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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Creative Learning to Affirm Diversity

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KESS Policy Briefing

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-informed policy and law-making within Northern Ireland

Key points:

- Legislation currently under way in the Race Equality Bill and the 16s to 18s in Education or Training Bill is associated with the aspirations of young people for Religious Education more fully to reflect the diversity of our society.
- The Supreme Court judgement of November 2025 means that there is now a legal imperative for reform of the RE curriculum in Northern Ireland.
- The ongoing development of the first ever National Curriculum for RE in England is a valuable opportunity and stimulus for curriculum reform in Northern Ireland.
- Effective RE should not primarily be about imparting 'head knowledge' of religion, but rather about giving young people of all faiths and none the outlook and skills positively to appreciate and negotiate the cultural richness and diversity of contemporary society.
- To that end it is important to facilitate 'safe spaces' for young people to discuss issues of religious diversity in the past and present among themselves, while ensuring adult oversight to establish ground rules and mitigate risks.
- The RETOPEA 'Docutube' methodology offers one way to achieve the above ends through the creative and collaborative activity of film-making.
- Through participation in a RETOPEA workshop young people develop skills in communication and digital literacy skills, that are relevant to other subjects and transferable to the workplace.
- Feedback from participants in our pilot workshops including a cross-community workshop in Belfast has been overwhelmingly positive.
- The project remains active and is currently exploring applications to home education and to primary schools as well as to peace education in post conflict societies.

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Policy and legal context

Our research relates to various areas of current interest. First, the Race Equality Bill, the consultation for which reports (p.32) that ‘Young people suggested that there should be widened curriculum on racism and diversity’ including a widening of the scope of Religious Education. Second, the 16s to 18s in Education or Training Bill, which implements some of the recommendations of the 2023 Independent Review of Education, including (Vol 2, p. 129) one for a new Religious Education syllabus that ‘should help young people to understand the society in which they are growing up, including both its increasing diversity and its Christian traditions’. This matter has been given increased urgency by the Supreme Court judgement of 19 November 2025 that currently the ‘religious education and collective worship provided in a school in Northern Ireland’ are contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights and the UK Human Rights Act 1998. Most recently on 11 March 2026 the Executive Office published the draft Framework for Race Relations which places considerable emphasis on the importance of education and training to reflect diversity. Meanwhile the ongoing development of the first National Curriculum for RE in England is a significant comparative context for discussion of the future of RE in Northern Ireland.

The Religious Toleration and Peace (RETOPEA) Project

RETOPEA is a research-based initiative which has developed and extensively tested innovative methods and resources for religious, citizenship and history education. Through the collaborative process of creating short, documentary-style films (so-called ‘Docutubes’), it supports children and young people in exploring, discussing and reflecting on issues relevant to religious diversity, toleration and peace in the past and present. It is targeted primarily at young people between the ages of 12 and 18. The Docutube method can be used both in schools and in informal education, such as through youth clubs and museums. It prompts young people to think ‘outside the box’ about religious diversity and toleration/intolerance in history, the present day and their own lived experiences, through engagement with short source extracts and then (working in groups) to make their Docutubes. This creative process encourages participants actively to engage with the issues and supports development of other important skills, such as team-working, empathy, curiosity and imagination and therefore has a value that goes well beyond Religious Education, advancing practical learning that also relates to other subjects and to future employment. The films are presented not as an end in themselves, but as a means to an end – ie to stimulate independent thought, critical thinking, working ‘with’ history, in order better to understand and appreciate present-day religious and cultural diversity.

RETOPEA originated in a consortium of international partners funded by the European Union’s Horizon2020 programme (Grant Agreement n°770309) between 2018 and 2022, which supported pilot workshops across Europe and the development of free educational

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resources. These include an Open Learn course for teachers and youth workers which explains the methodology in detail (<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/religious-studies/young-people-and-religion-creative-learning-history/content-section-overview?active-tab=description-tab>) and the RETOPEA website (<https://retopea.eu/s/start/page/home>), which hosts a collection of over 400 sources or 'clippings'. These are short texts, images and films that explore issues relevant to religious toleration and peace in a wide range of different historical and cultural settings, including Northern Ireland. These 'clippings' can be used on their own as freestanding educational materials in schools, museums and youth groups as well as providing an essential point of departure for participants to think about their own experience and develop their films.

After the end of the European project, The Open University received further funding from the Culham St Gabriel's Trust and from the OU's own Open Societal Challenges programme that has enabled us to run further workshops in the UK, and also in Albania and Jordan. Overall, between 2020 and 2025, we have run 20 docutube workshops, including three in Northern Ireland. Overall, a total of 232 young people have participated.

Feedback from participants was gathered through semi-structured interviews and through a questionnaire, completed by 180 young people. Their reactions were overwhelmingly positive: 84% agreed or strongly agreed that the workshop had helped them 'to think of religious peace and toleration in new ways'; 96% enjoyed the experience, an indication in itself of positive engagement and effective learning. (Wolffe et al., 2024; Sinclair, 2026).

The Northern Ireland workshops took place in Belfast, involving one each in a Controlled school and a Catholic Maintained school, and a third event that brought students from both these schools together. The young people produced Docutubes relating both specifically to the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and examples of religious toleration from other national and historical contexts. The results were broadly comparable to above, with feedback from the most recent workshop (the 'shared education' event) showing that 89% agreed or strongly agreed it had helped them to think about religious peace and toleration differently and 100% enjoyed the experience. Additionally, 83% agreed or strongly agreed that 'the experience of working with other young people from different religious backgrounds' was valuable, with students enthusiastic about making new friends and feedback comment such as 'I got to see a different culture and a different side of things', and 'it helped me understand a different point of view that can change mine.'

The RETOPEA project continues to develop, including a recent workshop with home educated children, many of whom are neuro-divergent and present particular challenges for traditional educational methodologies. We are currently exploring how to adapt the methodology to primary schools, bearing in mind the evidence that religious and other attitudes are formed early in life. We are also seeking to engage with groups active in peace education, bearing in mind the impact of transgenerational trauma in post-conflict societies and would welcome further contacts and collaborations in Northern Ireland.

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Recommendations

1. That high quality teaching and learning on religious (and non-religious) diversity be sufficiently resourced as a vital part of young people's education and training. Young people themselves are enthusiastic to learn about diverse traditions and experiences. Moreover, last year's Supreme Court judgement means there is now a legal imperative for the educational system in Northern Ireland to adapt to accommodate such aspirations. We therefore add our voice to those of speakers in a recent House of Lords debate (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2024-01-18/debates/AA74B35D-579A-4814-9363-ADF5056B5831/ReligiousEducationInSchools>) and seek to promote our approach as a creative and innovative means to shared ends.
2. That the Docutube workshop methodology should be widely adopted in both formal and informal education and training and should be promoted to senior school leaders and employers as having benefits that go well beyond the teaching of RE. The overwhelmingly positive feedback we have received demonstrates that the Docutube method brings considerable benefits to the young people involved in terms of actively engaging them in deep learning and supporting the development of a wide range of skills. The initial evaluation highlights the value of the Docutube method as a creative, hands-on approach to learning with history, stimulating critical thinking about the past and present and supporting team working and communication skills. Moreover participatory film-making is a powerful educational tool that helps young people gain an active understanding of how media content is produced and edited and how these processes impact on the way information is presented. Thereby they are made less vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation. The method can be adapted to circumstances and has proved successful with different age groups, with neuro-divergent students, and with a variety of modes of delivery and both in schools and with youth organisations.
3. Whether or not our specific methodology is adopted, young people should be given 'safe spaces' to discuss issues of religious diversity and toleration among themselves. Such conversations have significant potential to protect young people from extremist and sectarian influences. Contrary to initial concerns that participants would be reluctant to take part, or that they would offend or provoke each other by differing views, the conversations we have facilitated have consistently prompted enthusiastic and collaborative participation. This has occurred even between young people with very different convictions - for example between Christians and Muslims and between Catholics and Protestants in North Belfast. It is important though to establish clear ground rules and a neutral point of departure for discussion, such as that provided by the RETOPEA clippings collection. Adults should facilitate the conversation, but ensure young people are encouraged to express their own views. Our experience is that the shared task of making a Docutube enables participants to 'disagree well' by working out how to represent their different perspectives in the film, but

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there are other ways of replicating this experience, though for example jointly devising a podcast, PowerPoint presentation or creating a short piece of drama.

4. That curricula in Religious Education and History be adapted to allow time to stimulate students to apply examples of religious toleration and diversity to thinking about their own present-day contexts. Some teachers have said that while they see the value of the methodology, the demands of existing curricula leave no time for adoption. RETOPEA has demonstrated the potential of history to provide significant positive examples (as well as 'cautionary tales') to prompt 'outside the box' thinking about contemporary situations, but students need time and encouragement if these are to be fully understood and appropriately developed. It is important, moreover, not to impose particular readings of the past: young people should be prompted to learn with (rather than from) history.

5. That we affirm the benefits of engaging with youth culture in matters of religious toleration and diversity. There are legitimate concerns about the inappropriate online sharing of personal or controversial material on mobile phones. Accordingly, to date our workshops have operated using cameras and/or iPads provided by the project team or by schools themselves. Our observation, however, has been that such risks can be overstated, and that if young people are to be inspired to further the cause of religious toleration and peace, there needs to be some trust in their capacity to behave responsibly. We therefore recommend that the way forward lies in promoting awareness of risks, not least to themselves, and carefully monitoring their activity, but avoiding the kind of close adult control and supervision that limits their own creativity and enthusiasm.

Publications by our team include:

Maiden, J., Sinclair, S., Salmesvouri, P., Van Nieuwenhuysse, K. and Wolffe, J. 'Views of the Young: Reflections on the basis of European pilot studies' in Riho Altnurme, Elena Arigita and Patrick Pasture (eds.) (2022) *Religious Diversity in Europe: Mediating the Past to the Young*. London: Bloomsbury. pp. 33-50. ISBN 978-1350198623.

Wolffe, J., Maiden, J., Sinclair, S and Teller, K. 'Creative Shared Religious Education with Film-Making and History', *Religions* 15 (11), (2024) ISSN 2077-1444.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15111337>.

Sinclair, S., 'Religious Toleration, Peace and the Docutube method': Integrating filmmaking in religious and moral education', *British Journal of Religious Education* (2026), Special Issue: Integrating Technology in Religious and Moral Education,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01416200.2026.2614593>

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