

Religious observance in higher education

Facilities and services

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) provide a range of facilities and services to all staff and students on campus. The Equality Act 2006 provides the legal framework whereby HEIs ensure the provision of these general facilities and services is free of unlawful discrimination on the basis of religion and belief. Where barriers to accessing facilities and services exist, and where possible and appropriate, some HEIs also provide targeted services and facilities to support staff and students in observing their religion or belief.

The protection afforded by the Equality Act covers all staff and students on campus, of all religions and beliefs. The range and diversity of religions and beliefs poses a challenge to HEIs, which must ensure facilities and services are appropriate for all staff and students, while remaining consistent with the institution's operational needs, resources and overall mission.


This briefing has been produced in response to growing interest in the sector about the initiatives some institutions have taken in providing facilities and services that are free of unlawful discrimination, as

Contents

Legislative background	2
Providing facilities and services free of unlawful discrimination	4
= Gathering evidence	4
= Assessing the impact	4
= Procurement	5
Providing targeted services for particular religions or beliefs	5
= Chaplaincy	6
= Personal reflection, meditation or prayer rooms	8
= Catering services and alcohol	13
= Accommodation	16
Northern Ireland	18
Future work	18

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well as targeted facilities and services for staff and students with a religion or belief. It contains information on legislation and practical guidance, along with case studies provided by institutions.

The briefing is intended to be useful to all staff working in higher education, in particular estates staff, line managers and those working in student and staff services. It has been informed by discussions with HEIs, national student-led religion and belief organisations, unions, and other religion and belief organisations.

This is the second in a series of briefings on religion and belief from Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). These briefings present ideas and initiatives from the higher education sector around practical issues that arise on campus relating to religion or belief.


The first briefing is *Religious observance in higher education: institutional timetabling and work patterns* (www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/religious-obs-timetabling).

Legislative background

The Equality Act 2006 (www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2006/ukpga_20060003_en_1) prohibits direct discrimination, indirect discrimination and victimisation against a person in the provision of goods, facilities and services because they:

- = hold a particular religion or belief
- = do not hold a particular religion or belief
- = have no specific religion or belief
- = are believed to hold/not hold a particular religion or belief or are believed to have no specific religion or belief, or
- = are associated with someone who holds a particular religion or belief.

This unlawful conduct includes refusing someone a service, or offering a service of inferior quality, or in a hostile or less courteous way, or on less favourable terms, on grounds of religion and belief.



It is also unlawful to advertise goods, facilities and services in a way that indicates an intention to discriminate or indirectly discriminate unlawfully.

HEIs should refer to legislation and case law as it develops in this area. Details of further legislative requirements are available on ECU's religion and belief web pages:

www.ecu.ac.uk/subjects/religion-and-belief.

What legally constitutes a religion or belief?

The Equality Act 2006 states that:

- = 'religion' means any religion
- = 'belief' means any religious or philosophical belief
- = a reference to religion includes a reference to lack of religion
- = a reference to belief includes a reference to lack of belief.

What constitutes a religion or belief is not explicitly defined by legislation and is ultimately for the courts to decide. Recent case law suggests that to benefit from protection under the Equality Act 2006, a religion or belief should:

- = attain a certain level of congruency, seriousness and cohesion
- = be worthy of respect in a democratic society.

Religion and belief should therefore be taken to mean the full diversity of religious and belief affiliations within the UK, including non-religious and philosophical beliefs such as atheism, agnosticism and humanism.

For further information on what constitutes a religion or belief and the latest developments on case law in this area, see

www.ecu.ac.uk/subjects/religion-and-belief.



Providing facilities and services free of unlawful discrimination

Effective evidence-gathering and assessment of service provision can help provide facilities and services free of unlawful discrimination to the broad range of religions and beliefs protected under the Equality Act 2006.

Gathering evidence


There is currently no legal requirement to monitor the religion or belief of staff or students; however, a number of HEIs already do so. Collecting this type of evidence can help HEIs identify and assess the impact and use of services. For example, a lack of take-up of particular services by religion and belief groups compared with their representation in the staff and student population may highlight certain barriers facing these staff and students.

To complement or substitute this type of evidence, many HEIs have set up open dialogues such as discussion groups and working groups. These can facilitate a proactive approach to eliminating invisible barriers to the take-up of services and facilities (for further details see page 2 of the ECU briefing *Religious observance in higher education: institutional timetabling and work patterns*: www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/religious-obs-timetabling).

Linking the information gathered from such dialogues to relevant statistical data on religion and belief is likely to result in more meaningful and useful evidence to support decisions regarding facilities and services. Decisions made through consultation in an open and transparent process allow facilities and services to meet the needs of all staff and students.

Assessing the impact

There is currently no legal requirement to carry out an equality impact assessment of policies on religion or belief; however, some institutions carry out an impact assessment on their policies for



all equality areas. ECU's publication *Conducting equality impact assessments in higher education* offers guidance:
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-impact-assessment-in-he.

Procurement

An institution may contract out services (such as catering) to external companies. The HEI may be liable for the actions of these companies in the delivery of procured services unless they can prove that they have taken reasonable steps to prevent any unlawful discrimination.


Each HEI therefore needs to ensure contractors are aware of the legislation and understand the implications for their own work. A regular dialogue with service providers will clarify the diverse needs of the full staff and student communities. In addition, HEIs should have a duty of care document which they share with contractors (such as private providers of accommodation) to ensure they are aware of the requirements of the equality duties.

Further details are available in ECU's *Handbook for student accommodation providers: support and guidance for equality and diversity* (www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/student-accommodation-providers-handbook).

Providing targeted services for particular religions or beliefs

The Equality Act 2006 allows HEIs to provide separate targeted provision around education, training and welfare to different groups on the basis of religion and belief where current support is not appropriate.

Sometimes an HEI will have reasonable justification for not providing targeted facilities and services. Such decisions should be communicated through an open and transparent process with all parties involved.



The case studies below present ideas and initiatives from HEIs in providing the following services and facilities for education and welfare:

- = chaplaincy
- = personal reflection, meditation or prayer space
- = catering services and alcohol
- = accommodation.

Chaplaincy

Many HEIs offer services to support staff and students with personal or academic difficulties. As part of their provision to staff and students, an HEI may decide that a chaplain will understand the sociocultural, faith and psychological issues affecting staff and students with a particular religion or belief, and so will be well placed to offer targeted support to them.

In addition to this role, chaplains can provide advice and education on religion and belief matters to students. In providing this service, HEIs can work with chaplains to consider the following areas.

- = **The diversity of religion and belief.** Given the diversity of religion and belief, the support offered through chaplaincy may not be appropriate for all staff and students. HEIs need to consider the needs of all staff and students, and the resources required in providing such a service. Decisions should be transparent and open to discussion and consultation by the entire staff and student body or their representatives.
- = **Clear roles.** Chaplains provide a range of services, of which pastoral support is one. Clearly defined roles may help chaplains fulfil their roles effectively.
- = **Consultation.** Chaplains are a valuable source of consultation in considering the religions or beliefs of staff and students in designing policies. HEIs should also consider other sources, to encourage all staff and students who are not associated with an HEI's chaplain to provide ideas and input.



Sheffield Hallam University's multi-faith chaplaincy team consists of a full-time coordinator along with volunteer faith advisers from 14 different religious traditions. Around half of these advisers are employed within the university (mostly academic staff); the rest are linked to faith communities in the city.

London Metropolitan University has a diverse chaplaincy team that includes Anglican, Muslim, Roman Catholic and Free Church chaplains. Chaplains work with people of any religion or belief, or none. On the chaplaincy website, information is given on a variety of different faiths and the chaplains answer questions about different faiths, or put people in touch with someone who can provide that information.

The lead chaplain is involved with the Islington Interfaith Forum, and through this has connections to the local Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist and Bahá'í communities.

In recruiting its first Muslim chaplain, the **University of Bradford** consulted the Islamic Society and Muslim students throughout the entire process.

The process involved the university, chaplaincy and the Islamic Society drawing up a list of competencies for the role and a job specification. The Islamic Society was invited to help shortlist candidates, and two members (one man and one woman) were invited to sit on the interview panel along with the head of the chaplaincy service and an appropriate member of university staff.



Personal reflection, meditation or prayer rooms


Although there is no specific statutory responsibility placed on HEIs to provide facilities for personal reflection, meditation and prayer, HEIs should consider whether, without access to such facilities on campus or nearby, some groups of students or staff members may encounter practical difficulties in managing their working or study arrangements. HEIs should also consider the positive impact on the wellbeing of staff and students that can result from providing appropriate quiet spaces on campus.

When HEIs provide facilities for personal reflection, meditation and prayer, they should ensure, in line with their legal obligations, that these, or equivalent, facilities are open and accessible to all staff or students irrespective of their religion or belief. As a result, when setting up new facilities, ECU suggests taking a multi-faith approach by creating spaces that can be booked by staff members and students from different religious groups at different times.

In some cases, there will be reasons for establishing new faith-specific prayer facilities, although in doing so HEIs should be open to people with other religious faiths or beliefs requesting access to equivalent or similar facilities.


In providing such spaces, HEIs will need to consider the following.

- = **Availability of space.** Campus-based and city-based institutions will face different issues concerning the size and availability of rooms and access to local services. On larger campuses, or in multi-campus HEIs, having several rooms available will help staff and students observe their religion or belief.
- = **Consultation.** Planning is needed to ensure all different religious practices are represented, as well as the equally legitimate expectations of those with no religious observance and from other equality groups.

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- ⇒ **Specific requirements.** Effective consultation with staff and students will help HEIs determine the range of different religious practices within their institution. There may be specific requirements, such as in Islam, where men and women generally pray separately. This may require separate rooms, or management of the room, or a curtain to divide the room. Also, before praying, Muslims perform ablution, and facilities may be required for this.
 - ⇒ **The size of the facility.** If a large number of users require a small space at specific times, the use of the room will need to be managed.
 - ⇒ **Security.** Space may be needed for the security of possessions such as shoes and bags.
 - ⇒ **Use of the room.** Monitoring usage of the room will help HEIs check if it is being used inclusively and with respect. Clearly communicated feedback mechanisms will allow staff and students to register difficulties and issues and to improve the service.
 - ⇒ **Accessibility requirements.** Rooms should be made accessible to all staff and students.

A dedicated inter-faith room was established in 2003 by the **University of Glasgow**. The room is managed by the university's inter-faith chaplaincy. Washing and ablution facilities are part of this provision. There is further dedicated space on campus for reflection and prayer, such as the chapel and dedicated spaces in the library and at the Veterinary School.


There are also faith-based facilities (including a mosque, gurdwara, synagogue and churches) within walking distance of the main university campus. The university's inter-faith chaplaincy works in partnership with local faith and belief communities including the Humanist Society of Scotland. The inter-faith chaplaincy has produced faith and belief guidance for staff and students.



Through dialogue with the multi-faith chaplaincy, **Sheffield Hallam University** opened a multi-faith centre in November 2007. The centre comprises the multi-faith chaplaincy office; a quiet room for prayer, reflection or meditation by people of all religions and beliefs; Muslim prayer rooms (male/female) and designated ablution facilities; and two further meeting rooms available for use by both religion and belief groups and others within the university.

People of different religion and belief backgrounds regularly come into contact with each other at the centre, opening the way for dialogue.

Following consultation, the **University of Sunderland** set up a prayer facility in a small, dedicated building on the city campus. The facility is very popular with students, staff, alumni and the wider community. Feedback from users is that the university's facilities are seen as inclusive, women-friendly and supportive, both in terms of worship and as a social space. Through this provision, the university is engaging with traditionally harder-to-reach members of the wider community, who increasingly view the university as a place to study and work. This provision is reviewed as city campus work progresses.




In response to an increase in the number of Muslim students, the **University of Hertfordshire** decided to build an extension to the existing multi-faith centre. The Student Islamic Society was involved in the design from the outset.

The hall itself divides into three sections, one of which will become a permanent Muslim prayer zone. The other two sections will be available for mixed use, but recognising that the whole hall is set aside for Friday prayers every week.

The whole hall is kept free of shoes, food and drink except by special agreement (e.g. the evening meal during Ramadan). At the entrance to the hall there are male and female ablution facilities with separate male and female routes into a permanent prayer zone.

Staffordshire University provides multi-faith chaplaincy facilities on two campuses. A separate prayer room has always been made available for Muslim students within the chaplaincy; but as the university also has a number of smaller campuses, Muslim staff and students on those sites have to make a special journey to the prayer rooms.

During Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, Muslim staff want to pray on time without spending too much time travelling to another campus, so they requested a temporary prayer facility close at hand. The staff involved decided to approach one of the professors to ask if a facility could be made available. The professor made office space available for staff and students to use during the month of Ramadan. The availability of this facility was communicated to all staff and students via email. The following year, the facility was made available again by the faculty director without any request being made.




The **University of Northampton's** multi-faith chaplaincy offers facilities on both its campuses, providing prayer/quiet space for those of any religion or belief or none. On the larger campus, the provision of one main prayer/quiet room plus a second room ensures there is always space for groups or individuals to pray when their needs are different (e.g. diverse faiths or separation of sexes).

Rooms are available 24 hours a day. When there is no chaplain on site, the rooms are still available on application to security for a key, which is provided when a student identity card is produced. The multi-faith chaplaincy is within easy reach of the main security desk, which facilitates monitoring.

Muslim Friday prayers attract numbers larger than can be accommodated comfortably within the multi-faith centre space, so **Sheffield Hallam University** made the sports hall available for prayers throughout the year for this purpose. The provision was initiated by a conversation involving the HEI's multi-faith chaplaincy coordinator, two Muslim faith advisers, the president of the SHU Islamic Society, one of the pro vice-chancellors, and the head of the facilities directorate.

This provision was seen by all parties as a sensible and practical way of meeting the religious observance needs of Muslim students and staff within the university community, particularly in view of the Muslim observance of praying communally on Fridays wherever possible and the absence of a mosque within close proximity to the city campus. On the Fridays in the year when the sports hall is not available due to examinations, those who normally attend Friday prayers at the university are encouraged by the Muslim faith advisers to make alternative provision wherever possible due to the space restriction at the multi-faith centre.




Anglia Ruskin University's Chelmsford campus chaplaincy centre includes a quiet room with a small library for staff and students of all religions and belief to use. It is deliberately kept free of religious symbols.

A Muslim prayer room is located in the chaplaincy centre, with en suite washing facilities. Near the entrance to the centre there is also a toilet and wash basin, which some students use for their ablutions. There are no separate male and female prayer facilities; those who currently use the prayer room manage this by rotation.

Catering services and alcohol

Higher education institutions provide catering services to staff, students and visitors in their shops, canteens and common rooms, and also when catering for meetings, interviews and functions. Staff, students and visitors will have a diverse range of dietary requirements, such as gluten-free, halal, kosher, lactose-free, vegetarian or vegan. These requirements include foods to eat or avoid, as well as storage and preparation methods. Catering for diverse dietary requirements helps provide inclusive spaces for all staff and students, and may involve the following issues.

- = **Consultation.** Effective consultation with staff and students will help HEIs determine the range of different dietary requirements. Applying a blanket approach to food preparation may not be appropriate, for example if certain foods are required to be blessed.
- = **Keeping foods separate.** When storing, preparing and displaying food, keeping different types of foods (such as meat, vegetables and dairy products) separate avoids contamination. Having designated plates, cutlery and serving utensils will help staff and students keep their food types separate.


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- = **Labelling foods.** Clearly and accessibly labelled food (listing ingredients) helps staff and students make informed choices. For example, if an institution provides halal food, it should display a certificate that this food is permitted by Islamic law.
 - = **Contamination.** Care should be taken so that there is no accidental contamination (such as meat dishes touching or dripping into vegetarian dishes).
 - = **Alcohol.** Staff and students will have different approaches to the presence and consumption of alcohol. The HEI should assess its provision of alcohol and look to provide alternatives.

Further details of specific dietary requirements can be found on the Inter Faith Network for the UK's website:

www.interfaith.org.uk/local/catering.htm.

King's College London's catering outlets offer a wide range of options, including vegetarian, vegan and halal choices. Kosher menus can be provided by kosher caterers for functions if required.

Fasting is a particular issue during the Muslim month of Ramadan, while some Christians may also fast during the six weeks of Lent. The timing of Ramadan is based on the lunar calendar, so it may occur in different points in the academic year (e.g. the start of the year or during exams). Those providing food at induction events should be aware that not all those attending will be able to join in. The Dean and chaplaincy have worked with student religious societies to allow Muslims to break their fast at sundown in the Muslim prayer rooms. Additionally, the students' union makes sure freshers' week is not entirely driven by events involving alcohol.



At the **University of Glasgow**, halal chicken is provided in all university-managed catering outlets; the certificate from the supplier is displayed in the inter-faith room. Muslim students and staff have been made aware of this provision. The university's hospitality service uses a kosher provider for specific events as appropriate.

The **London School of Economics** hosted Unwind, a non-alcoholic freshers' party organised by the sabbatical team of the students' union. The aim was for students to socialise in a non-alcoholic setting. The event was attended by well over 450 students, filling the venue to its maximum capacity, and also managed to make a profit, which is ring-fenced to spend on future non-alcoholic events. The success of Unwind has given the union the confidence to hold more events for its members in environments that are conducive for them. The union has also encouraged other unions to hold such events.

A question was raised about the presence of alcohol at a volunteer awards event at **London Metropolitan University**. After conferring with a student society and with the university imam, it was decided to hold an alcohol-free event.

It was also decided that an event may offer alcohol, as long as the alcohol is kept completely away from the location of food and soft drinks. It is up to the event organiser to decide whether to have an alcohol-free event or, if there is to be alcohol, to ensure it is kept separately from food and other drinks.




Accommodation

In providing accommodation, HEIs will often choose to offer targeted forms of accommodation to cater for different religious observances and to ensure an inclusive portfolio of accommodation. In doing so, HEIs need to balance the need to cater for different groups against a need to promote good relations between different religious groups. If care is not taken, in some circumstances the provision of different types of accommodation may inadvertently encourage the separation of different groups of students, making for a less inclusive living and learning environment.

Examples of specific accommodation requests or requirements linked to religion or belief may include the following.


- = **Single-sex accommodation.** Some HEIs may provide single-sex accommodation, which some students may choose because of their religion or belief. This may need to be considered in relation to an HEI's aim of promoting integration through the allocation of places. Any accommodation allocations procedure that takes account of a student's religion or belief should be non-discriminatory, well publicised and transparent.
- = **Specific religious accommodation.** Some HEIs may provide specific religious accommodation, such as Shabbat accommodation. Shabbat is a day of rest, and for observant Jews specific work is forbidden – this may include work within accommodation, for example turning on light switches, or using electronic keycards or lift buttons. Further details can be found at www.ujf.org.uk/resources/jewish-stuff/shabbat. The provision of such accommodation may need to be considered in relation to an HEI's aim of promoting integration through the allocation of accommodation places.
- = **Shared kitchens.** Accommodation may include shared kitchens, where students of different religions and beliefs may have different requirements for food preparation. An HEI may consider, for example, providing different microwaves for vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, which may help students observe their dietary requirements.

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- = **Health and safety.** Certain religious observances (such as the use of candles) may breach health and safety regulations. Students may be encouraged to use local and campus facilities, or to see if alternatives may be used.

Kosher dining and meeting facilities are about to open at **Durham University** as a result of an initiative between UJS Hillel (www.ujshillel.co.uk) and the university authorities. UJS Hillel is negotiating with other university authorities for facilities on campuses where there are Jewish students requiring kosher accommodation and/or meeting spaces.

A limited amount of single-sex accommodation is available at the **University of Glasgow**. Students are required to identify a need by selecting the 'single-sex' option when completing the accommodation application form. If a request is received, the university will consider providing Shabbat-relevant accommodation.

King's College London does not give priority to applicants for accommodation on the basis of religious belief or observance for a place or a particular location. There is some single-sex accommodation for which any applicant is able to apply. Where possible, the college looks to facilitate integration in residences, and has a policy of random allocation to corridors and apartments. There is only one catered residence; a vegetarian option is always available and halal meats are provided during the week though not at every meal. In the past, the residence has varied its offer according to the residential population and demand for that year. Entertainment and amenity committees are encouraged to provide a range of activities to ensure that there are varied opportunities for participation.



It will often be necessary to balance the provision of specific types of accommodation against the potential separation of different religious groups that can result. For example, if an HEI is seeking to meet a request for a kitchen area to be designated solely for halal or kosher use, this should prompt consideration of whether new communal spaces should be created to facilitate integration. HEIs increasingly understand the role university-supported social events can play in building a more inclusive environment within residences.

At the **University of Leeds**, various services (including residential and commercial services, the international student office, the equality service and lifelong learning centre) have worked with the students' union to establish an annual inclusive community award. This award is presented to the student-run residents' committee that best demonstrates a track-record of delivering events that bring together diverse groups of students – including students from a range of religions and beliefs – and contributes to an inclusive living environment.

Northern Ireland

Although legislation cited in this briefing does not relate to Northern Ireland, institutions will still find the initiatives included to be useful.

Future work

ECU welcomes comments and suggestions for further work in this area, including examples of initiatives. ECU continues to work with the higher education sector to ensure universities can provide for their communities. Please check the website for further guidance on issues relating to religion and belief:

www.ecu.ac.uk/subjects/religion-and-belief.




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- = University of Glasgow
- = University of Hertfordshire
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- = Inter Faith Network for the UK
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ECU supports the higher education sector to realise the potential of all staff and students, whatever their race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief, or age, to the benefit of those individuals, HEIs and society.

You can download this briefing from the ECU website:
www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/religious-obs-facilities



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