

Religious observance in higher education

Institutional timetabling and work patterns

The local, regional, national and international reach of many higher education institutions (HEIs) means that campuses reflect a diversity of religions and beliefs.

For many staff and students, their religious beliefs are accommodated within existing institutional practices. For others, there is the potential for institutional practices to conflict with their religious beliefs, for instance in relation to timetabling on religious holy days. In some cases these conflicts can be avoided; in others it may not be so easy to resolve.

This briefing has been produced in response to growing interest in the sector about how other institutions respond to these issues. Containing practical guidance and a number of case studies provided by institutions, the briefing will be useful to all staff working in higher education, in particular admissions staff, examination officers, 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.

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Understanding religious observance on campus


The National Census, Labour Force Survey, British Social Attitudes Survey and Citizenship Survey all evidence the high level of religious diversity present in the UK, with over 170 distinct religions counted in the 2001 Census.

Observance of a religion or belief system may occur within an individual and/or group setting, and expressions of faith may differ in the private and public domains. Not all members of a particular religion will observe their religion in the same way.

Effective consultation with staff and students will help HEIs determine the range of different religious practices within their institution. Planning will be required to ensure all parties are represented in terms of different religious practices, as well as the equally legitimate expectations of those with no religious observance and from other equality groups.

Finding out about the observances of people of a particular religion or belief can be done through open dialogues such as discussion groups, working groups, working with union societies, and staff and student surveys. Some institutions have established religion and belief working groups as subgroups of their equal opportunities (or equivalent) group. These may be made up of staff and student representatives at all levels of the institution, along with representation from the unions, and representatives from different faith backgrounds and those with no religious belief. An approach to equality issues that looks at how race, gender, sexual orientation, disability and age interact with issues of religion and belief will ensure a more sustainable and coherent response to the diverse needs of all staff and students.

There is also a growing trend for institutions to create and facilitate inter-faith dialogue groups for staff and students, which can provide a good forum for debate. Such groups can also have an advisory function to the religion and belief working group.




University of Cumbria has set up an ongoing working group to look at 'supporting faith' and the practical implications for marketing, course design, facilities, time off for religious observance, uniforms and placement settings, health and safety, student identity data storage and other associated activities. The group works with support services and faculties to discuss practical solutions and initiatives.

University of Birmingham Medical School has been holding a staff/student consultative forum on faith matters for some years. Forum seminars present a range of speakers from a spectrum of religious and cultural backgrounds. Students set the topics and invite speakers on issues they want to address and share with peers from communities different from their own. Seminar topics have included 'Organ donation in Islam', 'Jews and their genes: examining genetic diseases in the Jewish community' and 'Breaking the silence: an examination of the psychological impact of forced marriages'.

The University of Glasgow Religion and Belief Equality Group reports to the Equality and Diversity Strategy Committee and liaises with other committees, managers and officers. The group has a remit to:

- = promote cultural diversity whereby religion and belief equality is incorporated into all the university's functions and activities
- = act as a channel of communication where issues affecting religion and belief can be raised and addressed or referred to appropriate bodies for action
- = oversee the preparation of the annual progress report
- = review annually the membership and remit of the Religion and Belief Equality Group, and co-opt additional members to the group as required.



Systems such as these allow the views of students and staff of all religions and beliefs to inform institutional policy. This can provide a robust mandate for the institution to determine policies and practices, and a context in which subsequent queries and issues can be addressed.

Communication


Communicating an HEI's policies and procedures around religious observance will help avoid potential conflicts. Including information in a publicly available religion and belief policy, which is communicated to staff and students on induction/administration, allows for consultation and input.

Students' union societies can help keep students informed through maintaining clear lines of communication with governance and management, working groups, student services and examination services. Thus they are able to reinforce an HEI's policy with staff and students, and advise students that early communication with their institution will help them to reconcile their requirements.

It is important to note that not all students will be members of these organisations, so keeping channels open between individual students and course directors, personal tutors, student services, welfare advisers and relevant chaplains will help students to communicate their needs.

Rights and responsibilities

Institutions and their staff and students have a mutual responsibility for accommodating religious observance on campus. The Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 (www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2003/20031660.htm) and the Equality Act 2006 (www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2006/ukpga_20060003_en_1) give institutions a legal responsibility to ensure their practices do not disadvantage certain groups, unless the requirement is proportionate in the circumstances and contributes to achieving a legitimate aim.



Staff and students have no absolute right for their belief to be accommodated; the needs of the institution must be balanced with the beliefs of the individual. There is normally no conflict, but where it does arise, the law requires a reasonable compromise to be sought. For more detailed analysis of the law, see www.ecu.ac.uk/subjects/religion-and-belief.

Timetabling issues


Religious holy days are based on different calendars, including the lunar calendar, which is determined by phases of the moon. They can fall within a range of days, the exact date not being determined until very close to the time. Where these dates fall within term times, there may be a conflict between observing the holy day and meeting academic requirements.

If HEIs anticipate the different holy days when devising their timetabling, conflicts can be avoided. Multi-faith calendars are publicly available, for example the BBC's Holy days and festivals calendar (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/tools/calendar). Restrictions on available dates, and the diversity of religious affiliations, may make it difficult to incorporate all these considerations, so further measures, discussed below, may also be needed.

Incorporating faith calendars

Using internal and external religious advisers and committees on an annual basis, prior to the development and publication of examination schedules and timetables, allows different calendars to be considered.

Setting up open channels of communication with religion and belief working groups, student faith groups, students and staff allows a variety of considerations on issues to be taken into account, such as the dates of holy days and times of prayer. Effective communication will also enable holy days observed by staff and students of minority religious beliefs, which are not included in all multi-faith calendars, to be considered.



University of Cumbria includes details of roles and responsibilities in its policy statement on 'Supporting staff and students from faith communities'

(www.cumbria.ac.uk/Services/HumanResources/EqualityandDiversity/SupportingFaithsPolicy.doc).

All managers are responsible for:

- = familiarising themselves with this policy statement
- = following it in matters such as requests for leave
- = ensuring staff are aware of this policy
- = informing Human Resources Service of any activity or action in relation to this policy statement.

All staff are responsible for:


- = familiarising themselves with this policy
- = respecting staff who choose to use this policy, and supporting their use of it
- = informing appropriate staff of their particular requirements
- = making up any time lost as a result of cultural/religious observance, as required.

The Human Resources service is responsible for:

- = keeping this policy statement current and appropriate
- = ensuring the appropriate use of this policy for staff
- = amending this policy as necessary in line with good practice and legislation
- = communicating this policy widely with all staff and visitors/ contracts.

Deans of Faculty are responsible for:

- = familiarising themselves with this policy
- = respecting students who choose to use this policy, and support their use of it in line with the policy requirements
- = ensuring the appropriate use of this policy for students
- = communicating this policy widely to all students.



University of Birmingham has incorporated a faith calendar into the university diary to raise awareness of the major holy days and festivals occurring during the working week, for which students are likely to request leave of absence. These days have been selected in consultation with the University Chaplaincy Committee and its representatives from the six major UK faiths (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism).

University of Bradford highlights seven key religious holy days and festivals within the university's annual year planner. This aids in scheduling university exams, committees and assessments. The same information is also displayed on the electronic meeting-maker that administrative and support staff can view when planning events or meetings.

University of Westminster includes a section on religious observance in its academic calendar. It has a calendar of religious festivals and holy days sourced from external multi-faith calendars and updated each year, setting out dates and times when formal assessment should not be scheduled.

The University of Hertfordshire received a request for absence from a Wiccan student wishing to attend Imbolc, one of the eight major sabbaths. Although the Wiccan holidays were not included in the university's faith calendar, the university handled the student's request in line with its policy on religious observance and time off.

Leeds Metropolitan University held a community consultation during Ramadan, and there was concern that Muslim members of the community would feel unable to attend as they would be fasting until sunset. Colleagues met the representative from one of the local faith centres and arranged a number of adjustments to make the event more inclusive for Muslims. A range of halal food was available as a take-away option for people to eat after sunset, and a private prayer room was made available.



Timetabling for students

Clashes at the start of term

The first weeks of first term are important for students to acclimatise, find out about key course information, and socialise. Arranging key induction events on religious holy days in these first few weeks can have a negative impact on some students' experience.


University of Birmingham asks its Academic Services to remind staff involved in induction to be sympathetic to students wishing to observe religious holy days and, where possible, to make alternative arrangements to ensure their academic induction is facilitated. This proactive approach ensures students do not have to feel uncomfortable with seeking leave of absence in their first few days.

Attending lectures

As a result of religious observance, some students may be unable to attend or participate fully in lectures at certain times. Open communication between students and lecturers/tutors can help accommodate alternative ways for students to make up the time requirements of the course, causing minimal disruption to the class.

Some courses may have attendance requirements, for example those leading to a professional qualification, and in these cases further discussion with students and the professional awarding body may be necessary.

Institutions have increasingly tried to ensure lecture materials are available in alternative formats, for instance by providing copies of slides to students, or using podcasts and video recordings of lectures. Students may also make their own arrangements for taking notes.



Leeds Metropolitan University sent course literature to students, advising them that substantial parts of the programme would be delivered over a weekend. A query was received from a student relating to lectures on a Friday afternoon session and over the weekend. The Equality and Diversity Team and the faculty looked at the feasibility of rearranging teaching days and times. Where it was not possible, the faculty ensured learning materials could be made available in other formats, including online lecture notes, one-to-one sessions, and hard copies of session notes.

Requesting extended leave for religious observance

Early notification from students requiring extended leave for the purpose of going on pilgrimage will help institutions minimise any disruption to a student's studies.

University of Birmingham recognises that there will be times when students want or need to take time out from academic study, for a variety of reasons.

Any student who wishes to be absent from the university for any part of any term or other period of required attendance must first obtain permission of the Head of School (or nominee). Reasons for absence may include religious observance, and the university seeks to ensure the manner in which requests for absence for religious observance are responded to is consistent with the response to requests for absence on other grounds.

Where there are sound and defensible pedagogic reasons for limiting the number or regularity of days off for religious or any other reason, Schools have consulted the Director of Student Life, who consults with the relevant Chaplain to maintain an appropriate degree of consistency. These limits are clearly publicised to students.



Exams and in-class assessment


Timetabling examinations to avoid key religious holy days and rest days, or times when students may wish to pray, will help reconcile clashes between academic assessment and religious observance.

University of Bradford has a policy whereby 'No university examinations will be scheduled in the examination timetable between 13:00 and 15:00 on Fridays or during major religious festivals to be attended by large number of students.'

Seeking information from students as to whether they foresee any conflicts with the examination period and their observance of their religion will help institutions to plan their timetables. There are already a number of considerations involved in timetabling, for example students' different module combinations, so gathering information at registration will give staff more time to arrange examinations. Containing information within the student fresher's pack on how to notify the institution of potential conflicts can help institutions gather this information early. Work with students' union societies can improve the clarity of the questions and students' understanding about why the information is being collected.

When examination timetables have been produced, students will be able to see if they are still able to observe their religion in line with the exam period. To help engage students, timetables can be accompanied with a follow-up reminder that if they have a clash, they should speak to the examination team and to their student society. Problems may arise, for instance, if someone has begun to follow a religious belief after starting at the institution. Setting up support mechanisms for students will help inform students about this issue. Student societies can again play a role, although students with a religion or belief may not necessarily belong to a society.

Pressures such as room availability and staff resources associated with examinations mean that conflicts may still arise, so further



measures, such as chaperoning, alternative papers and alternative sittings, may need to be adopted. Supervising a student between examinations, if they are sitting at different times from other students, requires careful planning of resources. Alternative papers that contribute to degree classification and need to be authorised by external examiners also take time to prepare. Again, communicating procedures on how students can notify institutions of any conflicts at an early stage can avoid the need to seek alternative arrangements, which can be administratively resource-intensive.



Case studies

University of Westminster has developed *Religion, belief and study: Code of practice to support students*, which outlines its procedure for timetabling formal assessments, examinations and in-class tests. It states:

'Formal assessments/examinations and in-class tests for full time and part time courses following the normal academic year pattern should never be timetabled:


- = on days or at times shown in bold on the calendar of religious festivals/holy days used by the University of Westminster for the assessment purposes
- = between 13:00 and 14:00 hours on any day
- = at any time on Saturdays and Sundays
- = during the winter months at the times designated on the calendar as those at which Jewish students must leave for home.'

The university also has a further set of holy days when formal assessments/examinations and in-class tests should not be scheduled. In this situation, the document states:

'Students who profess these faiths may, within ten working days of the publication of the provisional assessment timetable, inform their School Office of the clash. All reasonable efforts will be made to move the formal assessment/examination to another time, but in cases where this is not possible, students will be offered a deferral to the next available opportunity. Students should approach their module leader direct so that alternative arrangements may be made for in class assessments.'

This also applies to short courses and residential courses, which take place exclusively on Friday–Sunday.

In Manchester, arrangements have been made with the Jewish Chaplain to the **Manchester HEIs** so that, where exams are timetabled during a Jewish holiday or on a Friday afternoon (when there is an early sundown) he will keep Orthodox Jewish



students in isolation from other students for the time between the scheduled sitting of the examination and their sitting of the examination (whether earlier or later).

University of Birmingham also followed this procedure, with the local Rabbi as chaperone.

Birmingham City University students who have exams on religious holy days are allowed to write their exam earlier than the scheduled time. For exams on a Friday, Jewish students are allowed an hour to get home and half an hour to get ready for Shabbat, which starts at sundown. Students informed the university of the clash early, providing a letter from their Rabbi confirming their Jewish observance (printed on official Synagogue-headed paper). These students were then allowed to sit their exams in the Special Arrangements room, having signed a confidentiality agreement promising not to communicate details of the exam paper with any student from their course.

University of Essex has recently introduced a procedure for students unable to sit examinations at specific times because of religious observance.

Students are asked to apply in advance, using a procedure similar to that for students requesting individual arrangements because of a disability or medical condition. The deadline for applications is well before the exam period and, if accepted, a timetable is produced that avoids the potential conflict, for example students who have successfully applied for religious exemption will not be timetabled to sit exams on a Saturday.

The proposed policy was agreed by the University and Students' Union Consultative Committee and the Multi-faith Chaplaincy Centre Committee prior to implementation.

St George's, University of London also takes a similar approach, and where appropriate gives students the choice of morning or afternoon examination slots. The policy was impact-assessed so that where an approach was not appropriate, it was justified objectively.



Staff and work patterns

Requesting absence for religious observance

Many of the UK's public holidays have their origins in observance of the Christian religion. Higher education institutions have established a mode of operating whereby they are usually closed for normal business on Christian holy days; many of these 'closure days' are used for routine maintenance and the provision of extended conference facilities, so alteration of this pattern could seriously disrupt an HEI's normal course of business.

As there are other religious holy days during term time, some universities have allowed those practising other religions, or none, to take their holiday entitlement on the dates of most significance to them.

University of Bradford aims to accommodate staff requesting leave for religious observance, provided these days are booked at the beginning of the academic year, or when timetables are being drawn up for the forthcoming year.

'Statutory and customary holiday arrangements include Christmas and Easter, both of which are Christian religious festivals. Those staff practising other religions or comparable philosophical belief will normally be entitled to take three days of their holiday entitlement on the dates of most significance to them. Further requests for holiday entitlement to be taken at times of religious significance will be treated sympathetically.

For all staff, regardless of religious belief or similar philosophical belief, the number of annual days overall will remain as in the contract of employment.

The university will consider the circumstances for leave of absence on religious grounds and will inform the member of staff of the reasons if leave is to be refused.'



Changing work patterns

An environment in which individuals feel enabled to request alterations to their mode of working due to their observance of a particular religion or belief helps staff inform institutions of their specific requirements. Requests for alterations, compatible with the Working Time Regulations 1998 (as amended) (www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si1998/19981833.htm), can then be treated sympathetically within the framework of an HEI's operational needs.

For example, open communication between staff and their line managers can ensure members of staff who need to pray at certain times of day can do so, as far as is reasonably practical. If this means a member of staff is away from their desk during office hours, discussions can take place on how time can be made up.

University of Cumbria states in its policy statement on 'Supporting staff and students from faith communities' (www.cumbria.ac.uk/Services/HumanResources/EqualityandDiversity/SupportingFaithsPolicy.doc):

'All staff, regardless of religion and belief or non-belief, are required to work in accordance with their contract. This may allow for some flexibility over how the hours are worked unless rota systems are in place or minimum staffing levels are affected. Line managers (for staff) and Dean of Faculty (for students) should make every attempt to ensure that those whose religion requires them to pray at certain times during the day are free to do so. In addition, reasonable efforts should be made to accommodate requests from those who require, for example, an extra hour at midday on Friday, or not to work beyond sunset on Friday or at the weekends in ways that conflict with their religious beliefs.'

Requesting extended leave for religious observance

If a member of staff requests extended leave at a particular time for the purpose of going on pilgrimage, early discussions between the member of staff and the line manager will help the institution to accommodate the request.



Northern Ireland

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

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Future work

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.

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, higher education institutions and society

You can download an electronic version of this briefing from our website: www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/religious-obs-timetabling



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