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Who wants to teach the next generation? Exploring the shortage of RE teachers in European Schools

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Abstract

Across Europe countries suffer from a severe teacher shortage including for Religious Education (RE) teachers. This article explores the situation and measures taken in Austria, Estonia, Germany, Latvia and Wales and asks which factors enhance or hinder people's motivation to become a RE teacher. To this end, one of the most internationally renowned and valid instruments for comparative analyses of motivations to choose a teaching career, the FIT-Choice model developed by Watt and Richardson, is used. Each factor – socialisation, task demand and return, self-perceptions, intrinsic value, personal and social utility value, fallback career – is explored from several country perspectives reflecting on the particularities for the motivation of RE teachers. Through this analysis, the article attempts to indicate avenues how to address RE teacher shortages in Europe.

Keywords: career choice, comparative analysis motivation, Religious Education/RE, teacher shortage

Wer möchte die nächste Generation unterrichten? Eine Sondierung des Religionslehrkräftemangels an europäischen Schulen

Zusammenfassung

In vielen Ländern Europas herrscht ein gravierender Lehrkräftemangel, auch an Religionslehrkräften. Dieser Artikel betrachtet die aktuelle Lage und die ergriffenen Maßnahmen in Österreich, Estland, Deutschland, Lettland und Wales und fragt, welche Faktoren für die Motivation, Religionslehrkraft zu werden, zu- oder abträglich sind. Dafür wird das von Watt und Richardson entwickelte FIT-Choice Modell verwendet, ein international renommiertes Instrument für vergleichende Analysen der Motive für die Berufswahl Lehramt. Jeder Faktor – Sozialisation, Aufgabenanforderungen und erwarteter Nutzen, Selbstwahrnehmung, intrinsische Motivation, persönliche und soziale Motive, Ausweichkarriere – wird aus verschiedenen Länderperspektiven untersucht, wobei Besonderheiten der Motive von Religionslehrkräften berücksichtigt werden. Damit versucht der Artikel Wege aufzuzeigen, wie dem Mangel an Religionslehrkräften in Europa begegnet werden kann.

Schlagwörter: Berufswahl, Lehrermangel, Motivation, Religionsunterricht, Vergleichende Analyse

1 Introduction: the RE teacher shortage in Europe

Teacher shortages are a widespread and growing issue in OECD countries, affecting all levels of education (as can be seen in figure 1, highlighting the nations of the contributing authors). Common contributing factors include an ageing workforce, low salaries relative to similarly educated professions, high stress levels, and a general devaluation of the teaching profession (OECD, 2024, p.16). To address these challenges, the OECD recommends three strategies: increasing teacher numbers, better allocation of teachers to areas of greatest need, and enhancing the profession's attractiveness (OECD, 2024, p.44).

The data and discussion below highlight these issues in the nations represented by the authors (Austria, Estonia, Germany, Latvia and Wales), and hence form the context for that discussion in the rest of this article. This draws on national studies from these nations to explore the factors that impact the choice of an individual in choosing teaching as a profession, focusing (where data/literature permits) on Religious Education (RE) teachers reflecting the author team's roles in RE teacher education. Within these nations, a wide range of different RE models are included in the analysis (Austria and Germany denominational RE, Wales RE as part of a broader curriculum area of Religion, Values and Ethics, Estonia non-denominational and optional RE, Latvia RE as part of social sciences and history).

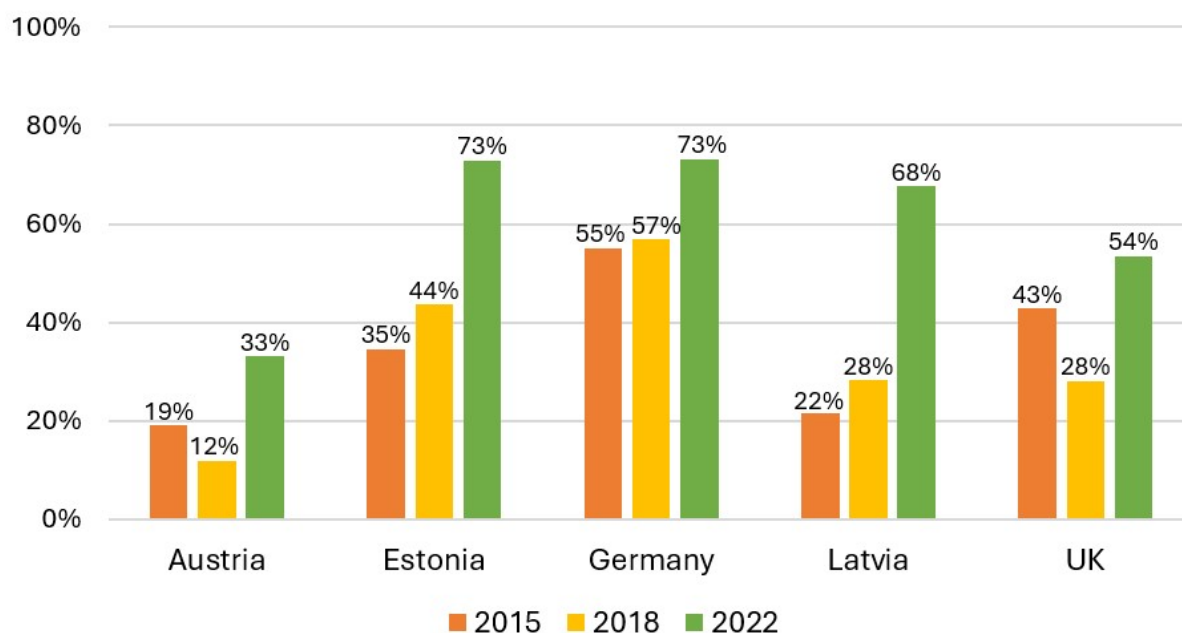


Fig. 1: Percentage of students whose principal reported that instruction is hindered due to a lack of teaching staff (based on OECD, 2023, Table II B1.5.4)

In *Estonia*, 51% of teachers are over 50, while only 9% are under 30, creating a significant generational gap (Haridussilm, 2024). Although RE teachers require only a higher education qualification, allowing for flexibility in filling positions, the subject is often taught by non-specialists, such as history or civics teachers, who lack formal training in RE (Härm, 2021, p.29-30). Only one university in Estonia offers a master's program to train licensed RE teachers, attracting fewer than six students annually. With RE offered in only 13% of schools as an elective subject, institutional support is limited. Programmes like micro-credential training for non-specialist teachers have been introduced, but without stable

status and broader support, the shortage of qualified RE teachers will persist (Schihalejev, 2020).

Germany faces a general teacher shortage, with a predicted shortfall of 68,000 teachers by 2035 (KMK, 2023). While data on RE teacher shortages are unavailable, denominational RE models in 12 of 16 states rely heavily on Protestant and Catholic teachers, whose student numbers have been declining. For example, only 0.7% of university students in 2021 were enrolled in theology programmes (Ferk, 2022). Protestant and Catholic RE school student numbers are decreasing, while enrolment in Ethics and Philosophy courses is growing (KMK, 2021; 2024). Recommendations from the Scientific Advisory Board to reform theology studies, recruit career changers, and enhance transferability between states aim to address these challenges (SWK, 2023).

In *Austria*, 16 recognised religious communities have the right to offer Religious Education (RE) in schools, with the Roman Catholic Church being the largest provider. However, the sector faces significant challenges. Among Roman Catholic RE teachers, 40% are over the age of 56, highlighting the ageing workforce. Recent changes in RE teacher training have also reduced the influx of career changers, traditionally a key demographic for this profession, as noted by the Catholic education authority (Katholisches Schulam Wien, 2024).

The Protestant Church faces similar difficulties. According to the Protestant superintendent of Salzburg/Tirol/Vorarlberg, in January 2024, two-thirds of Protestant students in Vorarlberg were no longer receiving RE lessons due to declining numbers of Protestants and a severe shortage of RE teachers. These trends underscore the urgent need for strategic interventions to address teacher shortages and adapt RE provisions to Austria's evolving demographic and educational landscape.

Latvia's teacher shortage is severe, with 1,330 vacancies in 2021, primarily in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), Latvian, and design subjects (Laganovskis, 2021). Many teachers retire or leave the profession within their first five years due to low salaries, limited job security, and poor working conditions. As of 2023, 50% of Latvia's teachers were over 50, exacerbating the workforce gap. Although over 1,000 graduates annually enter pedagogical programmes, 33% quit within five years (Laganovskis, 2021). To address these issues, Latvia has implemented budget placements for aspiring teachers and re-qualification programmes for professionals from other fields. RE is integrated into Social Sciences and History, reflecting a broader competency-based approach rather than a stand-alone subject.

In *Wales*, the shortage of RE teachers mirrors broader recruitment issues. During 2023–24, there was a 62% shortfall in teacher recruitment, with STEM and English prioritised over RE (Egan et al., 2024). Although the national quota for secondary RE teacher training is 36 students annually, most providers recruit only 2–3 students, highlighting a significant gap. Many RE teachers in Wales are non-specialists, with 40% lacking formal RE training (Education workforce council (EWC), 2024). Financial incentives offered for other priority subjects do not extend to RE, further undermining recruitment efforts.

In response to the situation outlined above, this article presents a re-conceptualisation of teachers' motivation to train for, and work in, education in a post-pandemic Europe. The discussion contributes to the existing body of knowledge by identifying new research areas related to the Factors Influencing Teaching Choice (FIT-choice) model (Watt & Richardson, 2012). Whilst it is widely accepted that there is a shortage of teachers across many subject disciplines, across many European nations, this article pays specific

attention to the teachers of RE as we suggest there are specific and additional challenges to recruitment, training and retention of RE teachers. This initial overview alone makes it clear that the shortage of RE teachers extends across all RE models and needs to be addressed in all these nations.

2 Motivation to become a RE teacher – the FIT-Choice model

Measures put in place to address the decline in RE teacher recruitment and retention need to address young peoples' reflections that lead to their individual decision-making process. "The decisive factor in career choice motivation is how the teaching profession is perceived and evaluated as a concrete career option and whether it seems achievable with a justifiable amount of effort and risk" (SWK, 2023, p.36).¹ Many researchers worldwide have explored the motivation for teaching as a career choice (Watt et al., 2012, p.792-793). One of the most internationally renowned and valid instruments is the FIT-Choice model developed by Watt and Richardson (Glutsch, König & Rothland, 2018, p.462; Watt et al., 2012). It identifies a series of factors that influence a person's choice for a teaching career. These motivational factors cover a wide range of aspects starting with socialisation influences and including influences of task demand and return, self-perceptions, values and fallback career.

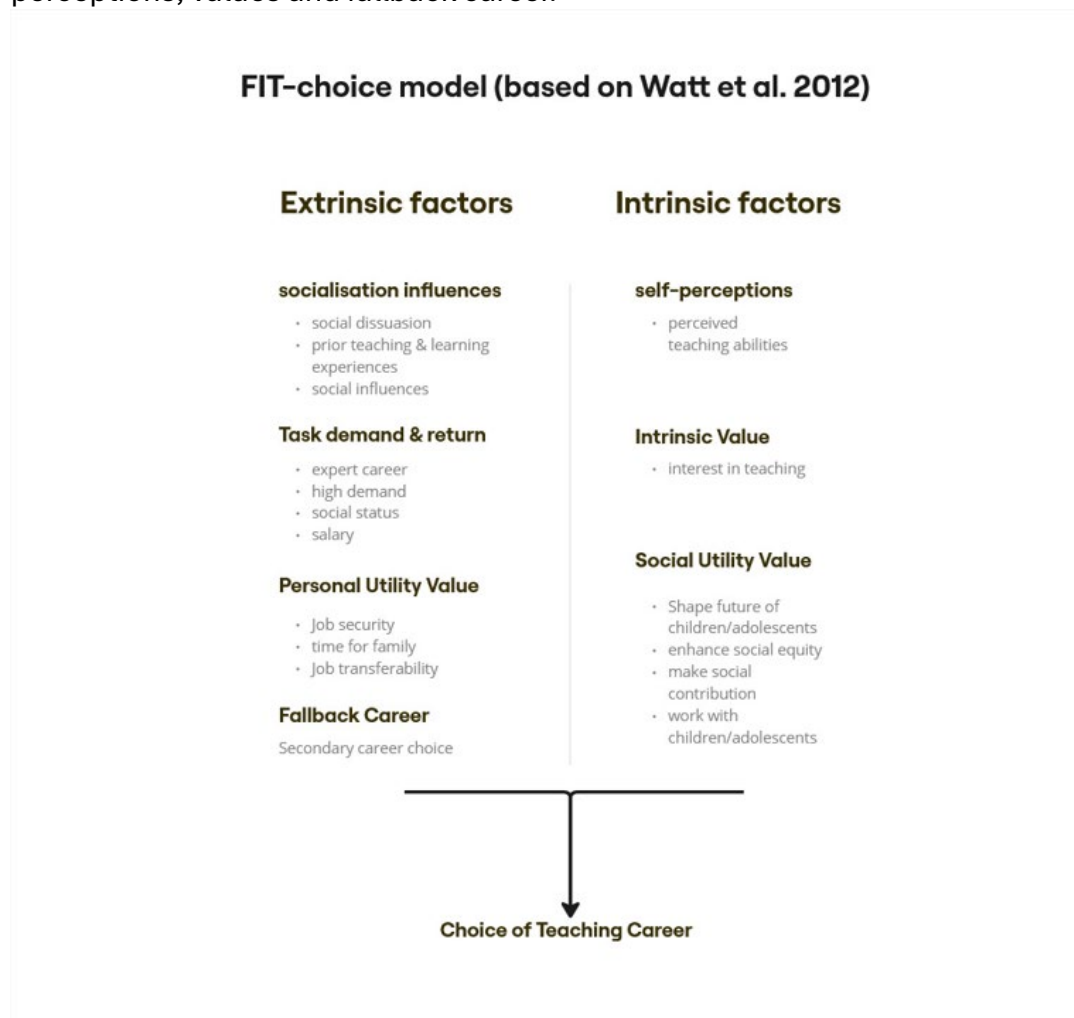


Fig. 2: FIT-choice model structured by extrinsic/intrinsic factors (based on Watt et al., 2012)

Most studies show that the perceived teaching abilities, the intrinsic value and the wish to work with children are the most decisive factors (Watt et al., 2012; Glutsch et al., 2018, p.462). “However, the socio-cultural background must be taken into account here, since in some countries extrinsic reasons such as salary or job security are the main motivation for wanting to pursue the profession” (Glutsch et al., 2018, p.462).²

The FIT-Choice model seems particularly suitable to the endeavour of this article. First, it has been shown to be suitable for international comparative studies. Second, the focus on an individual’s choices facilitates comparisons across countries. In contrast, a comparative analysis of structures and measures taken would be immensely complex or even impossible for RE, impacted by the framework of the RE model in addition to the education system in place. Third, even though this model analyses the individual perspective, it still acknowledges the influences of structures. These are considered via motivation factors such as job security, task demand or salary. Fourth, it offers a general framework to analyse the motivational factors for a teaching career, but also offers space to explore these factors in regard to the specific circumstances, expectations and goals of choosing to become and continue working as a RE teacher.

In the remainder of this article, each factor in the FIT-choice model will be explored starting with those factors that emphasise extrinsic influences before analysing the factors focusing on intrinsic influences on the motivation to become a RE teacher. For each factor relevant examples will be provided from the nations represented by the authors, to highlight the pan-European applicability of both the model and the factors concerned.

2.1 Extrinsic factors

2.1.1 Socialisation influences

The FIT-Choice model emphasises the importance of individual-level socialisation in influencing career decisions. This includes how personal experiences, social influences, and interactions shape perceptions of teaching as a viable and fulfilling career. Internal socialisation factors – such as prior teaching and learning experiences, inspirational role models, and encouragement or dissuasion from family and friends – play a critical role in motivating individuals to pursue a teaching career, particularly in RE. These influences are distinct from external factors like societal secularisation or task returns, instead focusing on the immediate and personal contexts in which individuals grow up.

In line with the FIT-choice model, a German study among Protestant and Catholic RE students in the state of Lower Saxony underscores that socialisation plays a specific role in their motivation as these experiences – whether that might be in school, family, religious communities or other contexts – influence other factors of motivation (see Figure 1). This applies to RE specific motivations like the interest in the study of theology and questions of purpose of life as well as to the more general intrinsic motivation to teach (Fuchs & Wiedemann, 2022, p.112-115).

In Germany, prior experiences with inspiring teachers often serve as a key motivator for those considering a career in teaching. Research highlights that students who had strong, engaging RE teachers are more likely to pursue the profession themselves (Lück, 2012). This mirrors findings in Estonia, where prospective RE teachers frequently cite positive educational encounters as shaping their decision to enter teaching (Schihalejev, 2009). At the same time, Fuchs & Wiedemann found that negative experiences with one’s own teachers can also increase the motivation to become a RE teacher in order to do it better

(Fuchs & Wiedemann, 2022, p.86, p.99). However, the reverse can also be true: a lack of visible and inspiring RE teacher role models can deter individuals from entering the profession, particularly in secular contexts where the relevance of RE is questioned (Lück, 2012).

Social dissuasion also significantly impacts RE teacher recruitment. In Estonia and Latvia, where religious affiliation is exceptionally low (Remmel, 2017), many young people report receiving little encouragement – or even outright discouragement – from their social circles when expressing interest in teaching RE. This trend is compounded by the perception that RE is a niche or declining subject, which reduces its appeal as a career path. Similarly, in Austria, prospective RE teachers may lack exposure to enthusiastic mentors or peers who actively promote the profession, limiting their internal motivation.

Family and peer influences are another critical aspect of internal socialisation. In Wales, research by Egan et al. (2024) highlights how familial and social networks often frame teaching as a “fallback” career, particularly in under-represented fields like RE. While some individuals are encouraged by family members who view teaching as stable and secure, others are dissuaded by narratives that emphasise the challenges and low status of the profession. These mixed messages can create ambivalence, particularly for those considering specialised teaching roles like RE.

Role models – or the lack thereof – play a crucial role in shaping career aspirations. In Germany, the diminishing number of theology students (Frerk, 2022) and declining enrolment in RE courses limit the visibility of successful RE teachers, reducing their impact as role models. In contrast, where strong RE teacher mentors exist, they often inspire their students to pursue the profession, reinforcing the intrinsic motivations central to the FIT-Choice model.

2.1.2 Task demand and return

The FIT-Choice model offers a framework for understanding how task demand and return influence teacher recruitment and retention, especially in fields like Religious Education (RE). Extrinsic factors, including workload and perceived rewards, significantly shape the attractiveness of teaching. This is particularly true for RE teachers, who face unique challenges across the nations of Wales, Latvia, Estonia, Austria, and Germany discussed in this article.

RE teachers navigate complex professional environments. Beyond mastering subject-specific knowledge and pedagogy, they must formulate and evaluate learning outcomes, design inclusive lesson plans, and address students' social and emotional needs. These demands are heightened in diverse societies like Austria and Germany, where RE teachers are expected to foster inclusive classrooms that respect religious and cultural diversity.

In Latvia, task demands are compounded by structural challenges. While the TALIS (2013) study found Latvian teachers generally satisfied with their work environment (Geske & Ozola, 2015), internal competition and school tensions often lead to psychological strain, impacting job satisfaction and deterring recruits (LIZDA, 2016). Similarly, in Wales, the new Curriculum for Wales integrates RE into the broader “Religion, Values, and Ethics” (RVE) framework, requiring significant professional expertise and development (Welsh Government, 2020). Teachers must deliver a curriculum that is both philosophically comprehensive and culturally sensitive, adding to an already demanding workload (Egan et al., 2024).

Task return encompasses salaries, job security, professional recognition, and career opportunities. Across Europe, limited financial incentives and low salaries hinder teacher recruitment, particularly in the Baltic states. In Estonia, while teacher salaries have doubled in the past decade, they remain lower than those in other professions requiring similar qualifications (Haridussilm, 2024). This is especially true for RE teachers, as the many years of study required often lead to very limited working hours in return. In Latvia, despite improvements, low pay continues to deter high-achieving graduates from pursuing teaching careers, including RE (LIZDA, 2016).

Austria and Germany present a mixed picture. Germany's relatively high teacher salaries and family-friendly policies attract recruits (SWK, 2023). However, RE teachers in both countries face additional challenges, including faith-specific qualifications and a lack of recognition for their broader pedagogical contributions. In Austria, while salary historically ranked low as a motivator for entering teaching (Pollheimer, 2002), studies indicate it is becoming increasingly important (Rabel, 2011).

Teacher-student relationships and supportive school cultures are critical to job satisfaction. In Latvia, positive feedback from school administrators and opportunities for collaboration enhance satisfaction, aligning with Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) concept of professional capital. Behavioural challenges and insufficient support from school leaders also discourage prospective teachers in Wales, particularly in perceived low-value subjects like RE (Egan et al., 2024).

2.1.3 Personal utility value

The personal utility value, according to the FIT-Choice model, refers to job security and time for family while being employed in the sphere of education (Watt et al., 2012). It highlights that choosing a teaching career is also related to reaching better quality of life, to ensure stability and benefits from one's job, like a longer summer vacation and secure retirement/pension plans, as well as reaching a work-life balance. The high workload as depicted in the previous section about the task demand also impacts negatively on the time for family and therefore may hinder the personal utility value.

In Austria, according to a study on the job satisfaction of Catholic (N=757) and Protestant (N=171) religious education teachers, a minority (7%) of Catholic RE teachers choose teaching RE for pragmatic reasons (Bucher & Miklas, 2005). It allowed them more favourable working hours, better career prospects (enough holidays, appropriate remuneration) and to be creative within the subject area (22%) by exercising freedom compared to the curriculum. They feel less pressure and more freedom in bringing existential topics into their teaching. The experiential dimension of spirituality that they exercise in their classroom correlates with a number of positive effects. First and foremost, it is a source of motivation. Young professionals potentially have an increased psychosomatic burden and spiritual experiences in this context are an important source of motivation and energy for teaching RE. In contrast, RE teachers in Wales are finding that the somewhat odd juxtaposition of teaching *about* religion with less emphasis on religious experience and more on the values and ethics that being religious foster, can be a frustration.

Protestant RE teachers in Austria primarily want to provide support (N=171, 33.3%) and express a desire to work with children and young people (32.7%), although only 1.8% enter the profession because they consider it to be family friendly. With regards to a general pool of teachers, compared to other occupational fields, they view teaching as allowing high degree of creative freedom and expression, but rather fewer opportunities for

promotion and less appropriate remuneration (Bucher & Miklas, 2005, p.146). In Germany, a regional study was carried out among 1385 student teachers at München University (Weiß, 2010) including 153 student teachers who studied to become Catholic RE teachers. When comparing this group to the other student teachers, family-friendliness was concluded to be one of the motives for student teachers to choose this career (Weiß, 2010, p.25-26).

2.1.4 Fallback career

The fallback career aspect of the FIT-Choice model highlights how teaching can often be seen as a secondary choice for individuals whose primary career aspirations are unattainable (Egan et al., 2024). This phenomenon variably impacts teacher recruitment and retention, particularly in the field of RE, where societal secularisation, financial disincentives, and niche subject challenges add complexity. Although not universal, across many nations, an interplay of societal perceptions, economic pressures, and structural barriers positions RE teaching as an unattractive first choice, or merely a fallback career for many. In Germany, a study among Protestant and Catholic student teachers found that the fallback option played only a minor role in their career choice. Among the nine motive dimensions analysed, this pragmatic motive was significantly less relevant to explain their career choice (Lück, 2012). Also the Scientific Advisory Board to the Conference of Education ministers underlines in their latest report that the thesis of the teaching profession being a fallback career cannot be backed by empirical data (SWK, 2023, p.38). Fuchs and Wiedemann though highlight in their study that some students in Germany identify theology as a fallback career as it has no entry restrictions and appears easier than other teaching subjects (Fuchs & Wiedemann, 2022, p.92-93, p.102-104).

Societal perceptions heavily influence whether teaching is seen as a first-choice or even fall-back career. In Estonia, secularisation has relegated RE to a low-priority subject with limited career advancement opportunities. Conversely, Germany's higher salaries and family-friendly policies enhance teaching's appeal, though RE remains less popular due to specialised requirements.

Positive school cultures can counteract the fallback career perception. For example, Latvian teachers report higher job satisfaction in collaborative school environments (Geske & Ozola, 2015), but internal tensions often undermine this (LIZDA, 2016). In Wales, classroom behavioural challenges and limited leadership support deter prospective teachers, particularly for RE (Egan et al., 2024).

2.2 Intrinsic factors

2.2.1 Intrinsic value

Intrinsic motivation plays a critical role in the teaching profession, particularly for RE teachers, where personal interest and commitment often drive career choices. According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2013), intrinsic motives hold greater value than external ones, a principle strongly applicable to teaching. Research utilising the FIT-Choice model confirms that intrinsic motivations – such as a genuine interest in teaching and its inherent value – are among the most influential factors for choosing a teaching career (Richardson & Watt, 2006; Fray & Gore, 2018; Egan et al., 2024). For early-career teachers, these internal drivers underscore their engagement and sense of purpose.

For RE teachers, intrinsic motivation is often tied to personal interest in ethics, diverse worldviews, and spirituality. It may also reflect a personal connection to religious teachings or a sense of religious calling (Dik & Duffy, 2009).

Teachers in varying contexts often share common intrinsic motivators. One key factor is the study of theology or religious studies, which offers opportunities to explore complex ethical and philosophical questions. This intellectual curiosity is particularly evident among secondary-level teachers, who value theology's analytical aspects (Lück, 2012). Another shared motivation is a sense of vocation, where teaching is viewed not as a job but as a calling rooted in personal or spiritual beliefs. Teachers in both Germany and Estonia highlight this vocational aspect, focusing on RE's potential to cultivate empathy and mutual understanding among students (Schihalejev, 2009).

In Germany, where RE is predominantly denominational, one's own faith is a key driver for the intrinsic motivation and among the most influential factors to become a RE teacher (Lück, 2012, p.75; Riegel & Zimmermann, 2022, p.63-65; Fuchs & Wiedemann, 2022, p.89-91, p.100-102). Many teachers see their Christian faith as central to their professional identity, using their role to deepen their own beliefs and share them with students (Lück, 2012). The denominational framework allows teachers to integrate personal faith with professional practice transparently, fostering authenticity and a strong sense of purpose. This alignment reinforces their intrinsic motivation and long-term commitment to the profession.

In contrast, Estonia and Latvia approach RE from a non-denominational, secular perspective. Teachers in these contexts are motivated by an interest in humanities and religious studies, aiming to help students understand religion's cultural and societal significance without promoting specific faiths (Schihalejev, 2009). This framework attracts individuals with backgrounds in religious studies rather than theology, emphasising critical thinking and tolerance. Anecdotal evidence from Wales, with its new "Religion, Values and Ethics" curriculum, suggests similar motivations among RE teachers. The curriculum's focus on global religions and philosophical inquiry aligns with a secular approach, attracting those who value fostering acceptance and critical engagement over personal faith expression.

Intrinsic motivation drives RE teachers, encompassing curiosity, purpose, and commitment. German denominational teachers align faith driven motivation with their work, while Estonian and Latvian non-denominational systems prioritize cultural and ethical education. Despite differences, all share a dedication to fostering independent thinking and empathy, making intrinsic motivation essential to their role.

2.2.2 Self-perceptions

The factor self-perception of the FIT-choice model describes the perceived teaching ability. These self-perceptions can be defined as "beliefs about how much ability one possesses [...] as beliefs about how well one will perform on an impending task; expectations for success are shaped over time by the individual's experiences and their interpretations of them" (Watt et al., 2012, p.793). Perceived teaching abilities rank among the five highest rated motivations across many countries (Watt et al., 2012, p.799). A quantitative study among teachers in Estonia (Saks et al., 2021) also found perceived teaching abilities to be one of the three most influential effects on teacher persistence, together with intrinsic motivation and job security.

Whether this is of particular relevance for RE teachers is difficult to say as reliable data is scarce. One could suspect that the perceived RE teaching abilities might be lower among students as with increasing secularisation and pluralisation because they lack a personal approach to the topic and might feel less confident in teaching RE. Furthermore, RE addresses topics about values, beliefs and ethics that might be perceived as challenging to teach in a time of increased polarisation over controversial issues. At the same time, training to become a RE teacher might attract those with high perceived teaching abilities. A German study comparing Catholic RE student teachers to other student teachers concerning their training motivation found that Catholic RE students stand out in some social competences. Whilst their self-estimation in social competences such as leadership, communication and ability to take criticism, independence, and cooperation are similar to other student teachers, Catholic RE student teachers assess themselves as possessing a significantly higher situational awareness (e.g. appropriate interaction with others, interpersonal skills and respect) as well as an outstanding sense of responsibility (e.g. finding acceptable solutions for all, taking into account the interests of all parties) (Weiß, 2010, p.26).

When assessing the perceived teaching abilities, this must also be connected to the perceived task demand. When being a teacher is perceived as an increasingly demanding or even impossible task as shown previously in this article, the relative perceived teaching ability is lower. Therefore, it is important for young people to get a better appreciation of their teaching abilities to make their career choices. In Germany, the Standing Scientific Advisory Board to the Conference of Education Ministers included in their recommendations the need to consider this aspect to remedy the teacher shortage. Recommended measures include to actively address students in upper secondary schools, to offer them self-assessment tools in combination with counselling offers and to create job-shadowing possibilities (SWK, 2023, p.42-44).

2.2.3 Social utility value

The social utility value of teaching lies in educators' ability to shape individual lives and society. Teachers are often motivated by a desire to make a difference, inspire change, promote social justice, and address pressing societal issues. These values encompass altruism (Watt et al., 2012) and the wish to work with children and shape their futures. Studies using the FIT-Choice model, such as those by Richardson and Watt (2005; 2006), confirm that social utility values are significant motivators for pursuing a teaching career. Watt et al. (2012) further emphasised the combined influence of personal intrinsic motivations and social utility motivations across countries like Australia, Germany, Norway, and the United States.

In Latvia, a Teachers' Union survey (LIZDA, 2016) revealed that many view teachers as having a significant influence on societal values and younger generations, echoing findings in Wales (Egan et al., 2024). However, teachers also expressed concerns about their diminishing impact on students, with societal and generational shifts making it harder to influence younger minds. The survey highlighted motivations such as passing on knowledge, designing engaging lessons, and fostering a love for learning. Alongside these social utility values, appropriate remuneration and societal prestige were also key factors influencing career choice, underscoring the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in Latvian teachers.

An empirical study in Bavaria, Germany (Pirner, 2022), similarly underscores the importance of social contribution among Protestant RE teachers. Among 850 surveyed educators, value education ranked highly when they were asked which cross-cutting curriculum theme RE contributes to, followed by human rights education and inter-cultural learning. German studies by Lück (2012) and by Riegel & Zimmermann (2022, p.63-68) demonstrate as well that values education ranks among the top factors of motivation for German Protestant and Catholic RE teachers.

The desire to work with children is another vital dimension of social utility value, as seen in Estonia. Interviews with RE teachers showed that many chose the profession because of their love for working with young people: “There is nothing that I dislike [in my job], especially working with teenagers. They are the ones with the most energy and potential, and seeing them put it into practice is very rewarding” (Schihalejev, 2009, p.45). This finding mirrors results from a regional study in Germany by Weiß, which highlights pedagogical motivation as a dominant driver, particularly for Catholic RE student teachers, who showed higher levels of idealism and a strong desire to shape students’ values (Weiß, 2010).

The social utility value of teaching, particularly in RE, encompasses a commitment to shaping societal and individual values, fostering understanding, and nurturing students. Across countries like Latvia, Estonia, and Germany, this motivation is deeply tied to altruism, a love for working with young people, and the broader societal impact of education. While variations exist – such as the emphasis on value education in Germany or the focus on creating engaging lessons in Latvia – RE teachers consistently highlight the profound satisfaction derived from making a meaningful contribution to students’ lives and society.

3 Conclusion

Addressing the challenges in recruiting and retaining RE teachers requires an approach that balances intrinsic and extrinsic factors while addressing broader societal influences. Teaching, as a profession, is uniquely shaped by a combination of motivations: intrinsic factors such as intellectual curiosity, a sense of calling, and alignment with personal values, and extrinsic conditions like salary, workload, and career opportunities. In the case of RE teaching, these dynamics are particularly complex due to the subject’s unique focus on values, beliefs, and ethics in increasingly pluralistic and increasingly secular societies.

Intrinsic motivation appears to play a critical role in attracting individuals to the teaching profession, especially to RE. The opportunity to engage with existential and ethical topics, foster independent thinking, and make a difference in students’ lives resonates strongly with those who choose this career. However, intrinsic motivation can be undermined when perceived task demands – such as the complexity of addressing controversial societal issues – exceed perceived teaching abilities. As the societal role of teachers shifts, particularly in secular contexts, many aspiring educators may feel ill-equipped to meet these challenges, highlighting the importance of building their confidence and competencies early in their career journey.

At the same time, extrinsic factors remain another determinant of how the teaching profession is perceived. Challenges experienced shared by teachers of many subjects, including RE, such as inadequate financial incentives, high workload, and limited career progression, create barriers to the recruitment and retention of teachers of all subjects (Egan et al., 2024). These challenges are compounded by societal narratives that devalue

teaching, framing it as a fallback career rather than a respected and rewarding profession. Addressing these perceptions requires structural interventions, such as competitive pay and flexible qualification pathways. Simplifying pathways without compromising on quality – such as modular or flexible certification programmes – could attract more candidates while maintaining standards. Ensuring a balance between task demands and task returns – both material and psychological – is essential for sustaining teacher motivation and satisfaction.

Furthermore, the social utility value of teaching must also be emphasised. Teachers play a crucial role in shaping the values and critical thinking skills of the next generation, promoting social justice, and addressing societal challenges. This is particularly relevant to RE teachers. However, many teachers feel their influence on students is diminishing in an era of polarisation and value conflicts. Policies that empower teachers to engage meaningfully with students can help restore the profession's status and attract individuals with a genuine desire to contribute to societal betterment. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) suggest this is an important component of professional capital which they argue should be a focus of global education systems to address many of the challenges noted above.

The FIT-choice model considered in the preceding paragraphs provides a helpful framework for a discussion of RE teacher shortage. It allows both to consider the different factors that impact recruitment and retention in the wider teaching profession and to deepen the analysis to the specific forms and particular relevance these factors unfold for the RE teaching profession. However, the research into the RE teacher shortage is limited, particularly in terms of subject-specific studies. There are secondary sources with varied methodologies, but these often do not focus specifically on the unique challenges of RE teaching. There is a notable gap in research exploring the motivation of individuals to become RE teachers, and understanding this motivation is crucial for developing targeted strategies to address the RE teacher shortage. Any suggestions for improvement that can be drawn from this article are however theoretical, as there is little data to prove their effectiveness in real-world contexts. Additional research exploring more in detail the factors of motivation for RE teachers would help to tailor RE specific strategies on how to attract and retain teachers. Although across the nations represented in this article there are, and have been, schemes and incentives to try to make teaching more attractive, the data presented in the opening section demonstrate that so far these have only had limited, or even no, effect. Further research is needed to explore effective pathways for recruiting and retaining RE teachers, including potential incentives and support mechanisms for those transitioning into this specialised role. These gaps highlight the need for future studies that consider the specific dynamics of RE teaching and provide deeper insights into how to overcome the challenges in this area.

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¹ Own translation from German original quote.

² Own translation from German original quote.