The 'secular culture' of youth work training

Are JNC-recognised programmes in English universities equipping youth workers to work with diverse religious communities?

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THE YOUTHSCAPE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH

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Contents

Endorsements

Goldsmiths welcome this research on the coverage of religion, faith and spirituality in professional youth work training in universities and we were very pleased to support it. As a secular university working in partnership with a faith-based organisation, the project speaks to both secular and faith-based youth work qualifying programmes with a balanced perspective on the key issues and tensions. The research is important because it highlights the need for youth and community workers to be better equipped to work with diverse religious communities and has implications for all of us involved in the training of youth and community workers, including here at Goldsmiths. It recognises that religion and faith intersect with identity and oppression while drawing out the particular neglect of religion, faith and spirituality in the training of youth and community workers. We are examining our approach here at Goldsmiths and sincerely hope the research widely leads to recognition, action and change.

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Youthscape is based in Luton, a town rich with religious and spiritual diversity, where faith plays a significant role in the lives of many young people. As a JNC qualified youth-work practitioner, I therefore welcome this report's demonstration of the need for youth workers to be confident and competent at acknowledging, celebrating and intentionally engaging in conversation about faith with young people. As an organisation, we recognise the role that faith can play in the positive formation of young people's identity, and hope that this report might lead to a shift in perspective on faith within the youth work community. This is an opportunity for youth work course leaders across the country to reflect on religion, faith and spirituality, and consider how this significant dimension of young people's identity can be meaningfully incorporated further into education and training going forwards.

Jemimah Woodbridge
Director of Local Work, Youthscape, Luton.

The Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work welcome this report and the work of the authors in engaging with our members to evaluate the status of religious literacy in professionally qualifying courses across England. The youth and community work profession and many Higher Education institutions have a rich history of pioneers who drew their inspiration from religious faith and practices, and the contribution of religious communities to community-based youth work is evident in some of the largest and longest standing youth organisations. This research is an important reminder that these are not only historical realities but very much part of the present for many youth workers and the young people with whom they work. It is a wake-up call that, if it is our ambition to work sensitively and inclusively within diverse communities, we cannot afford to relegate religious literacy to the margins of our curriculum design. We look forward to working with colleagues to evaluate and implement the learning from this research.

Paul Fenton
National Officer, The Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work

Acknowledgements

Foreword

This authoritative publication has surfaced at a timely moment. Lucie Shuker and Naomi Thompson rightly acknowledge that the topography of youth work is once more in a heightened state of flux. During the last thirty or forty years the tectonic plates have shifted in ways few predicted. A once ascendent secular orthodoxy within the youth sector has, for good or ill, been, seriously undermined. First, by the collapse of the previously dominant local authority sector, which initially lost its sense of purpose and direction, then its funding. Second, as a consequence of the loss of once conspicuous secular youth work agencies and providers such as the boys' clubs, the political youth wings, school-based clubs and units managed by non-aligned community groups. As the authors rightly stress these shifts have resulted in faith-based organisations once again emerging as key providers and the pioneers of many, if not most, innovative formats. Almost alone amongst contemporary writers on youth work policy, the authors urge us to take these changes on board and genuinely address their implications for both the field and training sector.

In the following chapters, all of which draw liberally upon their own research, Naomi Thompson and Lucie Shuker articulate a compelling case for youth and community work education to take steps to ensure those entering the profession possess an intellectually coherent level of 'religious literacy'. A literacy sufficiently broad and academically rigorous to equip a practitioner to not only enter into dialogue with young people and adults on issues relating to faith, religion and spirituality but to work effectively with faith-based colleagues, 'as well as alongside or within faith-based organisations, many of whom are seeking to work with civil society' (p. 14).

In part, this research conveys a dispiriting portrait of inertia amongst some charged with educating the next generation of youth and community workers. Like shipwrecked mariners many have held fast to the flotsam and jetsam of a fast-vanishing practice model. This may prove risky, even fatal, for, as the authors show, given the existing configuration, we can no longer assume a secular culture holds sway within the field. In the light of this reality it is unwise for existing courses to continue operating on the basis that religion, faith and spirituality can be ignored or dealt with 'informally and implicitly' (p. 29).

Thompson and Shuker's seemingly 'modest proposal' that community and youth work courses should henceforth teach 'religious literacy' embodies a number of weighty implications.

If their 'modest proposal' was to be embraced, doing so would entail more than a perfunctory tinkering with the current offer. First, because it requires us to ask ourselves what other literacies might be of equal value when it comes to ensuring graduates are equipped to effectively educate those they work with and alongside. What about, for example, 'political literacy' or 'economic literacy'? What to include or exclude is not an issue to be debated here but it is one that inevitably arises as a consequence of this research.

Second, imparting religious literacy is not something that can be a student-led process. Nor can it be reduced to a white-board list of words and concepts offered up by a random collection of attendees. If key issues, core ideas and challenging concepts are not to be side-lined, it will require a taught course founded upon a broad syllabus and which avoids rote learning and that embraces dialogue, questioning and self-scrutiny.

That leads us to the third point, namely who might be competent to teach a group of undergraduate or postgraduate students 'religious literacy'? The breadth of the topic and the complexity of the subject matter, in my view, surely demands the task be entrusted to a qualified theologian. In which case one must acknowledge that few of the current training agencies have the staff to hand who are qualified to teach at the required level.

Finally, if as the authors urge, we adopt in whole or part a 'literacy' model it will entail a total or partial abandonment of the current competency model of youth and community work training and the creation of a far more demanding knowledge and subject based education. One that will require all parties to finally embark on the task of thinking deeply regarding what knowledge a well-educated community and youth worker requires to become an educator rather than a mere 'deliverer of programmes'.

Besides making a cogent case for the need for ensuring all youth and community work graduates are taught the essentials required for the acquisition of a 'religious literacy', Lucie Shuker and Naomi Thompson oblige us to re-assess the format and content of professional education. Hence the importance of this perceptive and challenging publication which rightly deserves the widest possible readership.
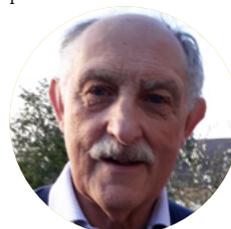
Tony Jeffs,
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Executive Summary

Context

Youth workers in the UK are professionally qualified if they have an undergraduate or postgraduate degree endorsed by the Joint Negotiating Committee for Youth and Community Work (JNC). Most professionally qualifying programmes are secular programmes in mainstream universities, even though several of these institutions have faith-based origins or ethos. Current National Occupational Standards (NOS) require youth workers to 'Explore the concept of values and beliefs with young people' (YW06) and 'Develop a culture and ethos that promotes inclusion and values diversity' (YW19). However, explicit references to religion, faith or spirituality are absent.

People's expressions and positions in relation to religion, faith and spirituality are not isolated from other elements of their lives, cultures and identities such as their race, gender and sexuality. Youth workers may well work within or alongside faith organisations (which form the largest sector of the youth work field) and all youth workers need to be equipped to work sensitively and inclusively with diverse communities. Religious literacy training should therefore equip youth workers to understand intersectional identities and respond to intersectional oppressions. However, religion has been found to be neglected in anti-oppressive practice, and a secular culture persists in universities.

In light of this, this research specifically explored the role of religion, faith and spirituality in youth work training on JNC-recognised youth work courses in England: seeking to understand where it is present and absent, how it is perceived and what the implications might be.

The research

An online semi-structured survey was sent to programme leaders for JNC-recognised youth work courses in England. In total, responses were received from 25 of the 27 institutions we approached, covering 30 of the 38 courses offered at the time of survey. In addition, the programme descriptions on the websites of 25 courses from 17 providers were analysed.

Key findings from the survey

- A minority of course leaders (37.9%) felt that the pre-2019 National Occupational Standard (YW14) to 'facilitate young people's exploration of their values and beliefs' sufficiently represented the place of religion, faith and spirituality in youth work practice.

- Most course leaders believed youth workers should proactively engage with issues of religion, faith and spirituality in their practice and none felt that youth workers should avoid engaging with this. However, further comments highlighted that this was complex, particularly where faith-based and secular values or practice were in tension.

- Over half of secular programmes had some ad hoc lectures and/or reference to religion, faith and spirituality during lectures on broader topics, but none identified it as a core part of the curriculum or had a core module on this. Nevertheless, many course leaders felt that religion, faith and spirituality were covered in broader modules on social justice.

- Courses are most likely to cover religious hate crime and youth work with religious/religiously diverse young people and communities. They are least likely to cover forms and models of specific faith-based youth work (e.g. Jewish, Muslim). It is encouraging that the majority say they cover youth work with religious/religiously diverse young people and communities – but there is clearly scope to highlight what faith-based youth work looks like in specific religious contexts.

- Further comments suggested that students were encouraged to raise issues relating to religion, faith and spirituality as part of their reflection on their own experiences and backgrounds rather than it being presented as a core topic. Where spontaneous discussion and dialogue are prioritised as the context for coverage of religion, faith and spirituality over more explicit recognition in curriculum content there is a chance that some experiences are unheard and that problematic views and assumptions from those with or without religious beliefs will go unchallenged.

- The religions most likely to feature in training are Christianity and Islam. Given the low number of course leaders who stated they cover Muslim youth work specifically, there is a clear risk that Islam is discussed primarily in the context of negative social issues like Islamophobia or extremism, with the risk that Muslims are positioned at the poles of either victim or perpetrator.

- Two thirds of course leaders (66.7%) reported that they thought students from religious backgrounds felt either comfortable or very comfortable discussing their faith in group settings on the programme, with a third reporting either that students felt uncomfortable, or very uncomfortable, or that they didn't know how they felt. It may therefore be unrealistic to expect discussion of personal values and beliefs to emerge naturally. At the very least, it puts more emphasis on the skills of course leaders, to overcome potential discomfort if it is likely to be a barrier to students sharing freely.

- Two-fifths (40%) of course leaders are not confident or not sure that their graduates are sufficiently equipped to engage with young people from diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds on issues of religion, faith and spirituality. This means there is no clear consensus across programme leaders that the NOS and the curricula of training programmes are sufficient to equip youth workers to work with diverse groups of young people around issues of religion, faith and spirituality.

Context and Literature Review

Introduction

This study was designed to explore if and how religion, faith and spirituality feature in professionally-qualifying youth work training in England. We conducted a survey with programme leaders and analysed programme webpages to explore what topics relating to religion, faith and spirituality are covered, in what context they feature (e.g. lectures, discussions or through fieldwork placements), and whether youth workers are being equipped to understand and work with diverse religious communities.

Youth workers in the UK are professionally qualified if they have an undergraduate or postgraduate degree endorsed by the Joint Negotiating Committee for Youth and Community Work (JNC). The National Occupational Standards (NOS) for youth work are UK-wide and must be met through JNC-recognised programmes in order for them to meet the validation requirements.[1] The NOS are reviewed every few years, and before 2012, reference to young people's spiritual development was included. Whilst explicit mention of young people's spiritual development was removed at this point, a standard requiring youth workers to 'facilitate young people's exploration of their values and beliefs' (YW14) was included. In 2019, partway through this study, when the NOS were reviewed again, the wording changed slightly to 'Explore the concept of values and beliefs with young people' (YW06). The current NOS also require youth workers to 'Develop a culture and ethos that promotes inclusion and values diversity' (YW19). Specific social justice issues are not highlighted in the NOS but youth work training programmes have a tradition of being underpinned by concerns about social justice and equalities, and programmes still cover these broad issues in depth, as our analysis revealed. Religion, faith and spirituality, however, were not found to be covered in depth on secular youth work training programmes.

Youth work in the UK is provided by local authorities, faith-based organisations and other community groups or charities. The faith-based youth work sector has existed for over 200 years and by the late 1990s was arguably the largest provider of youth work in the UK. This largely comprises Christian churches and organisations, but there are also established Jewish and Muslim youth work sectors in England. By contrast, the local authority youth work sector is much younger, having only been established substantially after the second world war. While both sectors have been impacted by funding cuts since 2010, statutory youth work has been much more significantly reduced.

There is an historic and ongoing separation of religious and secular youth work training, with faith-based organisations not always requiring their youth workers to have the JNC-validated professional qualification. Of the 27 higher education, JNC-validated youth work training providers in England as currently listed by the NYA, four offer Christian-specialist programmes, and the rest offer secular training programmes. There used to be a JNC-recognised Muslim youth work programme at the University of Chester and the JNC-qualifying programme provided by Newman University Birmingham used to offer optional pathways in Muslim youth work and Christian youth work where students could engage in specialist study whilst also studying alongside the wider cohort (Bardy et al, 2015). These specialisms have now ceased.

For the purposes of this study, we defined each youth work training programme as either a secular programme (i.e. religion, faith and spirituality may feature but are not dominant features of the programme, and the programme is not focused on a particular religious tradition) or as a single-faith programme (i.e. religion, faith and spirituality are dominant features of the programme, and the programme focuses on a particular religious tradition). As

well as applying these categories to the programmes ourselves, the programme leaders also identified with them consistently when asked in the survey. We also provided an option for courses to be identified as a 'multi-faith programme (i.e. religion, faith, non-religious beliefs and spirituality are dominant features of the programme, and the curriculum incorporates diverse religious viewpoints)' but no one chose this option.

Our study found that a secular culture exists on youth work training programmes in England (other than the Christian specialist programmes which focus primarily on Biblical theology). Our findings show that there are tensions and challenges in how religion, faith and spirituality are incorporated into programmes and how programme leaders think youth workers should engage with it in their practice. Where explicit content on religion, faith and spirituality is incorporated into university training programmes, it tends to focus on controversial issues such as radicalization. There is not consensus across programme leaders as to how the NOS relating to values and beliefs should be interpreted or whether their graduates are being sufficiently equipped to work with diverse religious communities. This suggests there is a need for an explicit recognition of the place of religion, faith and spirituality in youth work in the NOS and on secular training programmes.

Faith-based youth work

Youth work's origins are in the work of faith groups reaching out to their local communities to respond to social needs. Sunday Schools, for example began in the UK in the late 1700s as an outreach movement to teach young people to read and write (Thompson, 2018). Jewish youth clubs were largely developed to support young people from Jewish immigrant communities' social inclusion in the late 1800s (Jeffs and Spence, 2011; Marsh, 2015). Bright et al (2018: 198) argue that:

> *The largest sector of the UK youth work field... faith-based practice has had an influential role in youth work's history and development... it remains important to frame recognition of its significance across time and place, rather than as a 'poor relation' to the wider field.*

Whilst no clear figures exist for our current context, it was widely accepted by the late 1990s that faith-based youth workers outnumbered those working in secular settings. Brierley (2003) demonstrated that estimated numbers of full-time church-based youth workers in 1998 exceeded those employed by Local Authorities as calculated by the NYA in the same year. Similarly, Green (2006: 3) stated that 'in many Church of England dioceses the number of full time youth workers exceeds the number of statutory workers'. She recognised an increase in the 1990s in both the numbers of youth workers employed by churches and the numbers of these workers who were professional qualified. More recently, a report by YMCA England & Wales (2020) found that almost £1billion was cut from local authority youth services in England and Wales between 2010 and 2019, resulting in

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1. Education and Training Standards (ETS) committees in each nation of the UK validate their youth work qualifying programmes with JNC recognition and provide contextualisation documents for the interpretation and application of the NOS for the particular country (NYA, 2020). A Joint ETS committee (JETS) for the UK and Ireland with representation from each country's ETS oversees validation and standard-setting processes. In England, university training programmes receive their JNC-validation via the ETS committee that sits within England's National Youth Agency (NYA). Recognising these contextual differences, as well as the different religious context in each nation of the UK, we focused this study on England only.

the closure of 760 youth centres and the loss of 4,500 secular youth workers in less than a decade. Some commentators have suggested in recent years that Christian youth work is also at threat, pointing to the closure of specialist training programmes and a reduction in churches employing youth workers (Saunders, 2015). Whilst Christian youth work forms the largest and most visible part of the faith-based youth work sector, there are also established Muslim and Jewish sectors (Khan, 2006; Marsh, 2015). In light of the significant shrinkage of secular youth work, Jeffs (2015) suggests that the only way that it can survive is through the development of cooperative partnerships, including with the faith-based sector. There is some research evidence of these faith-based and secular partnerships emerging in recent years (Thompson, 2019).

While these sectors are distinct in important ways they both have a history of working with diversity. Faith-based youth work has a history of outreach beyond the religious community (e.g. the Sunday School movement's origins in offering basic education to young people in working class communities). Today, many faith-based youth workers and churches are working with young people who are not part of the church as well as those who are (Collins-Mayo et al, 2010; Thompson, 2018). Similarly, secular youth workers are engaging with young people from diverse religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. As such, despite an ongoing separation between secular and faith-based youth work education, the professional training of all youth workers needs to equip them to work with diverse religious communities.

Problematising the notion of secularity as a neutral position

A number of youth work scholars have highlighted the criticisms and suspicion of faith-based youth work made by its secular counterparts (Brierley, 2004: Bright et al, 2018; Green, 2010). Harris (2015) recognises that faith-based youth work and secular youth work come into conflict where there is a clash between 'religious' and 'secular' values. This is important in light of a tendency for critics of it ascribe value positions or 'agendas' to faith-based youth work without recognising, as Green (2010: 130) says that 'no youth workers are ideologically blank and devoid of personal values, and these will undoubtedly inform their work'. Green suggests that a common assumption persists of '[secular] youth work as having an ideologically neutral value base' with which faith-based practice is not compliant (2010: 131). The wariness of agendas in faith-based youth work is often couched in the assumption of secular youth work as somehow more neutral.

> *Secularism is largely accepted as an objective non-faith... In reality, secularism makes assumptions about God, the world and humanity just as any other worldview does. The absence of God from this worldview does not make it objective, nor does the presence of God in other worldviews make them more subjective.* (Clayton and Stanton, 2008: 114)

Both Brierley (2003) and Green (2010) point out that all youth workers engage in 'conversion'. They both interpret conversion as the desire to enable young people to make change in their lives and argue that it is the approach to conversion that can be

problematic, particularly where power is used inappropriately. Brierley (2003: 12) goes on to say:

> *Youth work that does not lead to change, or conversion, in young people's attitudes to self, others and society is ineffective practice. After all, why should public money be used to fund a service that does not bring about any change? Youth work enables young people to identify and bring about their own change and so, whether they like it or not, effective youth workers are in the business of conversion. Youth ministry is sometimes more open and specific about its 'change' agenda but, as long as it is undertaken ethically and with due regards to the needs of young people, then it should not be dismissed.*

There are different approaches and attitudes to professional ethics and boundaries within secular and faith-based provision. Peter Hart (2016) attributes this to the voluntary and vocational nature of much faith-based youth work. Bright et al (2018) recognise that faith-based youth work has, at times, been rightly subject to scrutiny, particularly around proselytization and some approaches to working with issues of gender and sexuality. However, secular youth work has also, at times, been rightly scrutinised for suppressing rather than empowering young people's engagement in social and political processes (Coburn, 2011; Garasia et al 2016). Bright et al (2018) recognise that problematic agendas can be implemented by the state, religious bodies or other stakeholders and that youth work is 'never fully neutral' but that effective youth work in all contexts promotes inclusion, empowerment and equality. However, there are, to some degree, different ideas about what these mean – and so even where there is common ground there is still the need for a certain depth of conversation and reflection to work out how these are applied and talked about in practice.

The assumption that the secular worldview is the neutral or superior one may lead to a lack of engagement with faith issues in professional youth work training and foster continued suspicion of faith-based practices. Both Green (2010) and Harris (2015) argue that youth work and the training of youth workers needs to facilitate a critical dialogue around issues of faith and values. Green (2010) argues that youth work should engage with young people's spiritual and political development alongside their social, emotional and physical development and she implies that to leave these to be 'haphazard processes' leaves young people more vulnerable. As such, it could be argued that incorporating multi-faith and multi-worldview perspectives into youth work training will prepare youth workers for engaging with diverse groups of young people more effectively than single-faith or singularly secular training programmes might. However, no such multi-faith approaches to youth work education currently exist.

Youth work training in higher education

As previously mentioned, there is a separation of faith-based or Christian and secular youth work training in England. Most professionally qualifying programmes are secular programmes in mainstream universities, even though several of these institutions have faith-based origins or ethos (Green, 2010). Alongside this,

there are a small number of specialist Christian programmes combining theological study with youth work training but no programmes specialising in other faith traditions. Universities have been widely recognised as 'bastions of secularity' in recent years (Jobani, 2016: 333) and this dominance has meant that university-level training in the public and social professions has also been dominantly secular (Dinham, 2018).

It has been recognised that youth workers need to engage in critical reflection on their own values and faith positions and to engage in critical dialogue with others, in order to become aware of the agendas they bring to their practice and to develop as ethically sound practitioners (Green, 2010; Harris, 2015). It has also been argued that university education is more able to offer youth workers a critically reflective education than the more competency-based vocational training used in pre-qualifying programmes because of their tradition and culture of focusing on encouraging critical thinking rather than on meeting competencies (Cooper, 2008; Holmes, 2008; Trelfa and Richmond, 2008). However, Cooper (2008) argues that there are complexities and tensions inherent in the process of 'teaching values' in universities, with some students having varied interpretations of course materials and content on youth work higher education programmes. However, if issues relating to religion, faith and spirituality are neglected in youth work training, it is likely these tensions will not become explicit or visible in order to be dealt with through critical reflection and dialogue.

Bardy et al (2015) reflect from their experience as youth work educators in Birmingham that students with faith tend not to discuss this with their peers during their secular youth work training. They recount their own experiences of working as lecturers on secular youth work programmes:

> ...although religious faith was discussed, there was still clear resistance by students to share their faith because of actual or perceived hostility by other students, and some tutors, as some Christian churches were perceived as being sexist, homophobic and undermining professional conditions of service. Students often kept quiet about their faith, rationalising that this was a personal matter despite the likelihood that their faith values would influence their youth work practice. Too often it was at the end of courses that tutors and other students discovered that another student had a religious faith. (Bardy et al, 2015: 101-2)

They argue that dialogue needs to be more explicitly and effectively facilitated between students with and without religious beliefs. However, they suggest the removal of spiritual development as a distinct National Occupational Standard for youth work in 2012 only reinforced the separation. Arguably, the dominance of secular training creates a dualism between 'professional' and 'faith-based' practice – associating professionalism with a secular approach.

Anti-oppressive practice

Anti-oppressive practice has been an explicit feature of university training programmes for the public and social professions,

including youth work, over recent decades. Research shows that religion can either be viewed as antithetical to anti-oppressive practice (e.g. through issues of indoctrination and fundamentalism) or as one of the core and intersectional issues of social justice and identity that needs attention within anti-oppressive practice, alongside issues such as race, gender, sexuality and disability (Collins and Wilkie, 2010; Vanderwoerd, 2016). Some scholars have argued that some social issues receive more attention than others under anti-oppressive practice, with religion a neglected issue in training and practice (Collins and Wilkie, 2010). Crisp and Dinham (2019a) argue that in social work, for example, there is minimum engagement with religion as part of anti-oppressive practice training. In research exploring the enforced disconnection between anti-oppressive practice and spirituality in higher education teaching in Canada, Shahjahan (2009: 121) describes a 'secular chilly climate' in universities. The research found that 'racially minoritized' academic teaching staff in particular are required to leave their 'spiritual selves at the door' and not bring engagement with spirituality into their teaching (ibid.: 121), reflecting how issues of exclusion may intersect in the secular culture of universities.

Research largely suggests that anti-oppressive practice, as taught in universities, has a secular character and that the neglect and, in some contexts, the suspicion of religion reflects this underpinning secular ideology. It is also recognised that there can be a complexity in interpreting and implementing anti-oppressive practice by religious professionals where certain issues such as those around gender and sexuality can be in tension with religious beliefs (Todd and Coholic, 2008; Vanderwoerd, 2016). Todd and Coholic (2008) argue that space for critical reflection on personal belief systems is needed within social work training. This arguably applies to related social professions including youth work. It is thus important that religion, faith and spirituality feature in youth work training as part of curriculum content and reflection on issues of anti-oppressive practice so that these complexities and tensions can be engaged with by trainee youth workers.

Religious literacy

There is a global recognition that university training for students qualifying to work in the public and social professions needs to develop cultural competency in graduates in order that they can work effectively with diverse cultural, ethnic and religious groups (Larson and Bradshaw, 2017; Levin-Keini and Ben Shlomo, 2017). The need for cultural competency in the West is a response to a recognition that minoritized groups face barriers to accessing mainstream public and social services (Smith, Jennings and Lakhan, 2014).

Over recent years, Dinham (2018) has argued that people working in the public professions need to develop a 'religious literacy' specifically in relation to engaging sensitively and effectively with diverse religious groups. Dinham and colleagues argue that training for the public professions is largely not equipping graduates with religious literacy (ibid.; Crisp and Dinham, 2019b). Dinham (2018: 83) has also noted the separation of religious and secular university education including in vocational training for the social professions, arguing that there is a 'bracketing off' of religion into theology departments whilst mainstream

training largely neglects it. In a review of social work training in universities, Crisp and Dinham (2019a: 1544) found that 'Religion and belief appear briefly and incoherently and are often deprioritised, unless particularly problematic' suggesting that coverage of religion on secular programmes may be dominated by negative framings. Dinham and Shaw (2017) argue that the dominance of secular education and lack of competence in religious literacy starts in school. This is evidenced by a decline in the number of secondary school pupils in the UK taking Religious Studies at exam level, and fewer schools offering the subject, despite being required to in law (Commission on Religious Education, 2018). This argument is reinforced by international researchers with a consensus across several studies that more space for critical reflection and dialogue on religion and belief needs to start in school (von Brömssen, Ivkovits and Nixon, 2020; Hannam et al, 2020).

In a review of regulatory frameworks across the health and social care professions, Crisp and Dinham (2019b) found that while religion and belief do feature briefly across most of these frameworks, there is no requirement for critical reflection. Crisp and Dinham (2019c) also engaged in a review of UK National Occupational Standards across public and private industries and found that acknowledgement of religion and belief was usually tokenistic. Whilst youth work did not emerge in Crisp and Dinham's (2019c) analysis of NOS, their search via the keywords 'religion' and 'religious' was limited. Whilst the current 'values and beliefs' terminology in the youth work NOS was not flagged up in their analysis, neither would the previous reference to working with young people's 'spiritual development' have been flagged and included.

There is a clear argument for youth workers to develop a religious literacy in order that they can effectively work with diverse religious groups. They should also be equipped to work with faith-based youth workers, as well as alongside or within faith-based organisations, many of whom are seeking to engage with civil society (Thompson, 2019). Without a level of religious literacy, interventions with young people may be misplaced and overly punitive as with some of the interventions

around the Prevent agenda (Pihlaja and Thompson, 2017). Interventions might also not occur where they are needed. For example, Mirza (2010) found that young Muslim women may be let down by services where professionals' inertia and fear of appearing intolerant leads to them not following up on issues of concern, such as around forced marriage, female genital mutilation and other abuses. In these examples of interventions with Muslim young women, ethnicity, gender and religion intersect in ways that affect how and whether they receive support. Religious literacy is essential if youth workers are to move beyond dominantly negative framings of religion in order to challenge problematic and stigmatising discourses which have been found to marginalise some groups of religious young people, such as the suspicion of Muslim young people and communities that is reinforced by the Prevent agenda (Pihlaja and Thompson, 2017). Finally, if religious literacy is neglected in youth work training then those of different faiths and worldviews (including the non-religious) will lose an opportunity to understand each other's beliefs and practices. Inter-faith dialogue and understanding as well as faith-secular dialogue, arguably, should be part of youth work training if youth workers are to be fully equipped to work with diverse groups, whether or not they subscribe to a religion themselves.

To conclude, people's expressions and positions in relation to religion, faith and spirituality are not isolated from other elements of their lives, cultures and identities such as their race, gender and sexuality. Religious literacy training should therefore equip youth workers to understand intersectional identities and respond to intersectional oppressions. The broader notion of cultural competence might encompass these issues but, as we have seen, religion has been found to be neglected in anti-oppressive practice, and a secular culture persists in universities and in youth work training. Therefore, a particular focus on the religious literacy of youth workers is needed. Youth work training curricula should not neglect issues of religion, faith and spirituality, as youth workers may well work within or alongside faith organisations, as the largest sector of the youth work field, and all youth workers need to be equipped to work sensitively and inclusively with diverse communities.

The Research

Research methods

The main method of this study was an online semi-structured survey sent to programme leaders of JNC-recognised courses in England. Alongside this, we conducted an analysis of programme descriptions on the websites of course providers. This analysis looked at front-facing content (that which was visible on the main course page for potential applicants). These pages usually included a brief course 'blurb' and an outline of the modules and structure. Some pages contained more information than others. We were unable to find webpages for all courses and were aware that some of these courses were closing and therefore no longer taking new applicants. In total, we analysed the pages of 25 programmes from 17 providers.

In order to distribute the survey, we contacted the named programme leaders for the 38 JNC-recognised programmes in England in 2019, according to the NYA's list of these as published via their website. Twenty eight of these listed programmes were undergraduate level and ten were postgraduate. Of the postgraduate programmes, there appeared to be some double listings for a small number of the programmes that had exit points at both Postgraduate Diploma and at Masters level.

The programmes on the NYA list represented 27 different Higher Education Institutions offering JNC-recognised courses in England. Of these institutions, 22 were mainstream universities, four were specialist Christian institutions, and one was a specialist youth and community work institution offering secular programmes. Our aim was for the survey to reach all of these 27 providers. As such, we contacted the programme leaders directly and sent three reminders over the one-year period in which the survey remained open. We also sent the call to take part in the survey out via the mailing list of the Professional Association of Lecturers in Youth and Community Work (TAG/PALYCW) in case course leaders had changed from those listed. This mailing list reaches all subscribing institutions offering JNC-recognised courses in the UK. In total, the survey received 30 responses from 25 of the English institutions (21 mainstream universities, three Christian institutions, and the specialist youth and community work provider offering secular programmes). One of the two institutions it did not reach (a Christian provider) had closed. One of the 30 responses was from an additional university in Northern Ireland.

The size of the sample was limited by the number of providers of JNC-recognised programmes in England, but survey participants engaged well with the open questions, providing rich qualitative data alongside the quantitative data. Having gathered data about 30 of the 38 possible programmes and 25 of the 27 institutions contacted, we are confident that the research provides a robust, if not comprehensive, picture of religion, faith and spirituality on JNC-recognised programmes in England.

Findings:
Part One

Website analysis findings

Of the 25 programmes included in the analysis of course webpages, 10 were postgraduate programmes and 15 were undergraduate. Four of these were the Christian programmes (one postgraduate and three undergraduate) from the three Christian-specialist providers. Aside from these Christian programmes, there was little mention of religion, faith and spirituality or related issues in the course descriptions and outlines on webpages relating to youth work qualifying programmes.

The analysis identified only one secular programme advertising that it had a core module relevant to religion, faith and spirituality. This module expects students to reflect on their own backgrounds and experiences in relation to others and the module content directly referred to 'values and beliefs' as central to the module. There were two secular programmes identified with optional modules or pathways related to religion, faith and spirituality. One of these was a programme with a number of optional pathways to specialise in particular areas of practice, one of which was 'radicalization'. Whilst the webpage doesn't mention religion specifically in relation to this pathway, radicalization discourse is clearly linked to discussions of Islamist terrorism and this pathway almost certainly takes account of that debate, whether to critique or reinforce it. The other programme had two optional modules relating to 'faith-based youth work' and 'religion and belief in practice', as part of module choices in years two and three of the programme. Where issues related to religion, faith and spirituality were

mentioned on the webpages of other secular programmes as part of broader modules, it was in all three instances 'radicalization' or 'extremism' that were mentioned. This suggests that where religion, faith and spirituality do feature, it may be largely in terms of these negative connotations.

Across the secular programmes, there was explicit mention of social justice, anti-oppressive practice, equalities, inclusion and/or discrimination as part of programme outlines and module content on their webpages and it is possible that religion, faith and spirituality might be covered in these broader modules. However, where these modules specify content, other markers of identity such as sexuality, gender and race are referred to but not religion. A few programmes also have whole modules on specific social justice issues as they relate to race, gender or sexuality. For example, the programme with optional modules on faith-based youth work has a core module that all students undertake on 'race and racism'. Whilst this module may well touch on intersectional issues such as religion, it suggests that some topics are more explicitly covered on the core curricula of youth work training programmes than religion, faith and spirituality, which are largely absent across secular programmes. Despite faith-based youth work being the largest part of the sector, there was only one webpage that mentioned faith organisations as a potential placement setting, and no references to these contexts in terms of career outcomes on any of the secular programmes' webpages that list examples of these.

The webpages of the four Christian-specialist programmes that offered the JNC-recognised qualification were all focused on Christianity, with Biblical theology as their core content. Two of these programmes' webpages make explicit reference to coverage of topics relating to broader social justice issues such as 'inclusion and equality' and 'power and oppression'. It is not clear whether religious diversity beyond Christianity is covered in these modules. While module content was less clear on their website, the other Christian provider which runs an undergraduate and postgraduate programme referred, in their survey response relating to their BA programme, to a 'diversity module which includes major world faiths, non-religious world views and issues such as race, gender, sexuality and class'. This suggests there is some coverage of broader faith perspectives.

Overall, from the website analysis, it appeared that most of the secular programmes did not cover issues relating to religion, faith and spirituality in any depth, if at all. The specialist Christian programmes were focused on work in Christian contexts - though some Christian organisations will be working with diverse groups of young people. There was some reference to broad issues of social justice on these Christian programmes but it was largely unclear if religious diversity is covered within these programmes. The absence of religion, faith and spirituality in the content advertised on webpages of secular programmes suggests that, whether it is covered in reality or not, it is not viewed as in demand by potential applicants. The website analysis raises questions about the levels of religious literacy that students will develop on both secular and specialist youth work training programmes and how equipped graduates will be to work with diverse religious communities.

Survey findings

The survey elicited 30 responses representing 24 undergraduate and six postgraduate JNC-recognised programmes from 26 different institutions. Four of the responses related to single-faith programmes based at Christian institutions (one postgraduate and three undergraduate programmes). The other 26 responses were secular programmes from 22 institutions (five postgraduate and 21 undergraduate programmes). Whilst we had approached directly only English institutions, one of the undergraduate secular programmes was based in Northern Ireland, who likely received the survey through the call sent out via the TAG/PALYCW mailing list. We did not exclude this response from our analysis. Whilst the majority of respondents were working on broadly secular programmes, 55.2% identified their personal faith perspective as being Christian. 17.2% identified as Atheist and 13.8% as Humanist. Other respondents identified as Buddhist, Hindu, Agnostic and other.

The survey asked whether respondents thought that the pre-2019 National Occupational Standard (YW14) to 'facilitate young people's exploration of their values and beliefs' sufficiently represents the place of religion, faith and spirituality in youth work practice (the survey was designed and opened before the new NOS were released in 2019 with slightly different wording around values and beliefs). 37.9% of respondents responded 'yes' to this question; 34.5% responded 'no'; and 27.6% were 'not sure'. This demonstrates that the majority of course leaders either feel it is not sufficient or are uncertain.

Participants were also asked to choose a statement that best reflected how they think youth workers should engage with religion, faith and spirituality in their practice. Half (50%) thought that 'youth workers should proactively engage with issues of religion, faith and spirituality in their practice', followed by 23.3% agreeing that 'youth workers should only engage with religion, faith and spirituality when issues are raised by young people'. A minority (13.3%) also thought that they should proactively engage but only 'within the context of clear limits and/or guidance'. Two people (6.7%) were not sure and two (6.7%) chose the 'other' category: one explaining that 'it depends on the context in which the youth worker is employed' and one raising issues with the wording used in the question and its possible responses. No respondents felt that 'youth workers should avoid engaging with religion, faith and spirituality'. Some respondents raised issues with the question in their explanation for their answers. Use of the word 'should' was identified as problematic given the need for youth work to start with young people's agenda, as well as an issue with how such engagement might be approached (such as through proselytization). Another participant suggested that it is more complex than an 'either/or' answer. The responses demonstrate that respondents broadly agreed that youth workers should engage with issues of religion, faith and spirituality but recognised tensions in how this is sometimes undertaken.

The survey asked a number of questions about how religion, faith and spirituality are covered (or not) in JNC-recognised programmes. When asked about the specific topics covered, respondents identified with multiple categories.

Which of the following topics relating to Religion, Faith and Spirituality feature in the programme?
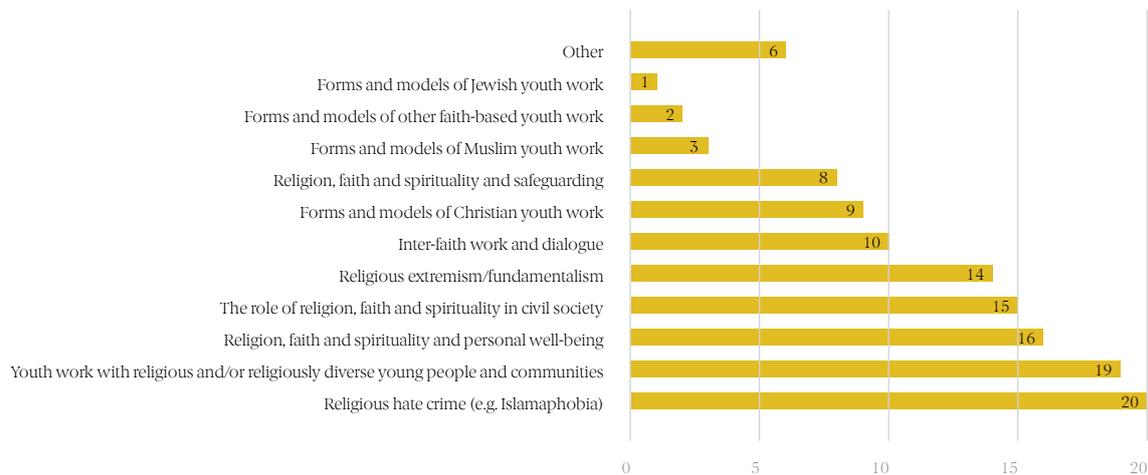
Figure 1 - Topics covered relating to Religion, Faith and Spirituality

The responses to this question reveal a variety of ways that religion, faith and spirituality are framed and covered in youth work programmes. More generalised issues such as hate crime, diversity, wellbeing and extremism appear to receive more coverage than specific examples and models of faith-based youth work. Of the religious traditions with established youth work traditions, Christianity is most explicit on programmes. This in part reflects the four Christian-specialist training programmes in the survey as well as potentially reflecting that over half of the programme leaders who responded identified as Christians themselves. It also likely reflects the size of the Christian sector and its place as the dominant religion in the UK. There is little coverage of Jewish and Muslim youth work across the programmes despite these also having established youth work fields in the UK. The six responses to the 'other' category included further explanations of categories chosen and topics specific to the Christian programmes such as 'missiology and ecclesiology'. As well as the topics covered, the survey also asked in what context these topics emerge on the programmes.

In what context do Religion, Faith and Spirituality feature in the programme?
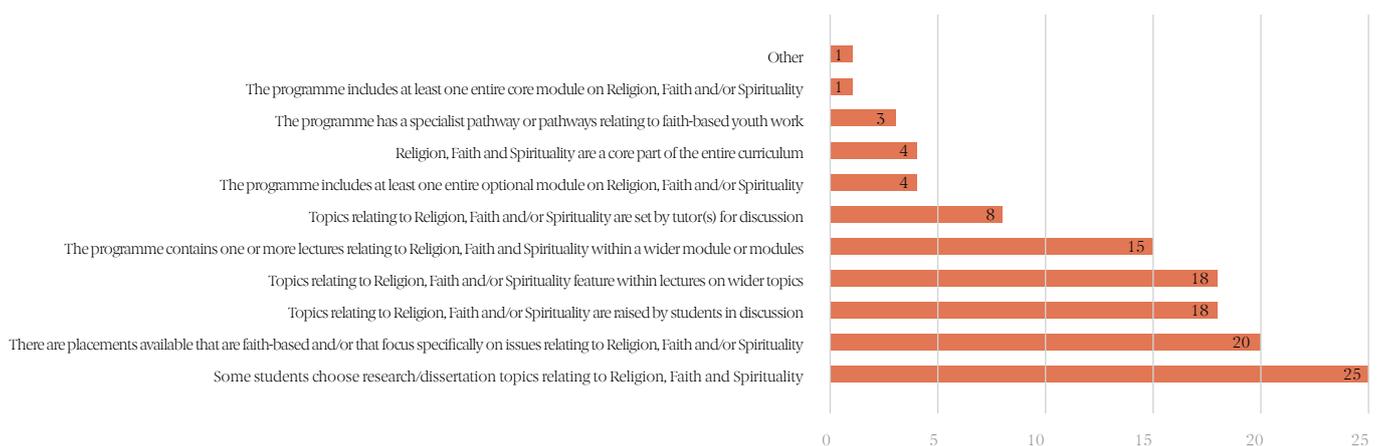
Figure 2 – The context in which Religion, Faith and Spirituality feature on programmes

Only four programmes identified religion, faith and spirituality as a core part of their curricula and these were the four Christians-specialist programmes. Across secular programmes, the dominant contexts in which religion, faith and spirituality were covered were through students' dissertations, placements and student-led discussions, rather than as part of core teaching. This suggests that some students do want to engage with religion, faith and spirituality and are choosing to do so in dissertations, placements and discussion. However, it is not included as core content or as a significant part of explicit teaching on secular programmes.

Over half of secular programmes did report having some ad hoc lectures and/or reference to religion, faith and spirituality during lectures on broader topics. None of the secular programmes identified religion, faith and spirituality as a core part of the curriculum and none of them stated that they had a core module on religion, faith and spirituality. Two of the secular programmes had a specialist pathway relating to religion, faith spirituality and three programmes had at least one optional module relating religion, faith and spirituality. There may have been some issues with interpretation in relation to the presence of a specialist pathway as it is clear from their other chosen categories, answers to other questions and website content that one of the programmes claiming this actually has two optional modules which run according to demand rather than a specialist pathway.

Respondents were also asked which religious perspectives feature most frequently on their programmes.

When religion and belief are taught/discussed on the programme, which perspectives frequently feature?
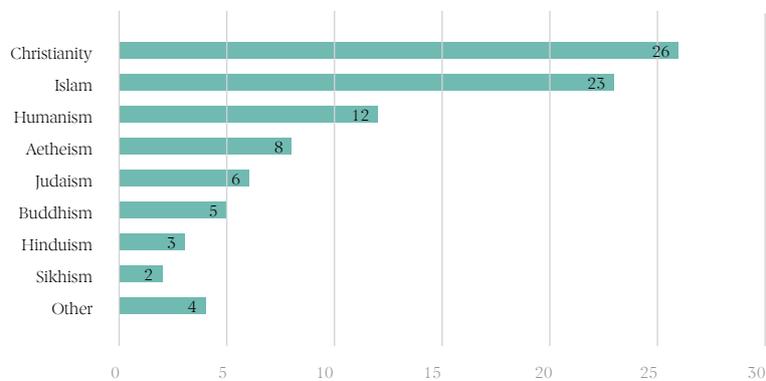
Figure 3 – The religious perspectives that frequently feature on programmes

The responses show that Christian and Muslim perspectives feature most dominantly on programmes as well as that non-religious perspectives receive attention alongside religious ones. As with figure 1 above, Christianity has more coverage than other religious perspectives, affected in part by the four responses from Christian-specialist programmes. It is notable that a frequent coverage of Islam was identified and yet only three programmes stated that they cover Muslim youth work (see figure 1 above). This suggests that Islam features in relation to some of the other popular topics identified in figure 1, potentially in relation to issues such as hate crime (Islamophobia) and extremism, but not in relation to Muslim youth work. If Islam features in these more negative contexts at the expense of exploring the practices and models of Muslim youth work, then a rebalancing may be needed to ensure alternative perspectives are shared that do not reinforce popular framings of Islam as problematic or deficient. The question about which perspectives feature most frequently was followed by a question asking respondents why they thought the particular perspectives they identified feature the most.

Why do you think these perspectives feature?
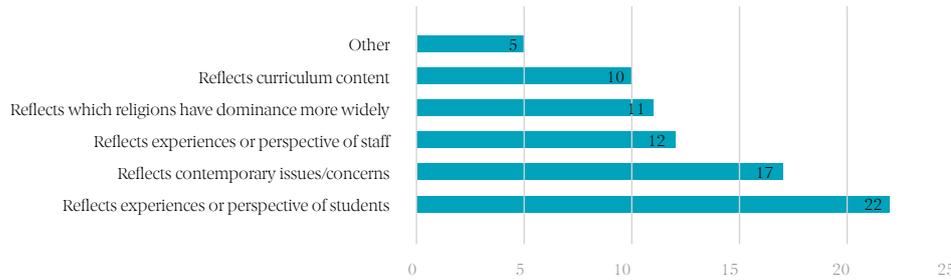
Figure 4 – Why particular perspectives feature in programmes

The most common answer was that the particular perspectives feature because they reflect the experience and backgrounds of students. Respondents also identified that it reflects contemporary issues and concerns and this may relate to the coverage of issues like Islamophobia and extremism. The third most common answer was that it reflects the experiences and backgrounds of staff and this may relate particularly to the frequent coverage of Christianity which 55% of survey respondents identified as their personal faith position. It is encouraging in some sense that the coverage of religious perspectives is, first and foremost, student-led. However, not including religion, faith and spirituality significantly in core teaching (see figure 2) means the perspectives that emerge will reflect dominant experience and not a diversity of perspectives. This exclusion risks leaving to chance that students are equipped to work with diverse religious communities. It is arguably important for them to gain knowledge and understanding of the more marginalised perspectives.

The survey asked how comfortable the programme leaders thought that students from religious backgrounds feel to discuss their faith in group settings on the programme. In contrast with the experience of Bardy et al, 66.7% of respondents answered either 'comfortable' or 'very comfortable', with 16.7% answering 'uncomfortable' or 'very uncomfortable' and the remaining 16.7% saying they were 'unsure'. The survey also asked how often students spontaneously raise issues of religion, faith and spirituality during lectures, seminars and tutorials. The majority said this happened 'sometimes' (63.3%) with 26.7% of respondents replying 'frequently' and 10% saying 'rarely'. No one said this never happened. We do not know how students themselves would respond to this question, but this does suggest that some students are comfortable enough to raise the topic, even where it is not explicitly taught.

The survey asked how well-equipped respondents felt their graduates are to engage with young people from diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds on issues of religion, faith and spirituality. A minority (6.7%) felt their graduates were 'very well equipped' and 53.3% felt they were 'sufficiently equipped'. However, 10% felt they were 'insufficiently equipped' and 6.7% felt they were 'very poorly equipped', with a substantial proportion of respondents (23.3%) being 'unsure' how well equipped their graduates were. These responses demonstrate that while 60% of course leaders feel their graduates are sufficiently equipped to engage with young people from diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds on issues of religion, faith and spirituality, two-fifths are not confident that this is the case.

Findings:
Part Two

In the sections below, we consider key findings that emerge from the survey responses. We explore the qualitative responses to the survey's open questions in detail, linking them back to the quantitative data outlined above.

The secular culture of youth work training programmes

The programmes that were not faith-based recognised the secular nature of their programmes and some of them were keen to justify that secular programmes had been developed because they were more generic, had broader appeal and were therefore more attractive to students. Some programme leaders specifically articulated why secular programmes had been developed at universities with faith-based roots and/or ethos:

> *Although the University has a faith base and strong links to the Church of England... we opted for a generic secular programme because this appears to fit the demand and is most likely to recruit.*
> (Christian respondent 3/secular programme)

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> *[The] university is an ecumenical university and faith is an element of the wider university, however, in terms of the JNC course we do teach about and explore youth work and faith but it is not a dominant feature and can change year to year depending on the mix of cohort and their interests.*
> (Atheist respondent 4/secular programme)

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Another respondent explained that having previously offered Christian and Muslim youth work pathways on their BA programme, they had shifted from offering faith-based pathways and module options in recent years, although they did not specify why this was the case.

> *The programme moved away from the Christian and Muslim Pathways routes that were offered until the 2014 validation. Instead focussing on one JNC with a spirituality option module. That specific module, however, ceased after this academic year.*
> (Humanist respondent 2/secular programme)

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These secular courses in (non-specialist) institutions with a faith ethos did not cover religion, faith and spirituality in detail and sensed, often from experience, there wasn't a great demand for this. However, when viewed in light of figure 2 above, it appears that students are choosing to explore religion, faith and spirituality through their dissertations, placements and in discussion, despite it not being a dominant feature of their teaching.

The absence of perspectives on religion, faith and spirituality in explicit teaching may contribute to the feeling that students are not always comfortable to discuss their faith positions among some programme leaders. A third of survey respondents felt that their students of faith either were not comfortable to discuss it or they didn't know. One of the respondents explained that a reason they may not be comfortable was because 'there tends to be a secular culture on the programme' (Christian respondent 1/secular programme). This statement implicitly recognises that secularity has its own culture, and other respondents also problematised notions that assume secularity to be a neutral or 'progressive' position, which are discussed later.

Arguably, the absence of religion, faith and spirituality in core teaching may reinforce it as a taboo or uncomfortable topic, as well as reinforcing the sense that secularity is the dominant frame. The findings outlined below suggest this does not equip youth workers with the religious literacy to work with diverse religious groups.

Christianity and Islam are covered most frequently – with disproportionate negative representation in explicit coverage on secular programmes

As already discussed, the survey data suggests that where Islam is covered in course material it is more often represented in relation to negative issues or deficit perspectives (extremism, and hate crime) than in relation to the contribution of Muslim youth workers to the sector. This resonates with Crisp and Dinham's (2019a) finding on secular social work programmes that where religion features, it is usually with negative connotations. The coverage of radicalization and extremism, as well as hate crime and exclusion of religious groups, in explicit teaching as shown in the survey data and the website analysis suggests that in some cases there may be a dominant problematisation of religion, faith and spirituality in youth work training where it is explicitly covered, with the positive aspects and actions of faith and religious groups less often covered.

This was reinforced in the qualitative answers to open questions on the survey with 'Islamophobia' and 'radicalization' both mentioned as some of the only specific examples of teaching around religion, faith and spirituality. Together these issues position Muslims as either victims or perpetrators of violence and exclusion, and there was some recognition of the potential impact of this kind of framing in youth work training, even where these are not directly attributed to religion. For example, one respondent stated 'We also have a pathway dedicated to Radicalisation which explores working with oppressive and potentially damaging values and beliefs in young people (not necessarily related to religion)' (Christian respondent 2/secular programme).

Not all examples were negative and some were clearly designed to challenge problematic assumptions, reflecting a more balanced coverage on some programmes. For example, one respondent commented 'we always spend half a day at a local mosque, with the Chief Imam, talking about its place within the community' (Christian respondent 12/secular programme).

An emphasis on personal beliefs and values over broader expressions of religion, faith and spirituality

None of the secular programmes stated that they had core modules on religion, faith and spirituality and only four of the secular programmes stated that they had a pathway and/or optional modules relating to religion, faith and spirituality (see discussion under figure 2 above). The survey asked respondents how they interpreted the National Occupational Standard (YW14) to 'facilitate young people's exploration of their values and beliefs'. Despite, having stated that they did not have a core module relating to religion, faith and spirituality, one respondent explained that there was a module focused on personal values and beliefs and this also reflected the information on their website.

[T]he programme has a module that allows / encourages students to explore their own personal journeys, values and beliefs that underpin their community and youth work practice as well as the importance of values and beliefs in the lives of others.
(Humanist respondent 1/secular programme)

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It is notable that this core module drawing on values and beliefs was not identified as relevant to religion, faith and spirituality. Another programme leader explained that while they don't have a specific module on religion, faith and spirituality, 'We have sessions in various modules which look at faith based youth work as a specialism in youth work' (Christian respondent 9/ secular programme, Northern Ireland). Other programmes also identified that personal faith and beliefs are part of the reflection encouraged in some programme modules. One programme leader explained that reflective group work is central to their programme and that NOS YW14 is met through this, as well as in core modules on equalities issues and optional modules relating to faith-based practice.

This is central to the experiential approach in the delivery of the course. Their values and beliefs are constantly explored in core modules such as weekly group work and specific modules in equality areas and faith-based community work and youth work.
(Buddhist respondent 1/secular programme)

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These comments suggest that reflecting on religion, faith and spirituality may be more central to some core modules than appears from the quantitative data and website analysis alone. However, it also appears that coverage of religion, faith and spirituality in core modules is entirely based on personal reflection rather than taught through theory and research, with such explicit teaching reserved for the occasional lectures in broader modules on equalities and social justice or in the rare optional modules that offer students the choice to focus on religion, faith and spirituality in more depth. Leaving such specialisation to choice means that not all students will have the religious literacy to work with diverse religious groups, and that they can effectively opt out of engaging with these issues in any depth, or from learning about perspectives beyond their own.

Religion, faith and spirituality as part of broader teaching on social justice and anti-oppressive practice

When explaining how they interpret NOS YW14 around values and beliefs, a large proportion of respondents explained that this issue is covered in broader modules, particularly those relating to equalities, social justice, anti-oppressive practice and inclusion – alongside students' fieldwork practice and reflection. There was a sense among programme leaders that through broader teaching on anti-oppressive practice and encouragement for students to reflect on themselves and their placement experiences, that discussion and understandings of 'values and beliefs' naturally emerge. There were a number of comments suggesting this from programme leaders with a range of personal religious identities, examples of which follow.

Directly through the teaching of ethics, and the implementation of anti-oppressive practice throughout the programme. Students are encouraged to reflect on their values and those of others drawing on placement experience.
(Hindu respondent 1/secular programme)

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Values and beliefs encompass faith and spirituality, but not exclusively and we interpret this more widely in terms of Anti-Oppressive Practice, Social Justice etc. In addition, we ask students to engage with the politics of everyday life, and because of our location we have a number of students from different faiths - most often Christian and Muslim.
(Christian respondent 12/secular programme)

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The programme has three professional practice placements in which students are encouraged to explore a range of strategies, tools to engage young people in facilitated conversations. There are modules at each level which provide theoretical underpinning including ethics, values and reflective education and social change and diversity and difference.
(Respondent identified their religious perspective as 'other'/secular programme)

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Within this approach religion, faith and spirituality are presented as more subtle components of teaching, integrated within a broader understanding of diversity, social justice and inclusion. Specific learning in this area tended to be described as emerging from fieldwork experiences rather than formal lectures. Students were encouraged to raise issues relating to religion, faith and spirituality from their own experiences and backgrounds rather than it being presented as a core topic. This could mean that students are only equipped to understand more dominant perspectives in their group and existing experience, and that marginalised voices and groups are missed where students don't encounter these on placements.

Unlike other aspects of identity, religion, faith and spirituality are covered informally rather than in core module content

Developing the point above, it appears that religion, faith and spirituality are largely covered informally and implicitly rather than being a significant feature as a core teaching topic. Fieldwork placements were a prevalent theme when explaining how NOS YW14 is met, as well as students' reflection on themselves and their practice.

This standard would be met predominantly through fieldwork practice. Students would be exploring their own values and beliefs through the dialogue and inputs contained within the curriculum before engaging with young people and communities. Students are regularly encouraged to explore their own ontological and philosophical stand points through reflection, debate, and study. This would be in the anticipation that they would involve the people they work with in such dialogue.
(Christian respondent 1/secular programme)

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Discussion and dialogue are prioritised as learning contexts, though this is not always comfortable for everyone

There was a confidence among some programme leaders that the diverse backgrounds of staff and students ensured that religion, faith and spirituality would emerge in student reflections and in group discussion. Several programme leaders suggested that NOS YW14 was covered through group discussion. One respondent stated that they 'expect students to be able to explore and discuss spirituality and what spirituality might look like in practice from religious and non-religious perspectives' (Humanist respondent 2/secular programme). Another stated that 'The team are from diverse backgrounds including faith, which supports the diverse dialogue' (Atheist respondent 5/secular programme).

When we recall that one third of respondents felt that religious students were either very uncomfortable, uncomfortable or they didn't know how comfortable they were to discuss their faith in group settings, it may be unrealistic to expect personal values and beliefs to emerge in dialogue. At the very least, it puts more emphasis on the skills of course leaders, to overcome potential discomfort if it is likely to be a barrier to students sharing freely. When explaining their responses to this question, some respondents explained that dialogue was positive and important even where discomfort was present.

Students of faith report that they are very comfortable to discuss this, but there is a counter issue here, students from non-faith positions appear to have many more issues about feeling comfortable to discuss their viewpoint, especially if perceived as being critical of faith. However, this is a fluid state and does not stop debate from emerging.
(Atheist respondent 3/secular programme)

Many students come from faith backgrounds or have been working in an agency that is faith based (e.g. church) or faith valued (e.g. YMCA). The positive promotion of the role of faith and multi faith groups often comes up in discussion and lectures, additionally students often find Faith Groups as examples of 'good practice'. There are some students who wrestle with concepts of Faith and youth work, but this is encouraged as it forms a good critical discussion.
(Christian respondent 2/secular programme)

We run our sessions using a dialogic pedagogy, so much of students' learning is based on the exchange of ideas and open discussion of their experiences. We are inclusive and model anti-oppressive practice, so students do feel comfortable in sharing their perspectives. I only put comfortable (as opposed to very comfortable) as there are clear clashes of values between some faith-based positions and the youth and community work profession, and discussions about individuals' positions on these can be difficult.
(Atheist respondent 2/secular programme)

Being a very diverse student body within a diverse locality, religion is often one of the many aspects from which students explore their work/study.
(Humanist respondent 2/secular programme)

It was clear that fieldwork placements were not viewed as operating in isolation but that course tutors were also proactively encouraging students to use self-reflection as a key medium for exploring beliefs and values, as part of broader reflection about themselves and others.

We interpret this as a more holistic perspective of supporting people to understand themselves and what they believe are important values to live by, this includes faith but is not limited to faith. Thinking is more in line with asking critical questions of self about who you are and how you act in the world.
(Atheist respondent 4/secular programme)

Whilst the complexity and intersectionality of the issues presents a strong justification for not separating out religion, faith and spirituality, it was clear from the website analysis we conducted that some issues of inclusion and social justice, such as race and gender, are covered more explicitly. It is not clear why religion, faith and spirituality are perceived to be of less relevance in terms of formal teaching.

Several *respondents suggested that they were able to facilitate safe spaces for discussions around personal faith, as in the examples below.*

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We invest a lot of time in supporting students to be expressive in the classroom and provide safe spaces to be vocal about issues.
(Christian respondent 8/secular programme)

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The programme team place a lot of emphasis on creating a safe environment for students to explore and be aware of self in relation to others. That said conversations about difference including discussion about faith can be uncomfortable.
(Respondent identified their religious perspective as 'other'/secular programme)

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However, as seen in the comment above, there was a recognition that discomfort is not necessarily antithetical to the idea of a space being 'safe', and that this safety should enable students to experience difficult emotions or conversations, in a positive way. Some respondents outlined that challenging and critical perspectives are an essential part of such dialogue, as in the example below.

We do not merely accept but challenge all views and perspectives and we insist that the focus is the principles and values of community development and youth work. People who have strong religious views especially around their homophobic beliefs find it very uncomfortable.
(Atheist respondent 1/secular programme)

Other respondents suggested that students with faith might anticipate feeling excluded by others during group discussion. The extract below outlines an example of how faith and religious perspectives are sometimes excluded from discussion, even where they intersect with other social justice issues. The respondent was explaining why they had said that students of faith were uncomfortable to discuss their faith in group discussions.

Fear of being excluded, labelled judgmental or challenged from others in the class. The course tends to focus on supporting minority groups in society, and people with strong faith don't seem to be considered as much in this category, even though they can be isolated in secular circles/communities/cultures. Faith it seems is to have its own place in faith circles such as when with friends from church and is to be expressed in those spaces rather than in a classroom where diverse views are present. I've found that there is also an overriding view that secular is viewed as progressive, youth workers now aiming to address issues without having to bring in or acknowledge faith and beliefs. For example, as a group of students challenged with a case study/scenario of young people disagreeing on issues of sexuality due to their faith, all students in the classroom referred to them accessing LGBTQ services for support... but none mentioned spiritual guidance and exploring elements of faith with the young people, thinking about how young people are wrestling with big questions such as the meaning of life. I've found that working with these meta-ethical questions with young people gets overlooked.
(Christian respondent 10/secular programme)

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Some of the responses suggest that whether students are comfortable or not to discuss their personal faith in the classroom depends at least to an extent on faith positions of staff.

> *The majority of our staff members are 'of Faith' and while this is not 'advertised' I think students of Faith recognise this and therefore feel comfortable talking about this.*
> (Christian respondent 2/secular programme)

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> *I think this has varied according to the student cohort - one cohort was very comfortable but another was not. This is due in part to the level of knowledge and confidence of tutors who are working from a secular perspective and also the dynamics within individual year groups.*
> (Christian respondent 3/secular programme)

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Another respondent also noted 'the secular culture on the programme' as the reason for students' discomfort suggesting, alongside the quotation above, that 'secular perspectives' on some programmes may contribute to some students feeling uncomfortable to discuss their faith positions. The respondent quoted earlier in this section who outlined how students of faith may experience exclusion also raised the 'overriding view that secular is viewed as progressive' as problematic. The same respondent went further to state that students with faith would struggle on youth work training programmes.

> *Anyone with a faith going on this youth work course, and probably most youth work courses today will need a lot of support. I am being as fair as I can be when I say this because I know it is hard to get the balance right. I am writing this as a person of faith who wants to help young people thrive in life and I believe faith has a vital role to play in youth work and I acknowledge its value.*
> (Christian respondent 10/secular programme)

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There was a diversity of perception around how comfortable students of faith do or don't feel to engage in dialogue, which to some extent may also reflect the faith experience of survey respondents themselves. It would be helpful, therefore, for future research to explicitly seek the perspectives and experiences of students themselves.

Overall, the responses about students' levels of comfort in discussing faith suggest that the likelihood of honest, constructive dialogue should not be taken as given, but will reflect the background, skill and confidence of staff, the experiences of students and their willingness to engage in dialogue. If these topics are never covered in more formal teaching, there is a chance that some experiences are unheard and that problematic views and assumptions from those with or without religious beliefs will go unchallenged.

More scope for equipping students to work with diverse religious communities

As outlined earlier, two fifths of programme leaders either didn't think their graduates were equipped to work with diverse religious communities or weren't sure if they were. There was also a lack of confidence that NOS YW14 sufficiently represents the place of religion, faith and spirituality in youth work, with only two fifths confidently stating that it does. This demonstrates that there is no clear consensus across programme leaders that the NOS and the curricula of training programmes are sufficient to equip youth workers to work with diverse groups of young people around issues of religion, faith and spirituality. Based on these survey responses, it is observed that a significant minority of respondents felt that the NOS and the curricula of training programmes were not going far enough.

Our survey asked, 'How well equipped do you think your graduates are to engage with young people from diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds on issues of religion, faith and spirituality?' with one option being 'I don't believe they need to be equipped for this'. No one chose this option. Similarly, when asked how they thought youth workers should engage with religion, faith and spirituality in their practice, no one told us that youth workers should not engage with religion, faith and spirituality at all. The answers to open questions affirmed this belief amongst most course leaders that religion, faith and spirituality are relevant to youth work training and that youth workers need to be equipped to work with diverse religious communities. The most in-depth explanations of this came from Christian respondents on secular programmes.

> *Many of our trainee youth workers are not only from faith backgrounds but work with young people from faith backgrounds... youth workers will find themselves engaging with young people from a variety of faiths and non faiths.*
> (Christian respondent 8/secular programme)

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> *Faith/religion is an important part of contemporary society that affects politics, economics and culture. The History of Youth Work in the UK has close and important links with faith and religion. To not engage would be to deny a past and present reality.*
> (Christian respondent 1/secular programme)

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> *I think an open and proactive engagement even when there are young people of no faith, is a positive move to generate understanding of self and others.*
> (Christian respondent 12/secular programme)

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The recognition that youth workers need to be equipped was often coupled with comments that suggested that they were not being sufficiently prepared in this area.

> *I am very aware that the issues of religion, faith and spirituality feature in our programme because it is an area of*

work I have been involved in for over 25 years. I bring this into discussions because I believe that they are live issues that students need to engage with in their work roles and as such I feel that they should feature more in JNC validated programmes.
(Christian respondent 8/secular programme)

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This sense that programmes might not be sufficiently equipping graduates for engaging with religion, faith and spirituality was further highlighted by several respondents at the end of the survey where there was a space for any additional comments. Here, several responses from programme leaders with a range of personal faith positions suggested that the survey had caused them to reflect on their own programmes.

We have answered this as a programme team. The questionnaire itself has been thought provoking about the extent to which religion, faith and spirituality should be reflected in a secular programme curriculum. This has been useful in reflecting further and we would be interested to participate in further discussion.
(Respondent identified their religious perspective as 'other'/secular programme)

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This has prompted me to reflect that we need to review and discuss the relevancy of these areas for the programme.
(Buddhist respondent 1/secular programme)

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You have given me pause for thought about the extent to which we include discussions about this important issue... as I do not believe our graduates are adequately prepared to engage with young people about religion and spirituality.
(Atheist respondent 2/secular programme)

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For some respondents, it was a deeply felt issue that provoked feelings of sadness or mourning about the absence of religion, faith and spirituality in youth work training.

It's hard to put into words, as it's so sad that this is in question for this sector. I think it's vital that youth workers engage with faith in some way, at very least know a trusted qualified youth worker with a faith background who can offer young people spiritual guidance.
(Christian respondent 10/secular programme)

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However, in contrast there were also respondents who felt that this issue was addressed well on their programmes. One respondent, for example, stated that 'Based on my experience, youth workers are capable of judging when and how to engage, based both on needs of a particular group/individual, and also as part of a balanced curriculum' (Christian respondent 3/secular programme). This again demonstrates a lack of consensus as to how well-equipped youth workers are through their university training programmes to engage with issues of religion, faith and spirituality.

These issues are complex, raising issues of power and its uses in youth work training

The lack of consensus on whether programmes are sufficiently equipping students to work with diverse religious communities reflects the complexity of how issues of religion, faith and spirituality are viewed and engaged with by programme leaders and how they think they should be engaged with by youth workers. Respondents used the open questions to describe this complexity and articulate a lack of certainty in answering closed questions on such complex issues. For example, one respondent explained why they answered 'not sure' to the question about whether the NOS on values and beliefs sufficiently represented the place of religion, faith and spirituality in youth work.

I answered 'not sure' to your question 'Do you think standard YW14 sufficiently represents the place of religion, faith and spirituality within youth work practice?' This is because it completely depends on the reader of the standard - this was part of the debate 10 years ago when 'spirituality' was removed from the last edition of the NOS. YW14 does represent those who want to explore religion and faith – 'values and beliefs' can represent anything, and youth workers with no belief are not expected to work on spirituality or religious belief, but evangelists can bring it to the forefront.
(Christian respondent 5/Christian programme)

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The respondent suggests that the NOS potentially allows too much flexibility in interpretation, enabling some youth workers to justify avoiding religion, faith and spirituality altogether and others to engage only in a narrow way

Some of the responses highlighted earlier described the complexity of providing a safe space for discussion of faith whilst also being able to challenge oppressive, particularly homophobic, attitudes. This was further articulated in response to the question about how proactively or not youth workers should engage with issues of religion, faith and spirituality in their practice, particularly by programme leaders who identified as Atheist.

The focus should always be on the principles and values of community development and youth work and many people hide their prejudices behind their religious beliefs and on our course where anti-oppressive practice features very strongly, students with those perspectives have to be engaged from an educational and not a religious perspective.
(Atheist respondent 1/secular programme)

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This is not a simple either-or answer. Youth workers need to be open to discussing issues that young people raise, and utilise every resource available to them in order to help young people in their care to better understand and act in/ on the world. We should respect the fact that young people will have been brought up in different values systems to our own, some of which will be based on religious teaching. We should openly acknowledge where there is conflict between our professional values-base and the values systems of the young people in our care, and work with this difference to

promote a socially just world. I don't believe that youth and community work practitioners should promote any form of religion (as that becomes 'ministry'); however, we should work through and with faith communities in a respectful and collaborative manner to help young people shape their futures as compassionate human beings.
(Atheist respondent 2/secular programme)

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If 'proactive' is being presented as 'actively promote' as might be inferred here then no. If proactive is proactive about the role and value, positive in relation to voice and choice and supportive of awareness and tolerance, then yes. Proactive is key, but the personal position also raises the concept of agenda.
(Atheist respondent 3/secular programme)

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The 'concept of agenda' was only raised in relation to religious beliefs, but not political or secular worldviews, nor the agendas of secular institutions employing youth workers - again revealing a broad assumption of secularity as a neutral position. There was a sense from respondents on secular programmes, particularly (but not exclusively) from those with non-religious perspectives, that proselytization should be avoided by youth workers whilst recognising that some engagement with religion, faith and spirituality was needed.

I think Youth Workers should be able to engage young people with all issues of importance for them, enabling them to explore and make informed choices etc... this should be a professional judgement (but not proselytizing).
(Agnostic respondent 1/secular programme)

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Whether a person has a faith or belongs to a faith or not I think it has value to explore these areas as I believe all faiths add value to people's understanding of life. This needless to say is not or should not be about conversion.
(Buddhist respondent 1/secular programme)

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It is important that faith is explored and young people and community members have the opportunities to explore and discuss - this is not a topic that cannot be discussed. It is important, as with all areas, that youth workers are clear of their professional responsibilities and boundaries, especially where belief is a personal belief. It is important, as with many curriculum areas, that workers facilitate learning and discussion rather than persuasion and coercion.
(Atheist respondent 4/secular programme)

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This reflects a wariness of proselytizing endeavours across secular programmes that wasn't present in responses from the Christian-specialist programmes which focused on 'mission' and 'ministry' alongside youth work. Some respondents on secular programmes highlighted that youth workers of faith should not be assumed to be well equipped to deal with diversity of belief.

My observation is that there is an emotional maturity and insight needed to be inclusive of other faiths and non-faith and that celebrates human experience within a wider context, that this is not automatic, but acquired and maintained. However, what is automatic and/or strongly known/believed can be highly problematic as confirmation bias and limiting in practice. Many students who are very capable and secure in their own faith/non-faith may not therefore be sufficiently equipped to work in the same way across a diverse spectrum of beliefs. Students independent of faith are generally very well equipped to deal with 'not knowing' and starting from where they and others are at. This would be supportive of the engagement, diversity and topic focus but does not allow for the great strength and/or limitations that can be being drawn from having a particular faith/non-faith position.
(Atheist respondent 3/secular programme)

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There was a clear sense of concern amongst several secular programme leaders (particularly those with non-religious identities) about how religion, faith and spirituality is approached in youth work, as reflected in the comments above and the example below where one respondent justifies why religion, faith and spirituality should feature on youth work training programmes.

It should as it reflects perspectives that feature in their work with communities and workers should not merely accept whatever religious dogma people propose without it being linked to the core values of our profession.
(Atheist respondent 1/secular programme)

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A lack of explicit coverage arguably does not address these complexities for qualifying youth workers.

Conclusion

JNC-recognised programmes are teaching broad issues relating to social justice, anti-oppressive practice, diversity and inclusion. Christian-specialist programmes also cover these issues in explicit modules alongside theological Christian study. The specific issue of religion, faith and spirituality appears, however, to be neglected across secular programmes, not included in core curriculum content, and presented as an option or specialism rarely, meaning that engagement with it is not compulsory for trainee youth workers. Where it is more explicitly covered, there is a risk that there is a disproportionately negative focus on issues such as hate crime, exclusion and radicalisation, largely in relation to Islam. Christian youth work receives some coverage in a substantial proportion of secular programmes.

Equipping youth workers to work with diverse religious communities should not be left to chance. If issues of religion, faith and spirituality are not more explicitly covered in teaching on JNC-recognised programmes, youth workers may not develop the religious literacy they need to engage with the issues outlined here. There is also a danger of youth workers reinforcing problematic assumptions, either informed by their religious beliefs or about others with religious beliefs, if there is not sufficient space to engage explicitly with religion, faith and spirituality as part of their training. Arguably, optional modules and ad hoc lectures are not sufficient to ensure all youth workers, regardless of their personal faith position are equipped to understand and work with young people and professionals from diverse backgrounds. A dominantly secular culture is likely to inhibit reflection on secularity as a subjective worldview in itself and make it more likely that religion is approached narrowly where it does emerge.

The place of religion, faith and spirituality as part of students' critical dialogue and reflection, was highlighted across programmes, facilitated at least to an extent by programme staff. This demonstrates that the need for this engagement (as highlighted in the literature) is at least partially being met (Green, 2010; Harris, 2015). However, there are some issues around who feels comfortable to engage in such discussions and whether minority voices are heard. A lack of explicit teaching on religion, faith and spirituality to feed into such discussions risks leaving student engagement with these topics to chance. Disproportionately negative teaching around religion and faith may also impact on whether students feel comfortable to engage

in discussions about their personal faith positions. We argue that youth work qualifying programmes could do more to focus positively and explicitly on religion, faith and spirituality and in ensuring diverse youth work contexts are included in their curricula. Within this, we acknowledge that space for potentially uncomfortable discussions where there are tensions between different belief systems or practices is also needed.

The only specialist faith-based JNC-recognised programmes in England are Christian, reflecting the size and professionalisation over recent decades of the Christian youth work sector. However, it is significant that despite substantial Muslim and Jewish youth work sectors and histories in the UK that these are not reflected among professional training programmes. This study is not able to address why this might be. The presence of specialist Christian programmes demonstrates that there is some demand for Christian youth workers to have both training in ministry and a 'secular' professional qualification, as well as reinforcing an ongoing separation between Christian and secular training.

Overall, this research raises questions about how youth workers with JNC-recognised qualifications might be better equipped by their university training programmes to work with diverse religious communities and with the faith-based sector. Youth workers need to develop a religious literacy (Dinham, 2018) to work with the largest sector of their field and with the diverse religious young people who they will engage in their practice. A broader and more explicit recognition of religion, faith and spirituality, as well of other specific social justice issues and how these intersect, in the youth work NOS would support this.

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