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Intra- and Interreligious Dialogue in Flemish (Belgian) Secondary Education as a Tool to Prevent Radicalisation

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Abstract: The attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016) led to the development of an Action Plan against radicalisation wherein Islamic religious teachers are expected to contribute actively to de-radicalisation processes and counter-discourse. To this end, Flemish teacher training university colleges have rapidly established new ‘Islamic religious education’ (IRE) teacher training programs. Additionally, the Minister of Education made interconvictional dialogue lessons mandatory in compulsory education. These lessons aim to stimulate, strengthen and reinforce the dialogue between pupils of different belief system backgrounds. Thus, the interconvictional competences are seen as a means to prevent radicalisation and polarisation. This article draws an overview of IRE development since 2015 until now regarding the policy incentives concerning the Flemish IRE, taking into account the concept of separation of Church and State. Furthermore, we scrutinise the existing IRE teacher training curricula with regard to the formulated interconvictional competence elements, as these are seen as one of the remedies for radicalisation and polarisation. We observe a clear relationship between the dramatic events and the implementation of new Islamic religious education programs and partnerships. An increasing number of ‘interconvictional’ references are observed in the Islam-related courses that are included in IRE teacher training programs. Further in-depth field research is needed to map the IRE teaching practices and experiences regarding the expectations formulated by policy makers.

Keywords: Islam; radicalisation; interconvictional competences; interreligious dialogue; Islamic religious education; IRE teacher training; secondary education



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1. Introduction

As a response to the violent attacks in Paris on 7 January 2015, the Flemish Government launched on 3 April 2015 the ‘Action Plan for the Prevention of Radicalisation that Lead to Extremism and Terrorism’. This document includes a strategic framework which includes 11 action domains (Flemish Government 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Commission Radicalisation 2016; Cops et al. 2020). It refers to, and includes, partners and stakeholders who are expected to contribute to the strategic roll-out, notably teachers, prevention personnel, social assistants and youth workers (p. 2). Furthermore, the Action Plan sets up a Flemish platform concerning radicalisation wherein representatives are responsible for the administration of the following policy domains: health care, work, youth, job placement, integration, city policy, and education, which act as reference for delegates regarding radicalisation, as well as the following stakeholders: a radicalisation collaborator of the Flemish umbrella organisation Cities and Municipalities (VVSG), and the Federal Officer of Home Affairs and the Security and Prevention Service. Throughout the Action Plan for the Prevention of Radicalisation, the Flemish Government lists the target groups that are asked to contribute to the de-radicalisation process and counter-discourse. In short, they explicitly refer to social workers, teachers, job placement consultants, and imams, with this regarding the acquisition of knowledge and skills, training, expertise exchange and sharing

of good practices (p. 4). The document also stipulates ‘the IRE inspection, CIO, IRE teachers participated [in] study days, [training], and CIO organised also information and training sessions for professionals about Islam, radicalisation, sensitive subjects, and so on’ (Flemish Government 2015a; Cops et al. 2020)¹. They also involve ‘representatives of the belief systems’ to stimulate dialogue among belief systems, and encourage 28 recognised mosques in Flanders to take an active role in the prevention of radicalisation. Democratic citizenship therein is central and there is place for different ideologies, views and convictions, as long as they do not undermine the existing constitutional state’.

On the European level, the Paris Declaration² of 17 March 2015 followed as an answer to the bombing attacks in Paris (European Union 2015). The Paris Declaration called for action at all levels to reinforce the role of education in ‘promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination, strengthening social cohesion, and helping young people become responsible, open-minded and active members of our diverse and inclusive society’. They subsequently established the ET 2020 Working Group (European Council 2018) whose primary focus is to benefit the Member States in their work of furthering policy development on ‘Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education’ through mutual learning and identification of good practices (European Commission 2016). The Working Group focuses on the four themes, i.e., critical thinking and media literacy, social and civic competences, education of disadvantaged learners and intercultural dialogue (European Commission 2019). The task of the Working Group was renewed for the period 2018–2020 and broadened to include ‘common values and inclusive education’ (Flemish Government 2020a, p. 24). It suffices to underline the direct impact of EU directives and policy decision on the Member States Education policy (Flemish Government 2017c, Action point 3.3. B). Despite the many policy initiatives, a thoughtful strategic road map was not designed, as the ‘sense of urgency’ prevailed after the bombing attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016). However, academia has voiced the need for an evidence-based analysis and evaluation of the national and European policy initiatives regarding radicalisation (P/CVE policy) (Van Hemert et al. 2014; Feddes and Gallucci 2015; Coolsaet 2017; Gielen 2017, 2018, 2019; Pistone et al. 2019; Stephens et al. 2019; Ravn et al. 2019), especially because the concept of ‘radicalisation’ in the context of the ‘Countering Violent Extremism’ (CVE) policy is very broadly formulated, and there is no clear-cut definition or approach (Kundnani 2012; Colaert 2017; Coolsaet 2017; Stephens et al. 2019; Cops et al. 2020). After the bombing attacks, many initiatives were implemented on a national (Belgian), regional (Flanders, Brussels-Capital and Wallonia) and local level (Commission Radicalisation 2016), however, the effectiveness has been less evaluated.

In this article, we seek to tackle two main related questions: (1) does the Flemish IRE teacher training meet the formulated expectations in the successive policy documents by politicians, and (2) can we find references to interconvictional competences in the Flemish Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Teacher Training Programs? To answer both questions, one needs to grasp which Flemish policy framework and incentives are put forward to engage the Islamic religion education legal representatives in the de-radicalisation project and counter-discourse as part of the successive Action Plan for the Prevention of Radicalisation. Therefore, we take a closer look at two crucial policy documents in addition to the Action Plans Radicalisation, namely (a) the Engagement Statement ‘to strengthen and stimulate interconvictional dialogue’ signed on 28 January 2016 by the Flemish Minister of Education and the Representative Bodies of the recognised belief systems, and (b) the Mission Statement signed on 9 November 2016 by the Muslim Representative Bodies, i.e., the EMB and CIO, as well as the Flemish Minister of Education, wherein formal expectations and minimum diploma qualifications for Islamic religious education (IRE) teachers are stipulated. With regard to the Engagement Statement, it is crucial to analyse if we can find references to interconvictional competences in the Flemish IRE teacher training programs. The formulated expectations in the Mission Statement, which regard the qualification and implementations of IRE teacher training programs, can be read as

minimum proficiency requirements for IRE teachers to guarantee the quality of the IRE courses from the perspective of the ‘state’. The novelty of this research is situated in the thorough analysis of the recent policy documents regarding IRE and of the IRE programs, more specifically, regarding the interconvictional competences, as they have only been compulsory since 2016. The conducted analysis of policy documents and the IRE programs of Flemish IRE teacher training aims to contribute to the education policy research field.

In this article, we first present the main historical developments regarding the establishment of IRE since its recognition in 1974 until now, focusing on the situation in Flanders (Section 2). In the following paragraph we sketch the theoretical framework regarding the radicalisation process from different perspectives (social, educational, theological studies, and political science) (Section 3). We continue with the Material and Method section (Section 4). Before the discussion (Section 6) and conclusion (Section 7), we present the findings and analysis of the qualitative data (Section 5).

2. Historical Overview of Islamic Religious Education

2.1. Separation of Church and State

Belgium is a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy. The federal state is composed of three linguistic communities (Dutch, French and German) and three territorial regions (Brussels-Capital Region, Walloon Region and Flanders). As a consequence of the federation process, religious education was allocated to the community regulations and the Federal Ministry of Justice and Cult. Once the recognition of a religion is agreed upon, it determines the institutional relations of the Belgian State with the recognised community ([Federale Overheidsdienst Justitie n.d.](#)).³

[Velaers and Foblets \(2015\)](#) indicate four constitutional articles which govern the relationship between state and the existing belief systems, i.e., articles 19, 20, 21 and 181. One of the most important consequences of being recognised as a belief system is that it allows access to public funding. For example, the state still pays the salary and the pensions of the (recognised) ministers of the recognised belief systems (Belgian Constitution, article 181; [Loobuyck and Meier 2014](#)). The state also pays the salaries, based on article 24 of the Belgian Constitution, of all the teachers and school personnel of the recognised belief systems. As a consequence, under the Belgian constitutional law, the relationship between state and belief systems can be described as mutual interdependence ([Debeer et al. 2011](#); [van den Berg 2018](#)) or a hybrid system ([Sandberg and Doe 2007](#)). Articles 19 and 20 include the positive and negative freedom of religion, respectively, the right to choose one’s own religion, and the prohibition to impose a belief/religion ([Varin 2006](#)). Article 21 prohibits the state ‘to intervene either in the appointment or in the installation of ministers of any religion [belief system]’.⁴

For educational matters, article 24 of the Constitution is fundamental ([Boender and Kanmaz 2002](#)). Based on article 24, the public schools must offer parents the opportunity to choose one of the recognised belief systems (see footnote 4) for their child (§1) during the compulsory education (§3). The schools receive funding for organising and offering the recognised religious and humanism courses in private and public schools. Still, the Recognised Bodies of the recognised belief systems are autonomously responsible for the organisation and (quality) control of their courses in public and private schools. This implies that they are responsible for the organisation of the courses, the training and appointment of teachers, the minimum (professional) requirements and qualifications regarding schooling and Dutch proficiency, the learning outcomes and the quality of used syllabuses ([Education Commission 2018, 2020](#); [Flemish Parliament 2019a](#); [VRT 2018](#)). Based on the constitutional hybrid system, policy makers voiced concerns and explicit expectations toward the Muslim representatives regarding counter-discourse and the de-radicalisation process, more specifically IRE teachers and imams ([Flemish Government 2015b, 2017a, 2017c](#); [Education Commission 2016a, 2016b](#); [Belgische Senaat 2016a, 2016b](#); [Flemish Parliament 2016b, 2016g](#)). To do so, they respectively formulated and imposed a minimum teaching qualification and mastery of Dutch ([Education Commission 2016b](#),

2020) and integration courses ([Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering 2016](#)), for example. As mentioned above, this is a legal prerogative of the Representative Bodies ([Kanmaz et al. 2004](#)). In other words: they stretch their legal competences regarding Islam-related matters.

2.2. Historical Overview of IRE in Belgium Flanders

Currently, there are nearly 1200 Flemish IRE teachers⁵ working in Flemish public primary and secondary education ([Flemish Parliament 2015a, 2015b, 2020](#)). The changing international context, increased number of Muslim pupils in public schools, and the need for qualified Dutch-speaking IRE teachers turned out to be important catalysts for the establishment of new IRE teacher training programs ([Education Commission 2016a, 2016b; Flemish Parliament 2017a, 2018a](#)). In response, the EMB negotiated with Flemish teacher training institutions to install new IRE training programs and to improve the quality of the two existing programs which are embedded in regular Flemish teacher training ([Ministry of Education and Training 2016a; Education Commission 2016b; Flemish Parliament 2017a, 2017d, 2018b, 2020](#)).

We note that in the 1990s the EMB already tried to negotiate with higher education institutions, including the Flemish universities ([Flemish Parliament 2011; Leman and Renaerts 1996](#)). The first IRE teacher training was implemented at the Erasmus University College Brussels in 1998. A decade later, in 2007, a second IRE teacher training program was installed at the Group T University College (Leuven), now University College Leuven Limburg. However, it was only in the academic year 2015–2016 that the implementation of IRE teacher training programs in regular Flemish teacher training was accelerated⁶, in direct relation to public pressure arising as a consequence of the Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks. The Belgian/Flemish debates resonate with the international, at least Western European, debate on the place and added value of religion in a school context ([Franken 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018; Franken and Loobuyck 2013a, 2013b, 2020; Loobuyck and Franken 2009, 2011; Zilliacus and Kallioniemi 2016; Valk and Tosun 2016; Sahin 2018; Kjeldsen 2019](#)). Additionally, debates regarding citizenship education are ongoing ([Franken 2014; Loobuyck 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Sahin 2017a](#)). However, the expectations toward IRE teachers, imams or Muslim social civil society are not new ([Flemish Parliament 2003, 2005, 2006, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2015d, 2016e, 2016f; Education and Equal Opportunities Commission 2011a, 2011b, 2011c; Education and Training Commission 2009; Education Commission 2016d](#)). Furthermore, during the previous period, the IRE inspectors, under the supervision of the Centre of Islamic Education, were mandated to appoint graduates from private Islamic institutes in Belgium or abroad to teach IRE in Belgian primary or secondary public schools. However, since 1 September 2018, all ‘newly’ appointed IRE teachers are under the obligation to obtain a recognised teacher training degree offered by an IRE teacher training institute ([Flemish Government 2017a, 2017b; Flemish Parliament 2018b](#)).⁷ It is worth noting that the Ministry of Education has no legal competence regarding the content, organisation, and exams of Flemish IRE, nor defines the selection criteria and appointment procedure for IRE teachers based on the Church and State separation principle.

In retrospect, the discussions at the level of the Flemish Parliament, the Commission Radicalisation, the Education Commission, and the general public sphere, were an important incentive to motivate the Flemish teacher training institutes to implement IRE teacher training programs in their regular program. Despite the recent increase in IRE teacher training facilities, a significant number of IRE teachers have, to date, not received a formal three-year IRE teacher training at a Flemish teacher training institute ([Education Commission 2016a, 2017; Flemish Parliament 2015a, 2015d, 2016c, 2016d, 2017a](#)). Politicians have frequently questioned the didactic-pedagogical qualities of the IRE teachers, the used didactical tools, and the ‘Islamic’ views and approaches that are circulated during the IRE lessons, and state that the IRE teachers are not well-equipped to cope with the changing teaching environment, the societal challenges they are confronted with, and the high expectations placed on them by different stakeholders, i.e., with regard to their role in

the prevention of radicalisation (Flemish Government 2015b, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a; Education Commission 2015, 2016a, 2017, 2018; Flemish Parliament 2011, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a, 2016c, 2016e, 2016f, 2019a, 2019b).

Since 2015, the Centrum Islamonderwijs (Centre of Islam Religious Education, CIO) has made attempts to meet the expectations and working points through measures such as organising (mandatory) study days, lectures and workshops on class management, development of didactical material, use of ICT in IRE classes, lectures dealing with sensitive subjects, how to react and deal with radicalisation, citizenship education, interreligious dialogue on secular topics, polarisation in society and how to deal with it⁸, and also sensitive topics such as, euthanasia, gender issues, sexual orientation, RE in peaceful living together, reconciliation between religion and science, as well as moral education in IRE lessons (Flemish Parliament 2016d, 2017a, 2018b, 2019b; Flemish Government 2020a, 2020b). This aims to inform and equip the IRE teachers to deal with polarised issues in their classes and contribute to the formulated expectations regarding counter-discourse (Flemish Government 2015b, 2016, 2017b, 2020a; Flemish Parliament 2020). The Network of Islam Experts was, and still is, installed to vehicle and proclaim a moderate voice of Islam, as seen by the politicians, and to inform Muslim and non-Muslim pupils about Islam-related topics in a school context, including delivering presentations about radicalisation processes. The Network is working under the legal responsibility of CIO/EMB.⁹

Based on the abovementioned, the politicians stretch their legal competences regarding Islamic religious education based—in their view—on the constitutional mutual interdependence between Church and State. More generally, the Action Plan Radicalisation of 2015 points only to the IRE and legal representatives, EMB and CIO, to take an active role in the de-radicalisation and counter-discourse during the IRE lessons. In the Action Plan of 2017, the increasing polarisation in society was recognised; in consequence, a wider range of actors were appointed to contribute to the Action Plan goals. Still, the IRE is kept in the crosshairs.

In line with the formulated expectations in the policy documents, can we find learning outcomes in the IRE teacher training programs regarding de-radicalisation processes, counter-discourse and interconvictional competences?

2.3. Intra- and Interreligious Education through Islamic Religious Education

It was not until 2010 that the inspectors of Islamic and Roman Catholic religious education organised voluntarily joint non-compulsory lectures on interreligious dialogue¹⁰ in collaboration with the *Universitair Centrum Sint-Ignatius Antwerpen* (UCSIA, University Centre Saint-Ignatius Antwerp), in order to stimulate and strengthen relationships between Catholic and Muslim colleagues working in the Flemish public schools (Lafrarchi 2017b).¹¹ The second milestone was that in 2012, the Commission of Life Stance Courses (*Commissie Levensbeschouwelijke Vakken*, CLB) launched a non-compulsory interconvictional¹² competence matrix wherein 24 learning outcomes, on levels of knowledge, skills and attitudes were described (Flemish Parliament 2012c).¹² On 28 January 2016, in direct response to the Paris attacks (13 November 2015), the Representative Bodies of the recognised belief systems and the Minister of Education signed an Engagement Statement including a non-exhaustive list of action points which advocates the organisation of a minimum of two and a maximum of six hours of compulsory joint lessons for each group of pupils every school year (Ministry of Education and Training 2016b).

Furthermore, on 9 November 2016, the Flemish Ministry of Education and the Muslim Executive of Belgium (EMB) and Centre of Islamic Education (CIO) signed a Mission Statement containing four action points: (1) the reform of CIO, (2) the implementation of new qualitative IRE teacher training in regular Flemish teacher training departments and the actualisation of the IRE programs, (3) a reinforcement of an IRE inspection team and increasing quality control of IRE lessons, and (4) the development of the teaching certificate for IRE (Ministry of Education and Training 2016b; Education Commission 2016c, 2016d). This article focuses on action points two and four. The in-depth reform of CIO

is still not put in place, while the IRE inspection monitoring and the evaluation system have not yet been reformed or critically evaluated by the Recognised Body for Islamic religious education.¹³

Coming to one of the formulated expectations, the question is raised: what is meant by interconvictional competences and how this is conceptualised by the stakeholders (Engagement Statement, 9 November 2016). Based on the policy documents, it is still not clear what is meant by ‘a moderate Islam’, ‘a rational Islam’ or ‘an Islam adapted/suited to our Flemish society’. To answer these questions, a systematic analysis of the Flemish IRE teacher training programs is conducted regarding references to interconvictional competences. In other words: to what extent do they refer to and take into account the interconvictional competences that have been articulated and formulated by the policy makers in the successive Action Plan(s) for the Prevention of Radicalisation and the signed statements?

3. Theoretical Framework

In the aftermath of the 2015 Paris attacks, the Council of Europe launched the Paris Declaration (17 March 2015), which underlined the importance of education as a space in society where ‘inclusive education’ can be promoted as an important tool to prevent radicalisation. Present-day Europe is a mosaic of cultures, religions and beliefs. Back in 2008, the European Commission launched the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (European Commission 2007) ‘to foster peaceful coexistence, social cohesion and tolerance among European citizens’. Furthermore, the OECD launched a working paper ‘The Lives of Teachers in Diverse Classrooms’ (Forghani-Arani et al. 2019), which acknowledges the challenges teachers face daily. This paper underlines the importance of the teachers’ competences, and draws attention to the understanding of diversity, and the indispensable overarching competence ‘to practice diversity’, such as reflectivity, multi-perspectivity, and the didactical-pedagogical approach to the topic. In the same line of thought, the ET2020 Working Group works on ‘furthering policy development on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education through mutual learning and identification of good practices’ linked to the theme, ‘social and civic competences’ (European Commission 2019) of the Paris Declaration of 2015. According to the European Commission, an intercultural dialogue¹⁴ could play a pivotal role in cultivating citizen awareness and knowledge about population groups with different beliefs, and in fostering genuine understanding and deep empathy for diversity in the wider context of Europe.

In a religiously and culturally pluralist world, the issue of how different population groups get along is no longer just an ‘abstract’ academic question, since violent religious extremism has become a pressing global concern. The various Flemish stakeholders have responded to this concern by investing in the development of counter-discourse, early detection of radicalisation processes, and the strengthening of social cohesion (Flemish Government 2020a). These initiatives were motivated by the sense of urgency (Colaert 2017; Cops et al. 2020; Ravn et al. 2019) whereby the policy makers mainly focused on the jihadi-inspired radicalisation. This focus led to initiatives regarding positive identity development of Muslim young people, involving and supporting imams, and involving mosques in the prevention of radicalisation. It is worth noting the explicit reference to ‘jihadism’ and ‘Syria Jihadists’ in the Action Plan Radicalisation (Flemish Government 2015a, 2015b). By using both concepts, the Flemish Government made a direct link between radicalisation and Islam (p. 2). Even if the document, and the following Action Plans, mention and refer to other forms of extremism (Fadil et al. 2019), Islamic extremism and terrorism is the main focus.

The link between Islam and radicalisation is not without danger, as ‘the term potentially reinforces the stigmas and stereotypes associated with vulnerable groups’ (Verkuyten 2003; Macaluso 2016; De Backer et al. 2020). Radicalisation processes are complex (Crenshaw 2000; Ponsaers et al. 2010; Feddes et al. 2016; Commission Radicalisation 2015), multi-layered (Tajfel et al. 1971; Sageman 2008; Borum 2011a, 2011b; Feddes et al. 2016; De Waele et al.

2017; De Backer et al. 2020; Stephens et al. 2019), and different root causes can be put forward (Crenshaw 1981; Veldhuis and Jørgen 2009; de Wijk 2005; Fadil et al. 2019). Coolsaet studied the subject for more than three decades. He states that the phenomenon of radicalisation and polarisation has to be researched and is characterised by the feeling of exclusion, exclusive ideologies, marginalisation, vulnerability, discrimination and feeling of injustice, not in the Islam as a religious framework (Coolsaet 2016, 2017, 2019; Doosje et al. 2013; Christodoulou and Szakács 2018; De Backer et al. 2020; Ravn et al. 2019). Similarly, Europol (2015, 2016) concludes that ‘radicalisation has less to do with religion’. The organisation suggests using another concept, i.e., ‘violent extreme societal trend’.¹⁵ Additionally, field workers state that this strategic approach is somehow contra-productive, as young Muslims feel targeted (De Backer et al. 2020; Verfaillie et al. 2019; Henskens and Kastit 2019). This has a negative impact on Muslim identity, personality development and wellbeing (Macaluso 2016; Eijkman and Roodnat 2017; Thomas 2017; van de Weert and Eijkman 2018; Henskens and Kastit 2019). Still, the Action Plans include, and refer to, different domains and ‘Muslim’ actors as partners in the ‘fight against radicalisation’. As some observed an increasing interest in (Islamic) religion, the approach of using counter-discourse, and expectations of the Flemish policy makers from Islamic religious education teachers, can be seen through that prism (Bakker and Bont 2016; van den Bos et al. 2009; van San et al. 2010; Sieckelinck 2017). Still, there is no one-to-one link between an increasing interest in religion and the potentiality of committing violent attacks (Venhaus 2010; Europol 2015, 2016), as the interference between the causes are complex and multi-layered. The voiced criticism and comments from academia and at a grassroots level prompted the policy makers and stakeholders to adjust, in fact, broaden the focus of the Action Plan Radicalisation of 2017, more specifically to approach the ‘issue’ in a wider context that is in sync with the social reality in which increasing polarisation and tensions are felt (Cops et al. 2020).

Focusing on the main aspects of the Action Plan Radicalisation of 2017, they can be classified into five transversal categories: (1) coordination and collaboration, (2) supporting the local initiatives, (3) organising a person-oriented approach, (4) strengthening the knowledge and increasing expertise and (5) mobilising the civil society (Cops et al. 2020). We notice that 20 of the 40 the action points of 2015’s Action Plan Radicalisation and 38¹⁶ of the 62 action points of 2017’s Action Plan Radicalisation are related to, embedded in, or involve the Ministry of Education (Cops et al. 2020, p. 13). Based on the preventive role of education in general, and in particular in the de-radicalisation processes, an important selection of preventive initiatives/roles is allocated to, and under the supervision of the Ministry of Education (Flemish Department of Education and Training 2016; Flemish Government 2015b, 2020a; Flemish Education n.d., online). The fifth transversal category ‘mobilising the civil society’ is of interest here, with initiatives such as: involving parents, families and friends, create space for dialogue, counter-discourse and identity development aiming and focusing on the youth. The following argument puts forward the idea that ‘extremist groups misuse the search for identity [of Muslim youngsters] and try to get in the minds of the youngsters’. Therefore, many initiatives focus on and aim to stimulate and strengthen a positive identity development. To date, no exclusive literature can be found regarding the significant effectiveness of this approach (Cops et al. 2020). Hence, some studies indicate that resilience could be an overall protecting factor against deviant and extremist ideologies (Cops et al. 2020; Stephens and Sieckelinck 2020). Studies regarding the effectiveness of the existing counter-discourse projects seem to have no significant effect on the disengagement and de-radicalisation process; on the contrary, a negative ‘boomerang’ effect was observed (Cops et al. 2020, p. 6, transversaal programma VI). The overall comment is that an approach to tackle radicalisation can only be effective if policy makers also invest in an inclusive society and a tight social fabric.

In addition to knowledge, dialogue and the exchange of ideas can support the understanding of the super diverse and complex societies and the role of religions in the contemporary world (Evans 2008; REDCo 2009). In this endeavor, intra- and interreligious learning should be understood as a constitutive, essential part of religious learning, and as

a competence that needs to be internalised by pupils attending IRE classes (Altmeyer 2010; Keast and Europe 2007).¹⁷ Koukounaras-Liagkis (2015) argues that teaching religion(s) in education, in a social pedagogical context, can encourage community cohesion; especially during the current (inter)nationally tense context, wherein a need for cohesion and mutual understanding is paramount. To reach these aims, Kuusisto and Gearon (2019) deduce three core aims from the interviews of RE teaching experts regarding societal perspectives, namely, understanding as literacy, understanding as empathy and competences for global citizenship. These three elements were named as answers to their research question ‘why teach about religions (from the perspective of professionals)?’. The potential role of the school in socialising pupils in civic values, identity development and belief systems entails why much debate, controversy and tension is present in politics and in the public sphere (Macaluso 2016). Although schools are not a political arena, they are one of the places and spaces where children learn how to deal with controversial issues (RAN 2019; Van Alstein 2019), how to become and behave as citizens, especially in plural societies (Martínez-Ariño and Teinturier 2019; Kuusisto and Gearon 2019). Education has been identified as a highly significant vehicle for reducing religious illiteracy, which is a standing issue in the secularised European countries (Zine 2001; Moore 2007, 2015; Conroy 2016; McCowan 2017).

In the socio-cultural and multireligious context of today, a need for interconvictional education is formulated by the Flemish Minister of Education, and the agreements are recorded in an Engagement Statement (28 January 2016), which can be seen as one of the derived European objectives (European Commission 2007, 2016, 2019). In line with European recommendations, contemporary education experts underline the importance of investing in pupils’ religious literacy, understood as ‘the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social, political, cultural life through multiple lenses’ (Moore 2007; Subbiondo 2012; Jackson 2014; Lafrarchi 2017a; Dinham and Shaw 2017; Sahin 2017a; Kuusisto and Gearon 2019; von Brömssen et al. 2020; Rissanen et al. 2020; Parker 2020). Ter Avest and Bakker (2009) argue that a solid education in life orientation combined with an authentic curiosity about the ‘Other’ is pre-conditional for innovation in RE, which, as an integral part of education, prepares students for a future they themselves will have to build. Jackson and Everington (2016) further emphasise the importance of the teacher’s impartiality as a condition for students to express and exchange their thoughts and emotions in a safe space. A maximal conceptualisation of education in intra- and interreligious dialogue is characterised by an emphasis on active learning, inclusion, interactiveness and a value-based and process-driven approach, based on illustrative didactical examples and interpretive and dialogical approaches that are open, inclusive and impartial, recognising the varied backgrounds of the students, which allows students to develop and articulate their own opinions and engage in authentic debates. Within such pedagogical approaches, the (I)RE teacher acts as a coach and moderator of the class event. The school and classroom can be seen as a ‘safe space’ (van San et al. 2010; Stephens et al. 2019) to discuss or debate conflicts, radical ideas, ideals or extreme points of view (de Ruyter 2016; Macaluso 2016; Sieckelinck 2007, 2009, 2017; Sieckelinck and Ruyter 2009; Stephens et al. 2019; Van Alstein 2019). These are considered learning opportunities where adolescents can voice their criticism, learn critical thinking, and build strong personalities armed against extreme ideological discourses or groups (Stephens et al. 2019; Cops et al. 2020). Education can play a role in developing the ability of pupils to understand who they are, and develop critical skills to question and analyse the content, (internet) sources and messages behind certain circulating ideas (Stephens et al. 2019). Referring to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad: ‘the quest for knowledge is the duty of every Muslim, man or woman’. This quest includes the effort to get to know and embrace the human plurality that is naturally present in the world in which we live.¹⁸ References to the human duty to respect internal and external differences as positive elements of the cultural and spiritual heritage of mankind can be found in the Islamic tradition (Sahin 2016). In this sense, intra- and interreligious education plays a

fundamental role in Islamic education, and fits naturally within the IRE framework (Selçuk and Avest 2017; Lafrarchi 2017b).

We note that the internal diversity of the student population in IRE courses is a relatively recent phenomenon, resulting from successive migration flows (IOM 2020). Today's teachers do not always know how to deal with the 'new' societal diversities (Vertovec 2007, 2015), which is also reflected in the internal diversity in the IRE classes (Niyozov 2010; Niyozov and Pluim 2009; Memon 2011; Mamodaly 2016; Memon and Alhashmi 2018). This diversity can be challenging, and requires knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes to deal properly with the intra- and interreligious questions raised during IRE. In comparison, the RE courses of the Christian movements are separately organised and constitutionally recognised. Given that interconvictional competences are considered important in the prevention of radicalisation and elaboration of counter-discourse, and since this can be seen as implicitly present in Islamic religious education, do the existing Flemish IRE teacher training programs stimulate and strengthen these competences, and how, in the long run? To provide an answer to this question, we systematically analysed the Flemish IRE teacher training programs, i.e., ECTS-sheets, paying special attention to subjects and didactical methods that train IRE teachers' abilities to stimulate, promote and strengthen the intra- and interconvictional competences of their students. To analyse and interpret the ECTS-sheets we used a reading grid with codes.

4. Materials and Methods

In this article we opted for a qualitative research method, i.e., a systematic text analysis of the successive Flemish Action Plans Radicalisation and mid-term reports. For this analysis, we had the documents to our disposal, available in digital format. The analysis is twofold. Firstly, we listed the elements found in the successive Action Plans Radicalisation that could directly be linked to Islamic religious education, content-wise or at an organisational level. Secondly, the curricula of the seven Flemish IRE teacher trainings were scrutinised for intra- and interconvictional learning outcomes, content and evaluation criteria. The following key words (codes) were listed: interreligious dialogue, interreligious competences, Islam, intercultural competences, values, culture, civic education, citizenship education.

We proceeded first to a digital search in the Flemish Government and Parliament policy document online database for the relevant policy documents. Once the relevant documents were targeted, a manual analysis of the (digital) policy documents was executed. Additionally, a one-by-one systematic selection of the relevant courses (i.e., the corresponding ECTS-sheets) of the seven Flemish IRE programs was performed. Once the relevant Islam-related courses were selected, we proceeded to a detailed systematic textual analysis to ensure that we did not miss concepts or references to incentives, initiatives or guidelines regarding the key concept 'interconvictional competences' in this study. A thorough analysis of 72 ECTS-sheets of all Islam-related courses was conducted. As the seven teacher training departments have their own website, curricula organisation system, ECTS-sheets structure and digital organisation and ECTS-sheet format, only a one-by-one manual systematic analysis allowed to answer the research questions. We only focused on the Islam-related courses, not on the courses of the *truncus communis*. During the systematic manual search we came across new concepts related to the key concepts, namely interconvictional dialogue and interconvictional competences in this article. In concrete terms, we analysed the programs in terms of learning goals, content and didactical elements that can be seen as promoting and strengthening the intra- and interconvictional competences of future novice IRE teachers.

We limited our analysis to the full-time day IRE teacher training for secondary education. However, most of the time the students of the secondary and primary school program are enrolled in the same courses (thus with the same lecturer). The IRE teaching programs offered in evening courses are the same as the regular courses regarding the credits, learning outcomes and content. Since we have limited access to the former IRE

programs, we limit our in-depth analysis to the currently existing program and go through the previous (academic year 2015–2016, 2017–2018, 2019–2020, 2020–2021) programs.

5. Meet the Expectations beyond the Limits

5.1. Policy Documents: High Expectations behind the Limits

In the political, policy and public debates, IRE teachers and imams were awarded a pivotal role in the prevention of radicalisation and the counter-discourse (Flemish Parliament 2015a; Flemish Government 2017c; Commission Radicalisation 2016). In the current increasingly secularised climate, various questions and expectations were formulated regarding the competences of IRE teachers and the content of the Flemish IRE curriculum for public primary and secondary schools (CIO 2012), as well as the governance of the *Centrum voor Islamonderwijs* (CIO 2012; Flemish Parliament 2011, 2017b, 2017d, 2019b; Education Commission 2018). This resulted in an Engagement Statement on 9 November 2016 signed by the Executive of Muslims of Belgium (EMB) and CIO, and the Minister of Education, wherein four action points are formulated. Two action points are of interest here: (1) the implementation of new qualitative IRE teacher training in regular Flemish teacher training departments and the actualisation of the IRE programs, and (2) the development of the teaching certificate for IRE.

The Action Plan for the Prevention of Radicalisation (Flemish Government 2015b) established a platform, including partners on community and federal level, who regularly meet and discuss the ongoing progress regarding the action points (Commission Radicalisation 2016; Flemish Government 2017c). In the first months after the tragic events in Paris and in Brussels, the policy makers decided to allocate resources to ‘de-radicalisation’ projects (successive Action Plan for the Prevention of Radicalisation, 2015–2020; Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur 2015). The granted project descriptions include explicit references to and links between positive identity development and radicalisation processes, young Muslims and radicalisation.¹⁹ Almost all the withheld projects aim to work mainly on positive identity development and/or decreasing radicalisation among Muslim young people as a target group.

Due to the focus and limited space, the most relevant elements included in the successive Action Plan reports (Flemish Government 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2020a; Commission Radicalisation 2016) are highlighted. The Flemish Government took the following measures in close contact and collaboration with the EMB and CIO (Flemish Government 2015b, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2020a): the establishment of the Network of Islam Experts was embedded in the womb of CIO (5.4), the organisation of training and study days for Education personnel (6.1., 8.1), the actualisation of the Digital Educative Platform Klasse (9.1), the development of tailor made support measure packages for higher education regarding radicalisation (9.1.), the appointment of radicalisation reference persons into the umbrella education organisation (10.1). Other measures are: investing in and focus on strengthening citizenship competences through support initiatives for teachers (12.1); similarly, if needed, the formulation of citizenship learning outcomes in relation to conclusions of the debates regarding the renewal of learning goals (12.2); the strengthening of the Media Knowledge and Skills of the teachers, support of the Knowledge Centre for Media Literacy and dissemination of the tools regarding hate speeches and media literacy in education (12.3). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education takes on a facilitator role in the interconvictional dialogue dossier. The recognised belief systems and the umbrella education organisation signed a Mission Statement on 28 January 2016 to stimulate and strengthen the interconvictional dialogue as a means and lever to stimulate and strengthen the interconvictional competences of pupils (12.4). Further to this, the IRE teachers are asked to collect and share good practices regarding interconvictional dialogue through joint study days (12.5). An Engagement Statement (9 November 2016) including an action plan for Islamic religious education is designed with the EMB. The progress and implementation of the four action points are monitored (12.6). The Action Plan for the Prevention of Radicalisation report of May 2020 includes an overview of all the action points taken and formulated since 2015 (Flemish Government 2020a).

On 2 June 2017, under the changed social and political context, the Action Plan for the Prevention of Radicalisation of 2015 was retitled ‘Flemish Action Plan of Prevention of Radicalisation and Polarisation’ (Flemish Government 2017a). The text refers mainly to security policy and collaboration between the Federal intelligence Service, includes information regarding Foreign Terrorist Fighters, in extension, their wives and children, the shifted security level as there are less FTF (Sealy and Modood 2020), and yet more attacks committed on European ground. The last paragraph of point two, ‘changed treat assessment’, mentions that ‘society is increasingly confronted with polarisation between and into the communities’. More specifically, it is not only about tensions between Belgian and foreign origin, but also about the division into (Muslim) communities (p. 3). Notably, the Action Plan describes the extension of the title as follows: ‘Polarisation affects personal relationships and undermines social participation and social stability. Radicalisation possibly promotes polarisation, but also the international events can be a trigger. Conversely, a polarised society can turn into a fruitful breeding ground for intolerant radical ideologies. Prevention of radicalisation and polarisation is therefore tackled in conjunction in this plan’ (p. 6). Annex 3, titled ‘resolution on combating violent radicalisation adopted in plenum on 27 May 2015 of the Flemish Parliament’ (p. 28), refers several times to citizenship education (pp. 4, 6, 11, 15, 17, 24, 28, 31, 33, 35, 36) related to values and norms (pp. 6, 7, 17, 30, 35, 36), and to education; more specifically, 12 of the 55 measurements refer to education as an active actor in the fight against radicalisation. Furthermore, it is striking to observe the many references to FTF, Syria fighters, Islamic radicalisation, even if the document includes other forms of radicalisation. Furthermore, the interconvictional dialogue is facilitated by the Flemish Agency Home Affairs, as part of the integration policy (p. 38).

We note, as education is pointed as having an important ‘prevention’ role, that these discussions juxtapose the discussion regarding the development of the new key competences, in particular citizenship education, and the new learning goals for all the subjects for secondary education. Following the Paris Declaration of 2015, the EU Member States implemented several initiatives (European Commission 2016, 2019) such as social, civic and intercultural competences, critical thinking and Media Literacy, and promoting intercultural dialogue. Regarding this last point, we observe juxtapositions with the initiatives taken in Flanders, where intercultural and interconvictional dialogue is explicitly mentioned and encouraged (Mission Statement of 28 January 2016). Additionally, many learning goals in the new key competence framework refer to critical thinking, self-reflection, informed debates, communication skills and transversal competences. This raised many questions among the religious education and non-confessional teachers about the position to take and the responsibility regarding this new key competences framework. Therefore, on 23 April 2019, the Inspector-General published a statement concerning the position of RE and non-confessional teachers regarding the learning goals included in the new key competences framework (Onderwijsinspectie 2019). The statement declares that they are not ‘exclusively’ responsible for the realisation of [the learning goals included in] the key competences. The evaluation always takes place ‘outside’ the RE and non-confessional courses.

5.2. Islamic Religious Education Teacher Training Programs

In this paragraph, we sketch the main findings regarding our detailed systematic digital and manual text analysis of the current ECTS-sheets of the Islam-related courses of the Flemish IRE teacher training programs (academic year 2020–2021). Due to the limited space, only an overall description will be included regarding the comparison with the former ECTS-sheets (2015–2016, 2017–2018, 2019–2020). The analysis of the ECTS-sheets of the 72 Islam-related courses prompts three categories of references to interconvictional competences. The three categories are: (1) learning goals literally copied out of the competences matrix elaborated by the Commission of the Life Stance Courses (CLBV), and approved by the Flemish Parliament, (2) more broadly formulated learning goals referring to worldviews, beliefs systems, religions, confessionality, internal and external religious diversity, religious and non-confessional identity development, dialogue between Muslims

and non-Muslims, secularism, liberalism and European context, and (3) learning goals referring and including general terms such as multiperspectivity, multicultural context, super diversity, global citizenship, plural society. Additionally, a fourth ‘umbrella’ category was distinguished, (4) generic learning goals and learning conditions such as critical thinking, self-reflection, dialogue skills, genuine curiosity toward the Other, openness, empathy, non-violent communication skills, formulating one’s own opinions and views regarding current (sensitive) topics.

In what follows, the most relevant findings are sketched. First, the courses cover the following topics, based on the titles and content descriptions: sira or biography of the Prophet, hadith, Qu’ran, fiqh or Islamic law and jurisprudence, kalam or theology, akhlaq or social and moral behavior, history and culture, Arabic and recitation, and internship in schools. The references to interconvictional competences were not found in one particular subject, nor does an alignment seem to be coming from the EMB/CIO regarding interconvictional competences. This is a consequence of the fact that the ETCS-sheets are filled in by the lecturers themselves, and university colleges function independently from the Recognised Bodies. It is important to remember that the EMB/CIO is the only legal body which may determine the content of the courses. The Catholic university colleges seem to elaborate more, consequently, on the learning goals based on the Decreet Basiscompetenties ([Flemish Government 2018b](#)).

When we take a closer look, the ECTS-sheets prompt the following observations. One University college enclosed a reference to Islamic State (IS) and radicalisation. One other University college included radicalisation linked with the current societal context in the ECTS-sheet descriptions. Another University college phrases it as follows: ‘(. . .) underline the importance of the pedagogical perspective of extreme ideals’. Additionally, most of the references included fall under category 2, and were found in the courses ‘Actuality and Innovation’, ‘Integrated Projects’, ‘Theology and Philosophy’, ‘Applied Didactics’, as well as ‘Religion, Meaning and Life Stance’ and ‘Identity in Diversity’.²⁰ Indirect references found throughout the ECTS-sheets under category 2 are for example: be able to interpret and contextualise (controversial) Quran verses, certain controversial hadiths, sharia and fiqh controversial passages which raise questions among pupils and in the current societal (secularised/liberal European) context, contextualise events of the life of the prophets, as well as explain the impact and consequences of these controversial passages on the current wider Belgian context.

Worth noting is the observation of the overall references to the ‘interconvictional’ context.²¹ The most striking observations are (1) starting from ethical–societal subjects, be able to put into practice the interconvictional dialogue, (2) put the Islamic historical and legal framework in perspective and in the contemporary interconfessional context, (3) be able to deal and discuss Muslim and non-Muslim different opinions and visions, (4) be able to have a broad societal view on Islam and worldviews, (5) be able to handle and teach contemporary—ethical—issues such as euthanasia, organ donation, sexuality, suicide, end of life, Human Rights/Women’s Rights, the importance of European/Belgian values in the context of the Islamic texts and principles, and also subjects which are informed by cultural influences, such as the relationship between men/women in the Islam and in Belgian society, Islam and economics, (6) be able to analyse, debate and reflect on the importance of education and environment of the child in the Islam and contemporary society, and be able to discuss in group how ‘religious identity can be shaped in the public sphere’. One plural non-denominational University college added ‘literally’ interconvictional learning goals 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 17, 18 which are included in the competence matrix ([Commissie Levensbeschouwelijke Vakken 2012](#)) in all the mandatory Islam courses through the three-year IRE program. One Catholic University college did not include (literal) interconvictional learning goals in the ECTS-sheets, nor references of the second category. Only one short overall sentence in the Sira and Akhlaq course was found, ‘discovering anchor points for a peaceful society out of the life of the prophet’. The lecturer is of Turkish background.

It is striking, yet not surprising, as the Turkish community is known not to be keen to implement the (new) policy initiatives.

In general, an increasing number of direct and indirect referrals and/or new referrals to interconvictional competences, religious identity development, pluralistic society, inter-confessional context, internal diversity, Muslim and non-Muslims was observed compared to the previous ECTS-sheets (2015–2016). Additionally, references, learning goals, content descriptions and objectives which aim to strengthen the IRE teachers in dealing with the societal complexity, internal and external religious diversity, liberalism and European values are included in the ECTS-sheets more than previously seen. Worth noting is the reference to radicalisation linked with the ‘current societal debates regarding worldviews and religions, secularisation, radicalisation (. . .), and also the societal debates regarding worldviews and religions, and the consequence on education, will be subject of reflection’.

As far as academic subjects are concerned, they did not explicitly refer to radicalisation, super diversity or interconvictional dialogue, apart from the course Islamic religious education. Regarding the university teacher training, only three courses refer to a Western European context, to other belief systems and/or to a pluralistic societal context (category 2), namely Islamic ethics, Islamic religious education and Quran sciences. Hence, this is less elaborate and detailed than in the university colleges’ teacher training. The references were mostly found in the course ‘Islamic ethics and spiritual care’, linked to the role and professional relationships that chaplains have in hospitals, prisons, with for instance non-religious professionals such as psychologists, doctors, nursing staff, prison directors, and guards.

The previous ECTS-sheets did not include as many references as the current ones, with one exception: the Catholic Dialogue School concept²² which is applied to the University College since 2015–2016. The main features of the Catholic Dialogue University Colleges can be described as follows: ‘starting from a Catholic framework to welcome, to be open and hospitable to others regardless of the religious or non-religious background’. Based on this larger framework, the Catholic university colleges include at least two compulsory courses for every student, ‘Religie, Zingeving and Levensbeschouwing’ (Religion, Life Meaning and Life Stance) and ‘Identiteit in Diversiteit’ (Identity in Diversity). The course ‘Identity in Diversity’ explicitly recognises the internal and external diversity among the students in university colleges and the pupils in compulsory education. Based on the ECTS-sheets, these courses ‘aim to practice interconvictional dialogue and strengthen the interconvictional competences’ of the future novice teachers. The ECTS-sheets contain recurrent elements regarding religious development such as knowing and using the appropriate religious confessional concepts, knowing one’s belief, religious identity in the super diverse context, recognising different religious positions in society, applying critical reflection in a pluralistic context, openness toward internal and external diversity. However, the included concepts are not described, nor are definitions included. Thus, the lecturer has the pedagogical and didactical authority [and freedom] to choose the approach or perspective to bring in the concepts, and the learning paths to achieve the learning goals, still within the broader (Catholic) pedagogical frameworks designed, and the mission and vision of the University Colleges as a whole toward which they work. This study did not include a systematic analysis of the study material. Hence, it is worth mentioning that the vast majority of the lecturers use their own PowerPoints or syllabus based on the information in the ECTS-sheets.

For the sake of completeness, the curricula of non-Islam-related courses contain courses such as ‘challenges in education’, ‘democracy and citizenship’, ‘inclusive citizenship’, ‘actuality and innovation’, which contain concepts referring to the overall aims described in the policy documents, such as super diversity, critical thinking, interconvictional dialogue, European and liberal values. Most of these courses did not exist or had other focuses until 2016. In an attempt to approach diversity inclusively, several concepts are interchangeably used by the teacher training involved. In other words, there is no alignment or uniformity in the handling of concepts. However, the lecturers seem to

attempt to include knowledge, skills as well as attitude components regarding interconvictional competences in the ECTS-sheets. We note that until now, no systematic empirical research has been conducted regarding the activities during IRE classes, quality of the IRE courses or didactical material used in compulsory education, and regarding the Flemish IRE teacher training.

To summarise: there is a clear shift observable since 2015. The increased references to interconvictional competences, plural society, Muslim and non-Muslims relationship are new. However, there is no alignment, nor clear-cut definitions of the included concepts in the ECTS-sheets. Thus, it is still unclear for an outsider to correctly judge the kind of pedagogical-didactical perspectives or contents that the lecturers bring in to work on interconvictional competences of the IRE teachers. Therefore, a qualitative in-depth evaluation of IRE and (empirical) research is needed to provide reliable data regarding IRE.

6. Discussion

The current international context, the looming threat of new terrorist attacks, and the plurality in the Belgian society have acted as an impetus to question the place and role of religion in Belgian education in general, and of IRE in public schools and Flemish teacher training programs in particular. This study is based on two closely related research questions. The first concerns the elements in Flemish policy documents, i.e., successive Action Plans and the respective reports. The second refers to the currently existing Flemish IRE teacher training programs with regards to intra- and interreligious elements. The findings can be read as part of a larger societal and political debate regarding the place, role, contributions of religious education in schools, and additional debates regarding citizenship education as a key competence.

The Action Plans Radicalisation included a broadly formulated description of radicalisation linked to Islam, jihadism, foreign fighters (2015) and other forms of radicalisation (2017), which was evaluated as too narrow, stigmatising one particular group (Cops et al. 2020). The successive Action Plans reveal that 20 of the 40 action points (2015), and 38 of the 62 action points (2017) directly or indirectly involve the Ministry of Education (Cops et al. 2020). Therefore, this study is highly relevant. One of the first implemented initiatives is the 'Network of Islam experts' in October 2015. The main objective of the Network is to inform schools and teachers about Islamic topics, to answer Islam-related questions, to discuss with Muslim and non-Muslim youngsters in a school context about (controversial) topics and de-radicalisation processes. In particular to spread an open and 'moderate Islam'. Although the Network organises many events, still the effectivity and long-term impact is not clear (Cops et al. 2020). Even more studies state that such interventions are not (yet) proved to be effective (De Backer et al. 2020; Cops et al. 2020). In the successive Action Plans and the reports, the policy makers refer dozens of times to the qualifications, and continuing training of the IRE teachers as a need and necessity to be able to answer and react properly to the prompted (radicalisation) issues raised, to have insights and understanding of the liberal, European values and norms, to have knowledge and understanding of Human Rights, to be able to handle and respond to questions regarding for example radicalisation processes, religious identity development, euthanasia, homosexuality, Women's Rights. In line with the formulated expectations, the Centre of Islamic Education organised compulsory study days and seminars. Based on the listed study days and workshops in the Action Plan report (2020), the EMB/CIO meet—at least formally—the expectations formulated. Still, similarly, the effectiveness of those compulsory study days can be questioned. Referring to the Church and State separation principle, one can wonder if the 'state' can impose topics to be part of the professionalisation trajectories of the IRE teachers. In other words: did they cross the constitutional line and interfere in the religious matters, as the separation of Church and State is a leading constitutional principle, by imposing qualification recruitments, study days about specific subjects? This question falls out of the scope of this study, but it is

worth questioning in an overall perspective. The second part of this study focuses on the interconvictional competences present in the IRE teacher training programs.

Over the past decades, Flanders became a super diverse society, particularly in its big cities. This diversity in society is, by default, mirrored in Flemish classrooms. Not only ethnic diversity, but also an increasing intra- and interreligious diversity is observed in the IRE courses as a consequence of the migration flows from the Balkan in the nineties, and since the last two decades from the Middle East (IOM 2020). The internal diversity challenges the Islamic religious education as a whole, as pupils from different religious Schools of Thought and religious movements are now present in the IRE courses (Everington et al. 2011). This new context raises didactical and pedagogical questions among the IRE teachers (Lafrarchi 2020). The religious diversity marks the starting point for a potentially fruitful, deep intra- and interreligious dialogue in schools as a whole. The intra- and interconvictional ‘dialogue’ competences that are needed in the contemporary Flemish super diverse society should be constructed in a safe space, moderated by skilled, well-trained and impartial IRE teachers using illustrative didactical lesson material (Jackson 2014; Jackson and Everington 2016). The findings indicate that the Muslim lecturers of the university colleges include the intra- and interconvictional competences in the Islam-related courses. However, significant differences in approach are found in the way the lecturers describe and refer to the interconvictional competences. Three approaches regarding the mandatory interconvictional competences were distinguished: (1) the literal copy of the interconvictional competences developed by the Commission (Commissie Levensbeschouwelijke Vakken 2012), (2) references to interconfessional (Belgian) context, religious identity development, internal and external religious/interconvictional diversity, interconvictional dialogue, Muslims and non-Muslims relationship, and (3) more general references to diversity, citizenship, plural society, multiperspectivity. A fourth category contains skills and attitudes to stimulate, strengthen the interconvictional competences such as critical thinking, self-reflection, dialogue skills, genuine curiosity toward the Other, openness, empathy, non-violent communication skills, formulating one’s own opinions and views regarding current topics. In a globalised world, literacy regarding religions and worldviews are highly felt (Zine 2001; Moore 2007, 2015; Conroy 2016; McCowan 2017). The included references can be seen as an attempt to increase this literacy. The explicit knowledge and references to world religions and the common course can be considered as an answer to the formulated ‘political’ expectations. With regards to this, we observed attempts of the lecturers to bring in content elements and courses in which all the students participate, which aims ‘to practice interconvictional dialogue’. Jackson and Everington (2016) underline the importance of an impartial teacher who moderates, guides and supports the student in a ‘safe space’, which is needed to help the students succeed in their learning process.

As the Minister of Education and the Recognised Bodies signed a Mission Statement on 28 January 2016 to implement a minimum of compulsory interconvictional courses in public education, with the aim of stimulating, promoting and strengthening pupils’ intra- and interreligious dialogue competences, we expected to find clear-cut definitions, descriptions, which are a starting point to develop a qualitative validated didactical-pedagogical framework to work on interconvictional competences. However, no clear-cut definitions or descriptions were found.

Furthermore, only the EMB/CIO, as the Recognised Body, has the legal authority to determine, to develop, to implement qualifications for the current and future novice IRE teachers and to monitor the qualifications and IRE programs. In this respect, we did not find an alignment of the interconvictional competences between the courses in the University college programs itself, nor in the wider Flemish context. However, the university colleges cooperating under the Catholic Association umbrella acknowledge the internal and external religious diversity by launching the ‘Catholic Dialogue School’ concept in 2016, which was prepared and discussed long before the ‘recent’ wave of installation of new IRE teacher training.²³

7. Conclusions

Belgium is a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy with the ‘separation of Church and State’ as a main principle. However, the relationship between both is interdependent. In concreto, the state pays the salaries and pensions of religious ministries and of the religious and non-confessional teachers appointed in public and private schools. In the case of Islamic religious education, and training, the policy makers, based on their discretionary authority, formulated expectations wherein mainly the Ministry of Education acts as a facilitator. Coming to the core of this study, the focus of the critics mainly concerns the qualifications of the IRE, the recruitment criteria, professionalisation trajectories, quality control and inspection of IRE teachers. Even though many criticisms were formulated, no systematic analysis has been conducted until now. Therein lies the novelty of this study. Thus, the analysis of policy documents and Flemish IRE teacher training programs aims to contribute to the education policy research field. The study was conducted based on the following research questions: (1) does the Flemish IRE teacher training meet the formulated expectations in the successive policy documents by politicians, and (2) can we find references to interconvictional competences in the Flemish Islamic Religious Education (IRE) Teacher Training Programs?

The dramatic events in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016 were an impetus for the establishment of IRE teacher training in the regular Flemish teaching training institutions. By doing so, one of the expectations formulated toward the Executive of Muslims of Belgium (EMB) as Recognised Body, is formally fulfilled. However, the policy makers agreed to state several formulated expectations in two formal statements in which the Ministry of Education plays a facilitating role. First, the Engagement Statement regarding the interconvictional competences of 28 January 2016 is signed by all the Recognised Bodies for religious and non-confessional education in compulsory education and the Flemish Public Education organisations. Second, the Mission Statement of 9 November 2016, which stipulates four main action points, is agreed upon by the EMB/CIO and the Ministry of Education. Herein, the action point regarding the implementation of new qualitative IRE teacher training is of interest. The compulsory interconvictional competences juxtapose the implementation of the IRE teacher training—as a three-year training is formulated as a quality requirement—as from now on ‘the (I)RE teachers are expected to evolve, answer to, participate into (controversial) societal debates and issues’—among other means through interconvictional competences—as they are seen as one of the key actors in the de-radicalisation process and counter-discourse. The findings show attempts to integrate interconvictional competences and learning goals in the Islam-related courses of the IRE teacher training programs of university colleges and university programs. However, no alignment, instructions or (theoretical) framework seem to emerge from the Recognised Bodies, i.e., EMB/CIO or other teacher training institutions.

Additionally, and related to the research questions, we observe a stretch regarding the policy makers’ and politicians’ legal constitutional competences regarding the constitutional separation of Church and State. They formulate expectations based, from their point of view, on the mutual interdependence between Church and State. Politicians rely on their discretionary, and constitutional mutual interdependence to formulate expectations ‘mostly’, if not only in some matters, toward the Recognised Bodies for IRE, and IRE teachers. The scope of this article does not allow for an in-depth juridical analysis, yet this observation is worth mentioning.

According to Coolsaet, the factors for radicalisation lie not in ‘Islam’ itself, nor in the ‘Islamic’ orthodox practice of the perpetrators. Similarly, the magnified focus on ‘Islamic’ radicalisation, jihadism and religious terrorism in the policy documents is not in line with the observation of [Europol \(2015, 2016\)](#). So, are the IRE teachers the ‘elect’ target group to work on de-radicalisation or to contribute to counter-discourse, through interconvictional dialogue? Based on the Action Plan reports, Commission reports, the study of Flemish Peace Institution, CONRAD research, we conclude that more efforts and funding is to be invested in lifelong learning of all the educational personnel, to create a

safe space in school context, and into a tight social fabric, if we aspire a peaceful society wherein radicalisation and polarisation no longer exist. Investments in that sense are mostly recommended. Additionally, resilience, critical thinking, self-reflection, non-violent communication, dialogue skills seem to be keys to achieve this overall goal. In more general terms we conclude that focusing on Islamic religious education, Islam, or Muslim young people seems to work counterproductively, as it increases the polarisation and tensions. The IRE teacher training programs aim to equip the novice IRE teacher to be able to support the personal development of the pupil, to contribute to the religions and worldviews literacy of the pupils, to develop an understanding of one's own values and worldview. The compulsory 'common' interconvictional courses aim to create a 'safe space' wherein the pupils encounter, discuss, exchange and critically debate about sensitive and controversial subjects as well as to increase the mutual understanding and insights in the complexity and diversity of perspectives within and between religions and worldviews in super diverse societies. The effectiveness of these interventions can be questioned as they seem not to be well-thought-out based on scientific didactical-pedagogical frameworks. More specifically, there is a need for validated interconvictional didactical methods, and to effectively professionalise all the (RE) educational staff in these specific didactical methods.

Conducting field work was not possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A first systematic analysis of the ECTS-sheets reveals that much work still has to be done. A follow-up study could consist of classroom observations and interviews to map the concrete initiatives and perspectives and experiences of the lecturers and novice (I)RE teachers regarding interconvictional competences. One more additional concern expressed by the stakeholders, and IRE teachers themselves, is the need of qualitative didactic material grafted on the Flemish/Belgian context that meet the educational standards.

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Notes

- ¹ p. 15, 40–42, 76–82, 92, 100, 101, 102, 108, 109, 110, see also Flemish [Flemish Government \(2020a\)](#), pp. 46–47 [imams], 48–50, 70 [Muslim chaplains], 97 [imams].
- ² In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of January 2015, Ministers wanted to boost EU-level cooperation on four overarching priorities: (1) Ensuring young people acquire social, civic and intercultural competences, by promoting democratic values and fundamental rights, social inclusion and non-discrimination, as well as active citizenship, (2) Enhancing critical thinking and media literacy, particularly in the use of the Internet and social media, so as to develop resistance to discrimination and indoctrination, (3) Fostering the education of disadvantaged children and young people, by ensuring that our education and training systems address their needs and (4) Promoting intercultural dialogue through all forms of learning in cooperation with other relevant policies and stakeholders. https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/news/2015/documents/citizenship-education-declaration_en.pdf (accessed on 29 January 2021); ET2020 Working Group https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/european-policy-cooperation/et2020-working-groups_en (accessed on 29 January 2021).
- ³ Note that four of the seven recognised religions were already recognised in 1831 or shortly thereafter. In their order of constitutional recognition, these are: Roman Catholicism (1830); Anglicanism (1835); Protestantism (1876); Judaism (1831); Islam (1974); Eastern Orthodoxy (1985); Humanism (1993) and Buddhism (2020) (www.justice.be (accessed on 15 March 2021)).
- ⁴ Article 21 of the Constitution of Belgium: 'The State does not have the right to intervene either in the appointment or in the installation of ministers of any religion whatsoever or to forbid these ministers from corresponding with their superiors, from publishing the acts of these superiors, but, in this latter case, normal responsibilities as regards the press and publishing apply.'
- ⁵ Informed by the president of CIO, on 16 October 2020 during a meeting.
- ⁶ https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20170505_02868788 (accessed on 15 February 2021), <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/04/11/vanaf-1-september-moeten-islamleerkrachten-een-opleiding-hoger-o/> (accessed on 15 February 2021); AP 2017–2018: <https://www.ap.be/artikel/lerarenopleiding-islam-meer-dan-religie> (accessed on 25 February 2021); TM: 2015–2016: <https://www.thomasmore.be/pers/thomas-more-introduceert-vak-islam-de-lerarenopleiding> (accessed on 25 February 2021).

- 7 According to recent data, 647 of the 1000 active IRE teachers do not have the required diploma, see: <https://www.n-va.be/pe/pe/bericht/islamonderwijs-in-vlaanderen-enkel-met-juiste-diploma-voor-de-klas> (accessed on 15 February 2021). (In Dutch). According to the Radicalisation Commission, Flemish Parliament, 37.9% has the required diploma, 32.6% has a diploma for secondary education that is considered sufficient. In primary education, the percentages are lower. Plenary Meeting of 13 April 2016, see (in Dutch): <https://www.vlaamsparlement.be/plenaire-vergaderingen/1048808/verslag/1050224> (accessed on 15 February 2021), Interview with the Inspector IRE see: <https://www.standaard.be/plus/20170104/ochtend/optimized/13> (accessed on 07 February 2021).
- 8 In collaboration with Public Education Umbrella organisation, GO!, organised a mandatory two day training for all the IRE teachers on 18, 22, 23 May 2017 and 21, 25, 26 September 2017.
- 9 The coordinator (and volunteers) is (are) paid by the Flemish Ministry of Education. CIO/EMB has to submit an annual report regarding the activities and expenditure of the funding.
- 10 The Flemish official documents do not refer to ‘interreligious dialogue’ as humanism and buddhism are not considered as religions. In Dutch the concept ‘interlevensbeschouwelijke competenties’ is used; which can be translated as ‘inter-convictional competences’. Convictions refers to all the religions and non-religions (humanism and buddhism) recognised by the Belgian Constitution.
- 11 http://www.ucsia.org/main.aspx?c=*UCSIA2&n=107202 (accessed on 30 January 2021).
- 12 https://www.onderwijsinspectie.be/sites/default/files/atoms/files/20121206_dossier_ILSenILD.pdf (accessed on 20 February 2021).
- 13 It was not until December 2019 (three years after the Mission Statement of 9 November 2016) that two members of Moroccan background were elected. The EMB and CIO president has been Turkish up to this moment (April 2021). Several policy documents mention the resistance of the Turkish wing of the EMB to implement and renew the structures of the Recognised Body. Remark: programs of IRE in primary and secondary education are translations of Turkish state IRE programs.
- 14 The policy document at European level do not mention interreligious or religious competences, hence the concept intercultural dialogue is used.
- 15 “Information on foreigners joining the ranks of IS suggests that recruitments can take place very quickly, without necessarily requiring a long radicalisation process. (...) In view of [this] shift away from the religious component in the radicalisation of, especially, young recruits, it may be more accurate to speak of a ‘violent extremist social trend’ rather than using the term ‘radicalisation’. Changes in modus operandi of Islamic terrorist attacks. Review held by experts from Member States and Europol on 29 November and 1 December 2015. Den Haag, Europol, 18 January 2016 (www.europol.europa.eu/conent/ects) (accessed on 30 January 2021); For the discussion regarding the concept ‘radicalising’ see: ‘All Radicalisation is Local’. The genesis and drawbacks of an elusive concept. Brussel, EGMONT-Koninklijk Instituut voor Internationale Betrekkingen, juni 2016 (www.egmontinstitute.be/publication_article/all-radicalisation-is-local) (accessed on 31 January 2021).
- 16 In collaboration with Ministry of Home Affairs, and Ministry of Wellbeing and Youth, and in 18 of 38 as the only responsible policy domain.
- 17 The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (European Commission 2007), which aimed to increase the visibility, efficiency and coherence of all European programs and actions that contribute to intercultural dialogue; Decision No. 1983/2006/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 concerning the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008).
- 18 To illustrate we refer for example to Quranic verses: Q30/V22; Q49/V13.
- 19 <https://momenten.demos.be/blog/8-projecten-rond-positieve-identiteitsontwikkeling-goedgekeurd> (accessed on 23 January 2021).
- 20 This study focuses on the Islam-related courses. Hence, this observation was so striking and worth mentioning in the broader framework of this article.
- 21 The University college and University do not use a standardisation nor do they seem to have an alignment in the use of concepts, formulating learning goals. This can be illustrated by the non-coherent use of concepts throughout the courses: interconfessional, multireligious, super diverse societal context.
- 22 *Rapport onderzoek naar de opvatting van 361 directieleden uit 59 katholieke scholen in Vlaanderen (2008–2015)*; <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/onderzoek-katholieke-identiteit-directie/> (accessed on 20 January 2021), <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/onderzoek-katholieke-identiteit-directie-volledig/> (accessed on 20 January 2021).
- 23 I was member of the Work Group ‘Catholic Dialogue School’ from 2011 till 2015.

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