and communication technology, critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, and intercultural understanding). In **England**, the state provides for ethics education through the legal requirement for schools to promote their students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development.

When integrated in other curriculum subjects, ethics education is generally related to citizenship education (e.g. civics and moral education in **Singapore**) or to social studies. Singapore's civics and moral education (CME) primary syllabus is designed to provide sound moral principles to enable young people to be morally upright and understand the relevance of moral values in a modern society. It is interesting to note that CME is taught in the mother tongue – either Chinese, Malay or Tamil (not English). This is because the Government believes that moral and social values and attitudes can be better conveyed and understood in the pupil's own language.

In **Scotland**, although some elements of education in ethics are taught through religious and moral education (RME) (or religious education in Catholic schools), others are covered elsewhere in the curriculum, primarily through social studies and through cross-curricular learning. Through social studies, pupils develop their understanding of the world by learning about other people and their values, in different times, places and circumstances. As they mature, their experiences are broadened using Scottish, British, European and wider contexts for learning, while maintaining a focus on the historical, social, geographic, economic and political changes that have shaped Scotland.

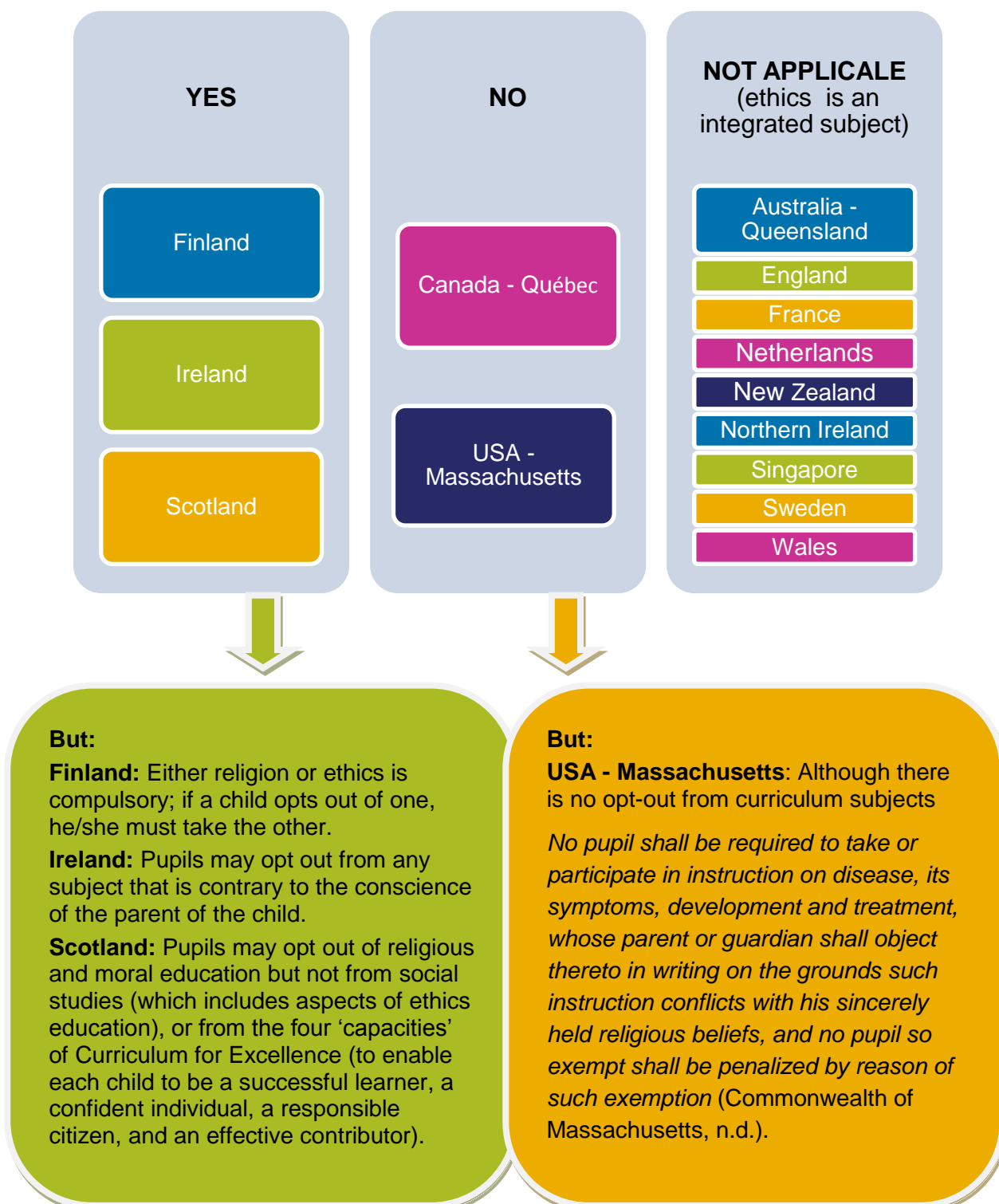
Figure 7: Education in Ethics



4.2 Opt-out from ethics education

In most of the 14 jurisdictions covered in the study, education in ethics is not a separate subject; it is generally integrated within other subjects (see above) and none of the jurisdictions allow students to opt out of these subjects. Figure 8 summarises these arrangements.

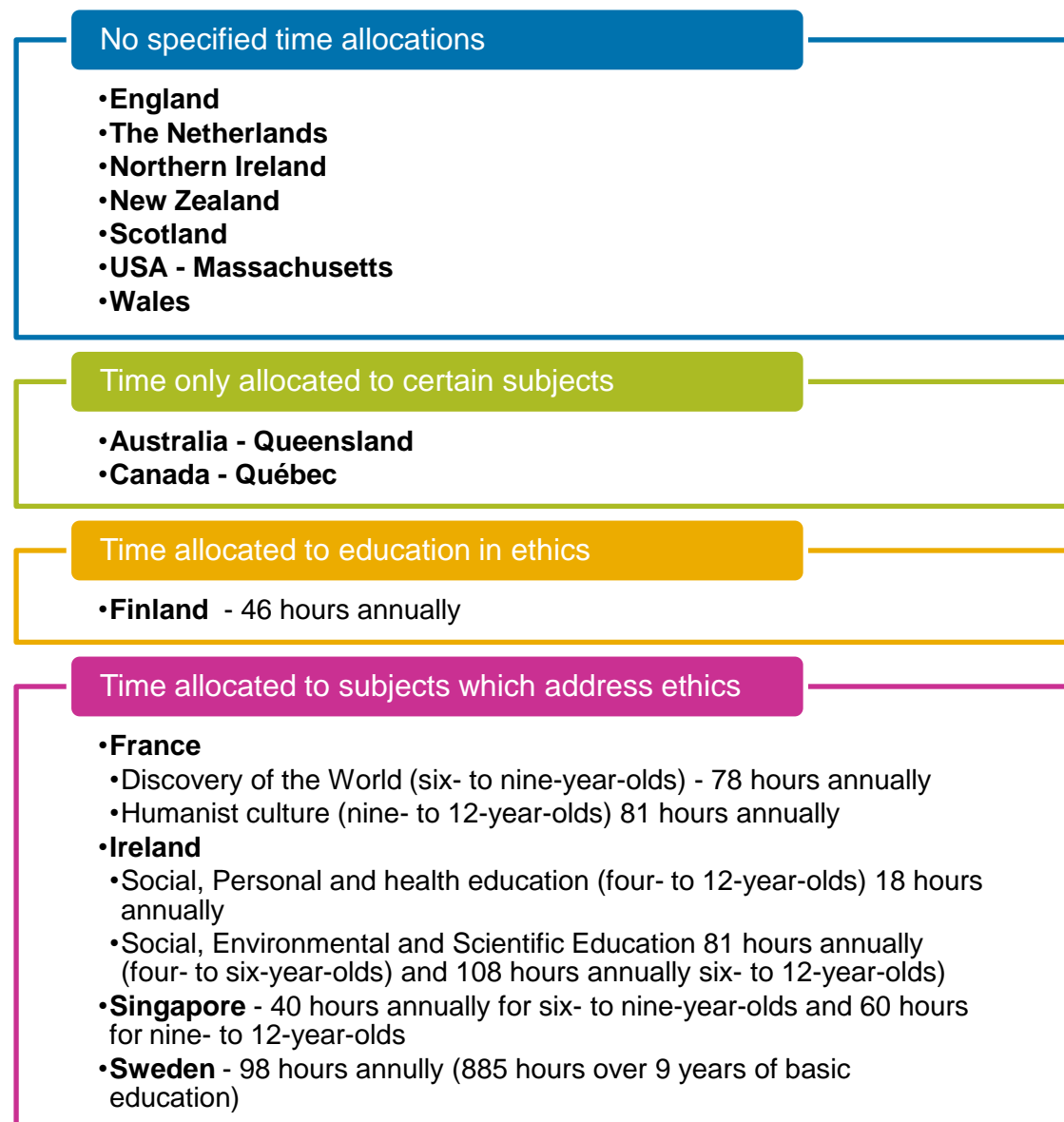
Figure 8: Is there an opt-out from education in ethics?



4.3 Time allocated to ethics education

Few of the jurisdictions provide guidelines on the amount of time to be allocated to the teaching of ethics in education. In **Queensland**, for example, education in ethics (taught as ethical understanding) is a general capability, integrated across the curriculum; consequently, there is no specific time allocation. Figure 9 shows how time is allocated to education in ethics across the 14 jurisdictions.

Figure 9: Time allocated to education in ethics



5 Curriculum review

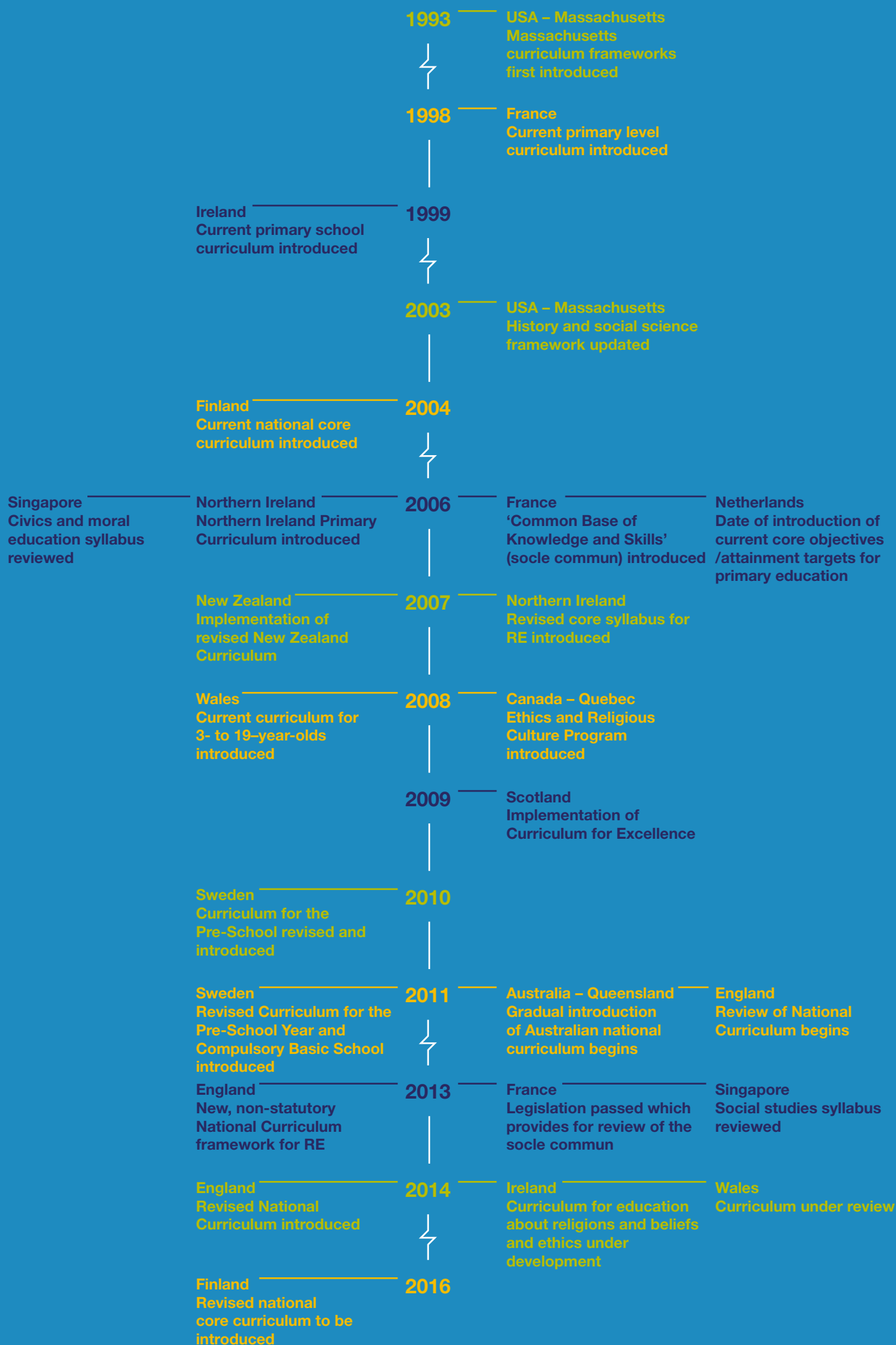
None of the 14 jurisdictions included in the study had a specific review process for education about religions and beliefs or ethics education. Only in **Québec**, **England** and **Northern Ireland** had there been reviews of elements of teaching content for religious education.

In the other 11 jurisdictions, any review of the curriculum for the teaching of religious education / education about religions and beliefs and ethics was undertaken as part of a more general curriculum review.

Only two jurisdictions (**Singapore** and **Massachusetts**) provide for regular reviews; in all others, curriculum review is a more *ad hoc* process. The review process in both **Singapore** and **Massachusetts** is concerned with keeping the syllabus content under review to ensure that it remains current.

Figure 10 summarises the curriculum review timeline across the 14 jurisdictions since 1993 when the **Massachusetts** curriculum frameworks were first introduced. Where there has been specific revision of the religious education curriculum, this is highlighted; otherwise any changes were part of a general review.

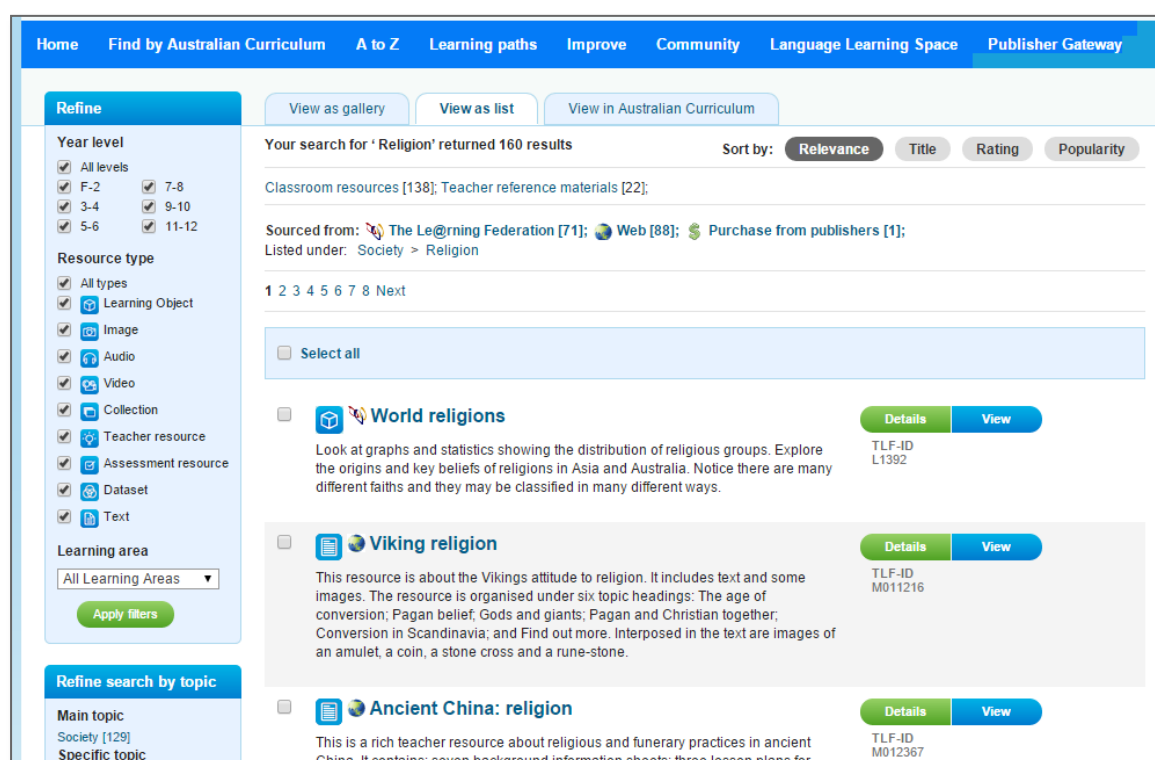
Figure 10: Timeline of Curriculum Review



6 Curriculum resources

Six jurisdictions (Australia – **Queensland**, Canada – **Québec**, **Finland**, **Northern Ireland**, **Scotland** and **Wales**) provide specific official guidance to support the delivery of religious and ethics education. In general this takes the form of guidance and non-compulsory examples in the relevant sections of curriculum framework documents. In **Queensland** and **Wales** digital resource banks (**Scootle** and **HwB** respectively) have also been set up. Figure 11 provides an example of a search in Scootle for religious education resources.

Figure 11



Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence seeks to create a single, coherent curriculum for all children and young people from the ages of three to 18. A suite of guidance documents were published to support its introduction and implementation, and this series of documents supported teachers in integrating religious and moral education (RME), as well as other subjects, as the new curriculum began to embed. In addition to this structural support, the outline of each curriculum area in the *Curriculum for Excellence* document includes a summary of 'principles and practice', which gives teachers guidance on implementing that specific subject area. In terms of teaching content, the Education Scotland religious and moral education webpage also includes a support section containing resources such as testimonies and descriptions of the key tenets of various faiths and world views, planning tools, and case studies.

Uniquely, the Finnish National Board of Education provides a series of textbooks about Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, as well as a textbook on secular

ethics. It also maintains a website of digital teaching resources, edu.fi (in Finnish only).

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in **Northern Ireland** has published specific non-statutory guidance for the teaching of religious education in primary school. The materials were prepared:

to help teachers in primary schools to make effective use of the Northern Ireland Core Syllabus for Religious Education and to assist curriculum leaders and co-ordinators in their planning for RE throughout the school. They offer advice and suggestions on how to develop themes and topics from the core syllabus and to teach them using approaches and activities that teachers are familiar with from other areas of the curriculum (CCEA, 2014, p.1).

The Religious Education Advisory Group has also developed Northern Ireland Curriculum Thematic Units, which were issued to schools in 2010.

In other jurisdictions, teachers have access to a range of resources to support their teaching; some of these are developed with the support of national education ministries or curriculum and assessment bodies, or other interested organisations. In **Singapore**, for example, the Ministry of Education maintains the Approved Textbook List (ATL) to assist principals, heads of department and subject leaders in selecting suitable texts for their students. The list includes a range of books approved for use in primary school social studies and for character and citizenship studies (which will include CME). In Massachusetts, over 100 Model Curriculum Units (MCUs) have been developed by teams of teachers, with guidance and support from the **Massachusetts** Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MDESE), to help educators in their implementation of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. In addition, PBS Learning Media provides access to a wide range of classroom-ready, curriculum-targeted digital resources. In **England**, although the Department for Education does not provide specific support materials beyond the statutory programmes of study for National Curriculum subjects, at local authority level, the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) may produce support materials for teachers in respect of the locally agreed syllabus for religious education. In the **Netherlands**, schools have discretion over how to implement the core objective s/ attainment targets, but the National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) helps schools select teaching materials by providing an overview of all the textbooks and teaching materials available for primary education.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

This desk study has sought to identify the salient features of the provision of education about religions and beliefs and ethics education in 14 jurisdictions, with the aim of informing the ongoing development of the curriculum in Ireland. Our main finding is that there is no single, generalised position across the education systems studied, and consequently no standardised approach to be recommended. In this chapter, however, we seek to summarise the main alternative approaches to teaching about religions and beliefs and ethics, and highlight some considerations worthy of being taken into account in the development of the curriculum in Ireland.

7.1 Conclusions

Education about religions and beliefs and ethics is provided in one of a range of contexts or structures – explicitly secular (including where the historical tradition may be Christian); informed by the Christian tradition; influenced to varying degrees by specific denominations, e.g. the Catholic faith. Where faith-based schools do exist, in some jurisdictions they are state-funded; in others, they are explicitly not.

7.1.1 Education about religions and beliefs

A variety of subject titles exists for this area of the curriculum and content may involve education about religions and beliefs, religious instruction in a specific faith or denomination, or elements of both. That said, whatever the subject title, several broad principles are widely apparent: freedom of religion; fostering pupils' awareness of and respect for diversity; encouraging mutual understanding between peoples; Christian heritage; and teaching about religions and beliefs rather than seeking to convert pupils. Education about religions and beliefs is generally taught within some form of national curriculum framework or following some national guidelines and, in many instances, there is a complementary framework or syllabus at local level.

In addition, it is common to begin with the teaching of Christianity and introduce pupils to a number of world religions later, although the age and stage at which this happens varies. Curricula progress typically from the personal and local (me as a person), through 'our' religion in denominational schools and the faiths practised by people in 'our' country, to other world religions and non-religious belief systems, and wider considerations about religion and life.

Only a minority of the jurisdictions studied allow pupils to opt out of religious education or education about religions and beliefs. Similarly, fewer than half provide guidelines about the amount of time to be allocated to teaching in these subject areas.

7.1.2 Ethics

Although the term 'ethics' is not explicitly included in the overarching values and aims of the majority of the education systems studied, the aim of nurturing good, ethical behaviour in students is. There is a general expectation that the primary curriculum will help young people to understand and develop a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights, the place of justice within society and the service of the common good.

In most jurisdictions, ethics education is either a cross-curricular theme or is integrated into another curriculum subject, most often citizenship education or social studies. In two jurisdictions it is combined with education about religions and beliefs to form a distinct subject, and in two others it is not formally provided at all.

Children do not generally have the choice to opt out of ethics education when it is taught as a cross-curricular theme or integrated subject unless, in a small number of jurisdictions, teaching may be contrary to their religious beliefs.

Few jurisdictions provide specific guidelines either for the teaching of ethics or for the amount of time to be allocated to its teaching.

7.1.3 Curriculum review

None of the 14 jurisdictions has a specific review process in place for education about religion and beliefs or ethics education, although three have recently completed reviews of the curriculum for religious education.

Generally, any review of the curriculum for the teaching of religious education / education about religions and beliefs or ethics takes place as part of a more general review of the curriculum, which most often takes place on an *ad hoc* basis. Only two jurisdictions provide for regular, systematic curriculum review, with the aim of ensuring that content is current.

7.1.4 Curriculum resources

Six of the 14 jurisdictions provide specific official guidance to support the delivery of religious and ethics education and, in all, teachers have access to a range of resources to support their teaching. Some of these are developed with the support of national education ministries, curriculum and assessment bodies, or other interested organisations.

7.2 Recommendations

This audit of the provision of education about religions and beliefs (ERB) and ethics education for children aged four to 12 years has shown that Ireland is unique in the 14 jurisdictions investigated in having a system in which the vast majority of primary schools are governed by denominational organisations, and in which the religious education provided is religious instruction rather than education about religions and beliefs. The other 13 jurisdictions either allow students to opt in to religious instruction (usually by choosing a faith-based school / education system), teach a combination of religious instruction and education about religion and beliefs, or prohibit religious instruction. Although approaches to the teaching of education about religions and beliefs and ethics vary across the jurisdictions, it is possible to provide some recommendations for the proposed curriculum for ERB and ethics currently under discussion/development in Ireland.

Society in Ireland is increasingly pluralist (DES, 2014) and the mutual understanding of beliefs is an important element in ensuring that misunderstanding does not become a source of tension. Developing and implementing a programme which teaches students about other faiths and beliefs could be key to preventing such misunderstanding and to supporting pluralism and multi-culturalism. Québec has recently completed the process of shifting from an essentially confessional / denominational Catholic and Protestant structure of religious education to a 'lay' structure and may be of particular interest. The Ethics and Religious Culture programme (MELS, 2008) has replaced three denominational programmes (students chose one) with a single programme to be used with all students whilst respecting the freedom of conscience and religion of parents, students and teachers. This broad programme of education about religions and beliefs, which goes beyond the teaching of religious facts, as happens in the primary education systems in France and Massachusetts (and the rest of the United States), for example, or beyond teaching focused on one religion, can contribute significantly to understanding.

There may also be lessons to learn from those jurisdictions which provide a combination of both religious instruction *and* education about religions and beliefs (see Figure 2). Programmes in these jurisdictions are not designed to reinforce (or convert children to) a particular religious belief, rather to inform and foster mutual understanding. There should be no need to provide an opt-out from programmes which provide education about religions and beliefs rather than reinforcing a particular faith or religious belief.

Most of the jurisdictions investigated in this audit expect that the primary curriculum will help young people to understand and develop a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights, the place of justice within society and the service of the common good. It is notable that, in Ireland, education in ethics is not specifically included as an element of the primary curriculum (although elements of ethics education are addressed by the programmes of study for Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)). More explicit inclusion of an ethical dimension to the primary curriculum may be worth consideration. The audit provides

some examples of how this can be done; merged with religious education / education about religions and beliefs or as a specific cross-curricular theme / integrated subject, for example.

When / if a new curriculum of education about religions and beliefs and ethics is introduced in Ireland, there may still be a demand for some primary school children to be provided with religious instruction. Providing time and space for denominational patrons to deliver religious instruction in schools, in a similar way to current arrangements in New Zealand or Queensland (Australia) may offer a useful solution here.

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Appendix A: frameworks for data collection

Context

Context	Detailed response
Cover the following: ages and stages of primary education if children are not in primary school at age four (or older), what kind of pre-school curriculum structure exists curriculum framework for primary education, and if necessary pre-school	

Line of inquiry 1

Table 1: Education about Religions and Beliefs

Question	Expected output	Detailed response
1. Does the state provide education about religions and beliefs in primary school? If yes, what are the aims and underpinning principles of the education about religions and beliefs curriculum?	a. Yes/No b. List of aims and principles	
2. What are the strands/themes relevant to education about religions and beliefs in primary schools? Please provide URL links where available	a. List strands/themes b. URL links Lots of detail here, especially the age at which other religions are introduced	
3. Is provision for education about religions and beliefs curriculum different across the primary school years? If yes, how does the curriculum differ in contents and structure for children in the junior end of primary school compared with provision for children at the senior end of primary school?	a. Yes/No b. List up to three differences	
4. Is the education about religions and beliefs content integrated across the curriculum? If so, into which subjects/subject areas/themes/topics?	a. Yes/No b. List of subjects/themes/topics, URLs if applicable	
5. Are there guidelines as to how much time/how many lessons should be allocated to the teaching about religions and beliefs across the primary school years? If so please calculate annual allocation.	a. Yes/No b. Detail of allocation Annual amount if possible and how this fits with the rest of the curriculum.	
6. Is there an opt-out clause for pupils who do not wish to receive education about religions and beliefs? If yes, what is the cultural/religious background, number and percentage of pupils who	a. Yes/No b. Number and percentage	

do opt out?	
7. Is there a review process in place for the religious education curriculum? If yes, when was the last review undertaken and are there future plans to review the curriculum?	a. Yes/No b. Year
8. Are resources or support material provided to teachers for teaching about religions and beliefs? If yes, please provide links to support material.	a. Yes/No b. Links

Line of inquiry 2

Table 2: Education in Ethics across jurisdictions

Question	Output	Detailed response
1. Does the state provide for ethics education? If yes, what are the aims and underpinning principles of the ethical curriculum?	a. Yes/No b. List of aims and principles	
2. What are the strands/themes relevant to ethics education in primary schools? Please provide URL links where available.	a. List strands/themes b. URL links	
3. Is provision of education in ethics different across the primary school years? If yes, how does the curriculum differ in contents and structure for children in the junior end of primary school compared with provision for children at the senior end of primary school?	a. Yes/No b. List up to three differences	
4. Is the ethical education content integrated across the curriculum? If so into which subjects/subject areas/themes/topics?	a. Yes/No b. List of subjects/themes/ topics, URLs if applicable	
5. Are there guidelines as to how much time/lessons should be allocated to the teaching of ethics across the primary school years? If so please calculate annual allocation.	a. Yes/No b. Details of allocation	
6. Is there an opt-out clause for pupils who do not wish to receive education in ethics? If yes, what is the number and percentage of pupils who do opt out?	a. Yes/No b. Number and percentage	
7. Is there a review process in place for the ethics education curriculum? If yes, when was the last review undertaken and are the future plans to review the curriculum?	a. Yes/No b. Year	
8. Are resources or support material provided to teachers for the teaching of ethics? If yes, please provide links to support material.	a. Yes/No b. Links	

Appendix B: definitions

The area of religions and beliefs is a particularly challenging area in relation to terminology. Key terms such as “religion”, “religions”, “religious”, “religious diversity”, “dimension of religions”, “religious dimension”, “faith”, “non-religious”, “theist”, “atheist”, “agnostic”, “secular”, “secularity”, “secularism”, “belief”, “conviction”, “spirituality”, “world view”, “life stance”, “multicultural education”, “intercultural education”, “intercultural dialogue”, “religious literacy”, etc., have different understandings and associations in different languages and contexts. This short note attempts to clarify the key terms used in this audit of jurisdictions in relation to education about religions and beliefs (ERB) and ethics.

Religious Education (RE):

For the purposes of this audit RE is understood as an aspect of the school curriculum. RE refers to a curriculum space where different approaches to RE can take place including confessional and non-confessional teaching of religion. The subject of RE is found in different forms and under different titles around the world. For the purposes of this research, the term RE is understood in the broadest sense of the word.

Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB):

The starting point is the understanding that teaching about religions and beliefs is not devotionally and denominationally oriented. It strives for student awareness of religions and beliefs, but does not press for student acceptance of any of them; it sponsors study about religions and beliefs, not their practice; it may expose students to a diversity of religious and non-religious views, but does not impose any particular view; it educates about religions and beliefs without promoting or denigrating any of them; it informs students about various religions and beliefs, it does not seek to conform or convert students to any particular religion or belief.

Confessional Religious Education/Denominational Religious Education/Religious Instruction:

This means education as formation in a belief system. Faith formation involves learning how to live a life according to religious guidelines and learning modes of thinking, values formation, integration into a faith community and moral action in the light of one religious belief. It incorporates the constitutional and legal term religious instruction whose connotation is now regarded as pedagogically limiting, but whose usage was widespread in the past.

Education for Ethics:

The teaching of ethics includes the formation in and the promotion of a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights, the place of justice within society, and the service of the common good. These are all essential to education in citizenship and the proper functioning of

democracy. Learning about ethics is important for all but developing modes of ethical behaviour is of central importance to human development.

Denominational patronage/school:

A denominational school is under the patronage/management of a single denominational group. Denominational schools provide Religious Education according to the traditions, practices and beliefs of the specified religious community. It may also provide a wider education about religions or facilitate parents of other faith traditions to enable them to provide for Religious Education in their belief system within the school or at home.

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**National Foundation for
Educational Research**
The Mere, Upton Park
Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ

T: 01753 574123
F: 01753 691632
E: enquiries@nfer.ac.uk
www.nfer.ac.uk