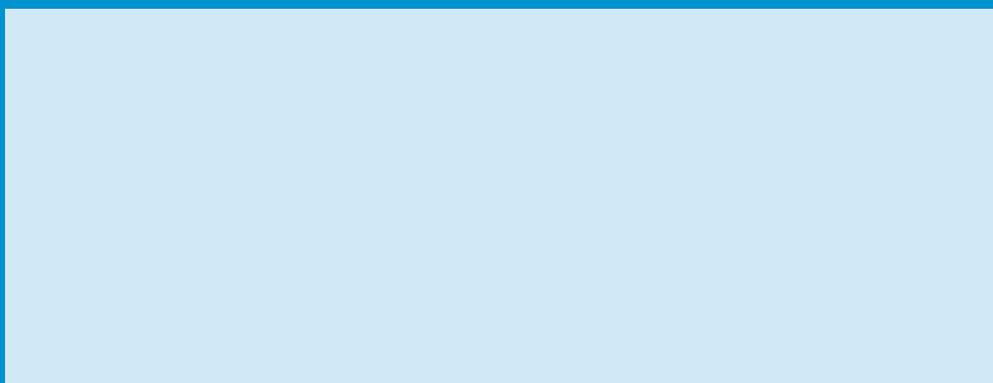
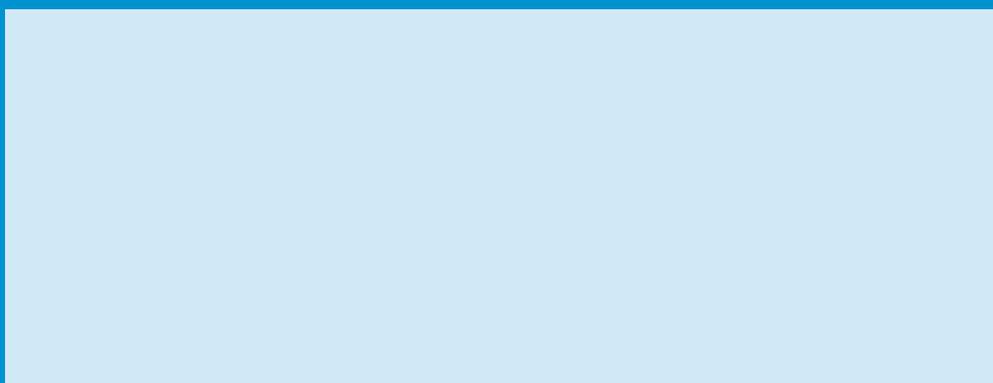


Religion and belief in higher education: the experiences of staff and students

Executive summary



Equality Challenge Unit

This is an executive summary of a research report written by Professor Paul Weller of the Society, Religion and Belief Research Group, University of Derby, and Dr Tristram Hooley and Nicki Moore of the International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby.

Acknowledgments

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The following organisations have provided ongoing support:

- = All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism
- = Church of England Board of Education
- = Community Security Trust
- = Federation of Student Islamic Societies
- = GuildHE
- = Higher Education Equal Opportunities Network
- = Hindu Forum of Britain
- = Inter Faith Network for the UK
- = National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies
- = National Hindu Students Forum
- = National Union of Students
- = Network of Buddhist Organisations (UK)
- = Student Christian Movement
- = Three Faiths Forum
- = UK Council for International Student Affairs
- = Union of Jewish Students
- = Universities UK
- = University and College Union
- = Young Jains

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Religion and belief in higher education: the experiences of staff and students

Whether the ethos of an individual higher education institution (HEI) is self-consciously secular or based on a religious heritage, all HEIs have had to address shifts in the role and nature of religion or belief in wider society.

Over the past few decades, the religion or belief composition of students and staff in UK HEIs has diversified substantially. This process has been extended by a growth in the number of international students, who have brought an even broader range of religion or belief positions.

Religion or belief has become a much more visible marker of identity, and in many institutions shapes thought and practice more than it did previously. Higher education has also seen, and been part of, a series of socio-cultural shifts in the place of religion or belief in UK society. Legal changes, including the Equality Act 2010, have established religion or belief as an equality strand with protected characteristics status in law. For UK higher education, these changes are challenging and require thoughtful responses.

HEIs are looking for evidence on which they can draw to develop policies, practices and procedures to improve the opportunities of staff and students for learning, teaching, research and employment, and their broader experiences on campus. This research is the first of its kind to focus on whether and how staff and students' experiences on campus differ because of their religion or belief. It is important to note that, in addressing matters relating to religion or belief (including discrimination or harassment on these grounds), 'belief' in this sense includes non-religious as well as religious beliefs. This follows equality and human rights law and related policy and practice.

The report aims to provide evidence of existing issues, and to highlight questions arising from the research for HEIs to consider in meeting potential challenges. It identifies a number of issues for consideration by the sector as a whole. It is hoped that the project will assist national bodies, including Equality Challenge Unit (ECU), and institutions in their work to improve the experiences of all staff and students. It will also be of interest to other external bodies, such as faith community, belief and inter-faith organisations, which may work to support HEIs in providing a positive learning and working environment for staff and students of various religion or belief backgrounds.

The research

This report presents key evidence from 'Religion and belief in higher education: researching the experiences of staff and students', a research project commissioned by ECU.

The research methods used for this project took into consideration institutional contexts and backgrounds to religion or belief issues to ensure sensitivity to the issues involved. The project utilised the experience of the project stakeholder group in designing all research approaches.

A range of research methods were used, including:

- = national staff and student surveys
- = institutional case studies, focus groups and interviews
- = stakeholder engagement with national religion or belief groups, staff and students' unions, and equality and diversity practitioners
- = literature review

The project sought to collect a large number of staff and student experiences through the surveys, and to develop a comprehensive picture of the issues within each HEI. Case studies included observation and the collection of documentation as well as interviews or focus groups.

Survey responses

It is important to note that this survey was not intended to be statistically representative, as in higher education there is a current lack of the data that would allow the necessary sampling to take place. Because of the impossibility of constructing a precise sample, readers should not attempt to extrapolate figures and percentages given in this report across the sector as a whole.

Overall, 3077 staff and 3935 students responded to the survey. For both staff and students, the highest percentage of respondents considered themselves to be Christian. The second largest group in both cases were respondents who considered themselves to be of no religion (including atheist and secular respondents).

Table 1.1 Student survey responses by religion or belief group

	Number	Percentage
Christian	1724	43.8
No religion	1249	31.4
Muslim	356	9.1
Spiritual	187	4.8
Pagan	79	2.0
Buddhist	78	2.0
Hindu	77	2.0
Jewish	75	1.9
Other	70	1.8
Sikh	36	0.9
Uncodable	4	0.1
Total	3935	*

* may not total exactly 100% due to rounding

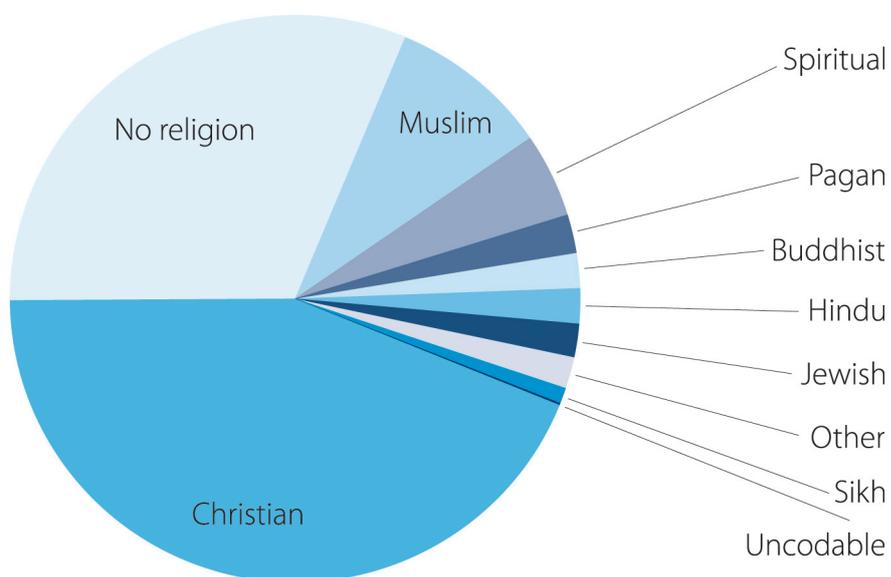
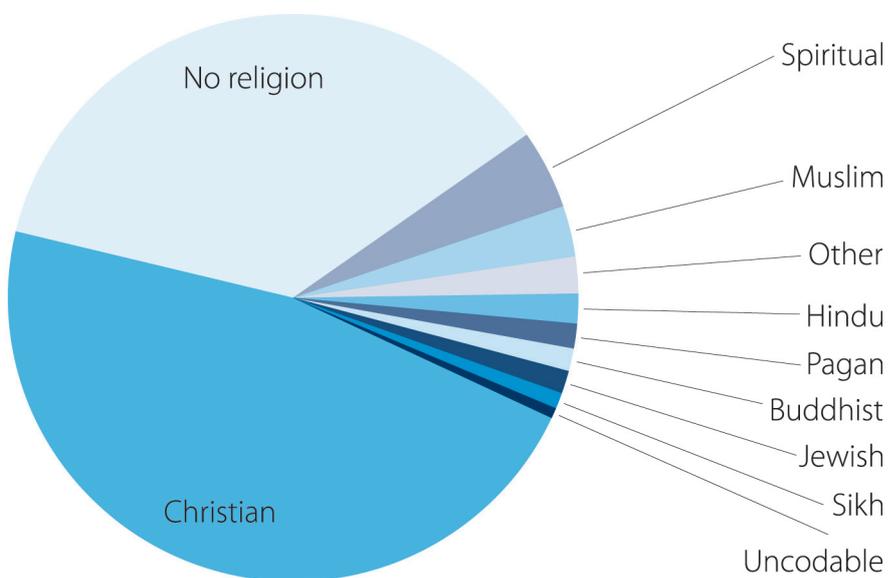


Table 1.2 Staff survey responses by religion or belief group

	Number	Percentage
Christian	1442	46.8
No religion	1124	36.5
Spiritual	138	4.5
Muslim	90	2.9
Other	64	2.1
Hindu	53	1.7
Pagan	44	1.4
Buddhist	41	1.3
Jewish	39	1.3
Sikh	29	0.9
Uncodable	13	0.4
Total	3077	*

* may not total exactly 100% due to rounding



Case studies

For the purposes of this research, the study distinguished between four broad categories of HEI:

- = collegiate ancient universities
- = redbrick universities
- = new universities
- = university colleges (colleges of higher education), including church colleges

The sample included two HEIs in each of the redbrick, modern and university college (college of higher education) categories, and one collegiate ancient university. Institutions were selected to ensure a geographical spread, including one in each of the four countries of the UK.

Full reports on the surveys and stakeholder meetings, and the literature review, can be found on the project website, www.derby.ac.uk/ehs/research/religion-and-belief-in-HE.

The findings

This study examines the experiences of staff and students with a religion or belief in higher education through four themes developed through an examination of previous research and ongoing work with institutions, unions, student-led religion or belief organisations, and other stakeholders.

- = Participation and access
- = Accommodating religious observance
- = Discrimination and harassment
- = Good relations

Participation and access

HEIs, students' unions and students' societies have a role in ensuring that all staff and students can participate fully in higher education. With no previous legal obligation for HEIs outside Northern Ireland to monitor matters related to religion or belief, there is little evidence of the extent of participation across the sector.

Access

While some in religion or belief groups feel able to access the full range of activities and provision offered by HEIs, others feel unable to do so, at least in part because of their HEI's understanding of the requirements of their religion or belief and/or lack of institutional accommodation of these.

Equality legislation underpins public bodies' approaches to the provision of goods, services and education, and helps to ensure that all individuals, including those with a religion or belief or none, feel fully able to access and participate in university life.

Data collection and consultation

Data collection and consultation are important components in developing appropriate religion or belief-sensitive provision. An institution's ability to make judgments about the adequacy of its provision requires appropriate data collection.

In the case of religion or belief, the research has revealed that there is only patchy data-gathering of this information at any level – despite the fact that respondents and participants in the research generally were content for this to take place, subject to the provision of a clear rationale for data collection and the existence of appropriate controls over data collection and use.

Table 2.1 Institutions' approaches to monitoring staff religion or belief

	Number	Percentage
On an equal opportunities form when you applied for your job	1146	33.4
On HR forms related to your actual employment	408	11.9
On your employer's pension scheme forms	34	1.0
At your institution's health centre	38	1.1
None of these	598	17.4
Don't know	1209	35.2
Total	3433	100.0

3052 people responded to the question, which allowed multiple responses. In total there were 3433 responses to the question.

Table 2.2 Institutions' responses to monitoring student religion or belief identities

	Number	Percentage
On forms when you applied to the university/college	1204	25.6
As information you are asked for when you access services at university/college	243	5.2
On university/college surveys	630	13.4
On enrolment at the university	777	16.5
None of these	1847	39.3
Total	4701	100.0

3763 people responded to the question, which allowed multiple responses. In total there were 4701 responses to the question.

HEIs currently collect data on staff and students in a number of ways. These systems could be updated to gather information on religion and belief, which will support HEIs in England, Scotland and Wales to meet the new public sector equality duty.

Teaching and learning

The overwhelming majority of students reported themselves satisfied with both the content and the teaching of their courses.

There is a level of variety among students by religion or belief group as to how far course content and teaching are seen to be sensitive to their religion or belief. There are also differences between how students feel about the degree of sensitivity to their religion or belief in course content and in approaches to teaching that content. Given the centrality of these matters to the core business of HEIs, there is likely to be value in future investigation into the intersections between the curriculum, teaching, and religion or belief.

The research reveals that some staff members are uncomfortable when confronted with decisions about the appropriate use of, or reference to, religion or belief-related materials. One institution has developed some guidance in these matters; there may be value in further work to uncover good practice in this area.

Dietary matters

Although most staff and students have no dietary requirements related to their religion or belief, and are satisfied with provision at their institution, there are a number for whom the availability of appropriate catering is an issue. The research indicates that most individuals are content when there is a good range of food available that meets all dietary requirements across all catering provision.

Generally speaking, staff and students would welcome a more consistent approach to labelling, including indicating whether or not food is halal or kosher and how animals have been slaughtered.

Alcohol

The availability and use of alcohol in a variety of settings is an issue for many staff and students. While this is not an issue solely related to religion or belief, many religious groups – particularly international students with religion or belief commitments – find that the almost ubiquitous presence of alcohol and the relative lack of alternatives increases their isolation and can lead to them feeling excluded. In some HEIs, this is particularly the case during induction or freshers' activities.

Accommodating religious observance

Many HEIs seek to ensure that institutional procedures take account of the diversity of religion or belief on campus, for example by timetabling academic assessments to avoid religious holy days.

Prayer, worship, meditation and celebration

Most HEIs organise their academic year based around the calendar of public holidays, which itself aligns broadly with the western Christian (or Gregorian) calendar. This can be challenging for students and staff of other faiths (and sometimes Orthodox Christians) who wish to celebrate holy days and religious festivals. ECU recommends that HEIs endeavour to take major festivals into account when arranging examination and holiday timings.

It is unclear how far calendars that set out religious holidays and festivals are being utilised. This can mean that students may be forced to miss elements of their course if they wish to absent themselves in order to make religious observance. For staff, this can mean adjusting working patterns to accommodate

observances – such as extended lunch breaks for prayer – which can cause resentment from other colleagues, and concern about how other staff view this adjustment.

The provision of space for prayer, worship, meditation, contemplation and celebration is valued. Sensitive consideration is needed of how such space is allocated and managed to ensure fair access by all religion or belief groups.

Some HEIs regularly use religious, mainly Christian, buildings to accommodate examinations or degree ceremonies. This may result in members of other religion or belief groups feeling uncomfortable.

A number of HEIs incorporate prayer (and occasionally hymns or acts of worship) within the fabric of institutional activities such as graduation ceremonies. Although in principle this might be thought to give rise to inequality between religion or belief groups, there is little evidence to suggest that this a problem for the majority. However, a small minority – especially those of no religion – voiced concern, and where attendance is mandatory at events that also include acts of worship, this can cause resentment and be a source of anxiety.

There appears to be some inconsistency in terms of which religion or belief celebrations are recognised and celebrated by HEIs and/or students' unions. Some participants felt that decisions about which festivals to celebrate are made with no clear rationale, and expressed concern about the potential inequalities arising from this.

The research shows that religion or belief societies are particularly valued by many students and by some staff as an important part of their support networks.

Religious dress and symbols

Relatively few participants in this study wish to wear religious dress or symbols. However, the research shows that those who do wish to observe certain dress codes can experience challenges while in higher education, particularly in programmes of study in medical or health-related disciplines, where clothing must meet health-and-safety requirements. This can cause students

some anxiety as they negotiate the tension to satisfy their own conscience and the requirements of the course.

Many HEIs require all staff and students to have photographic identity cards. This can pose issues for those female Muslims who cover their face. Some HEIs have developed and implemented policies and procedures that enable alternatives to photographic identity cards for this group. Where HEIs have done this, there is clarity for all about the processes for identification, and this ensures that no individual experiences discomfort when providing proof of identity.

Discrimination and harassment

Some evidence exists of discrimination and harassment of particular groups on campuses, for example, the Community Security Trust's report *Antisemitic incidents January–June 2009* (CST, 2009). However, there has been little systematic work to identify issues of discrimination and harassment across different religions or beliefs, or the extent to which institutional responses to incidents of discrimination and harassment on grounds of religion or belief might differ.

Levels of discrimination and harassment

The overwhelming majority of respondents reported that they feel valued by their institution and that they had not experienced harassment or discrimination. However, some patterns emerged from the data in relation to the experiences of particular religion or belief groups.

As few monitoring data are collected on individuals' religion or belief identity, or on the number of incidences across the sector, it can be difficult to assess the level of discrimination and harassment within higher education in relation to other surveys. There may be a case for further research to explore this issue in more depth.

Types of discrimination and harassment

While the research did not find discrimination and harassment to be particularly prevalent across the sector, respondents raised a number of incidents where it had taken place. Participants reported experiencing both direct and indirect discrimination and a variety of forms of harassment.

Institutional responses

Many HEIs have complex structures, systems and policies, and there can be challenges in coordinating an institutional approach to religion or belief issues.

Institutional practices and policies are commonly produced by a range of institutional stakeholders (senior management, human resources, student support departments, students' unions, trade unions, chaplaincies and pastoral care departments, independent multi-faith centres and inter-faith organisations and programmes and, of course, academics and students themselves), and this picture is more complicated still in institutions with more federated structures.

Procedures are generally in place for incidents of discrimination and harassment to be reported. However, these procedures are not always given a high profile, and formal reporting of incidents appears to be infrequent.

There is a variety of sources of support for students with regard to religion or belief. These include academic staff, counsellors, students' union advisers, chaplaincy staff and other faith advisers. Students' unions commonly have a formal role in advocacy relating to discrimination and harassment; however, not all students are aware that this is the case, and not all feel that religion or belief issues will be taken seriously by their students' union.

Staff have fewer specific sources of support than students, but many HEIs provide dignity or equality advisers in addition to normal line management arrangements.

Policies that deal with quite a wide range of issues of discrimination and harassment are generally in place, but HEIs deal with the issue of religion or belief in a number of different ways.

Good relations

While there is no commonly understood definition of good relations, there are a number of criteria that might be denoted as evidence of good relations (Johnson and Tatum, 2009). Segregation and separation may be aligned with the extent to which good relations between faith or belief groups are fostered on university campuses.

Interactions between members of religion or belief groups

The extent to which segregation or separation of members of different religion or belief groups exists may be a good indicator of how far good relations are evident. The research revealed that many HEIs actively seek to promote good relations through shared activities.

Tensions between different protected characteristics

The research indicates that in some cases there are tensions between religion or belief and other protected groups within higher education. Of particular note is the tension between religion or belief and sexual orientation.

Freedom of speech

The overwhelming number of participants in the study believe that freedom of speech is valued within their own HEI. This is mirrored by the high numbers who feel comfortable in expressing their religion or belief on campus, although fewer feel comfortable with seeking to promote their particular religion or belief as something that others might consider adopting or following.

Recommendations

This UK-wide research into the experiences of staff and students in higher education with regard to religion or belief is intended to inform further development of inclusive policies and approaches to meet new legislative requirements and good practice.

The sector is currently dealing with issues relating to religion or belief in a careful and thoughtful manner with clear awareness of the law. The majority of staff and students are satisfied with the way in which their institution handles religion or belief issues. However, there are tensions and issues that HEIs and the sector as a whole may wish to examine further. It is important to recognise that institutions are likely to find themselves in the position of balancing the competing demands of different stakeholders.

A number of reflective questions presented in this report are designed to help HEIs, and the sector as a whole, develop strategic plans to address the issues identified by this study in a way that is appropriate for the institution and meets the law. They will provide the sector, HEIs and practitioners with a structure for thinking about some of the issues raised.

Many of the findings here will stimulate thinking within the context of a single institution. However, there are also a number of key issues that would benefit from further consideration at the sector level.

- = The need for national (and local) monitoring data – the lack of such data on the religion or belief make-up of the staff and student body in HEIs makes it difficult to link the findings of this research to more general data. The overwhelming majority of participants in the study indicated that they would be willing to provide information about their religion or belief as long as a clear rationale is given for collecting the data.
- = The position of alcohol in the student experience – alcohol clearly has an important part in the culture of (undergraduate) students, and this is unlikely to change as the result of any policy initiatives on behalf of the sector. However, this study suggests that for some students, particularly those with a religion or belief, the position of alcohol in many student activities acts as a barrier to participation. Many HEIs, students' unions and chaplaincies are aware of this and provide alternatives. The sector may wish to explore how these alternatives are working, and continue to discuss the appropriate place of alcohol in the student experience.

- = Freedom of speech – although the majority of staff and students expressed a belief that freedom of speech is valued, some staff have concerns about how to balance the right to freedom of expression with sensitivity to individuals’ religion or belief.
- = The curriculum – this provides a space for individuals and groups to encounter and explore a range of issues relating to religion or belief. Issues may emerge across all disciplines, from theology to engineering, and there may be value in thinking further about how to support teaching staff in dealing with the intersection between religion or belief and the curriculum.

Reflective questions

Throughout this report, a number of reflective questions are posed.

These are designed to provide the sector, HEIs and practitioners with a structure for thinking about some of the issues raised. All the questions are gathered together here.

Participation and access

- = Should your institution start to gather more data in relation to religion or belief?
 - = Should the collection of religion or belief data be compulsory or voluntary?
 - = When collecting religion or belief data, should your HEI use the categories in the census?
 - = What role should HEIs take to support teaching that is both aware of religion or belief positions and sensitive to how they may intersect with the curriculum?
 - = Can food be labelled more appropriately to enable people with religion or belief to make more informed decisions about what they eat?
 - = How far do your HEI's catering arrangements meet the needs of students and staff, given the diversity of dietary requirements?
 - = Should the students' union and institution routinely provide non-alcoholic options in the programme at freshers' events?
 - = Should your HEI review the place that alcohol has within the institution?
 - = Is there value in providing alcohol-free alternatives that engage students and staff from all religion or belief groups?
-

Religious observance

- = When planning the academic timetable, in what ways can your institution accommodate individuals' requirements for religious observance?
- = Is the institution prepared for the fact that in 2015 and 2016 the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan will fall during the traditional exam period? Would any changes in policy or practice have wider implications for other religion or belief groups?
- = Under what circumstances is it appropriate for the institution to use religious buildings? How do staff and students of different religions or beliefs feel about this decision?

- = If your institution is church-related or Christian faith-informed, how far does it expect staff and students to participate in religious elements of institutional activities? How does the institution communicate these expectations?
- = How far are acts of worship integrated into institutional business? How does the institution accommodate individuals who do not share the institutional religion or belief position?
- = What provision does your institution make available for worship, meditation, prayer and celebration space? How is this space allocated and how are priorities decided between different groups?
- = How is information about institutional facilities for worship, meditation, prayer and celebration communicated to new staff and students?
- = What religion or belief occasions does your institution celebrate/mark? How have these celebrations been chosen and have any religion or belief positions been left out?
- = Does your institution provide clear guidance around religious dress codes? Do these address potential conflicts with health and safety requirements?
- = Does your institution have a clear policy about the use of photographic identity cards? Should alternative procedures be put in place for those who wish to cover their face as part of their religious observance?

Discrimination and harassment

- = What measures has your institution taken to prevent the creation of a 'hostile atmosphere', in line with the requirements of the Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006? Are these measures merely reactive, or are they in line with the positive equality duty to foster good relations?
- = Do your institution's equality and diversity policies include policies around religion or belief? How have these changed or developed in the light of recent changes in legislation?
- = Which stakeholders should be consulted when developing institutional policies around religion or belief?
- = What are your institution's obligations when harassment occurs in different contexts and locations (for example, classroom or cafeteria, university property or students' union property, students' union event or private gathering)? Are current regulations sufficient to deal with these complexities?

-
- = Should your HEI do more to raise the profile of policies and procedures in relation to addressing discrimination and harassment on the grounds of religion or belief? If so, what practical steps can be taken?
 - = Does the sector need to explore further the approaches used to collect data on religion or belief and on incidents of discrimination and harassment on the grounds of religion or belief?
 - = Should your HEI work with community organisations such as the Community Security Trust to feed into broader community-based reporting mechanisms?
 - = How can your institution, students' union and chaplaincy work together most effectively to deal with religion or belief issues?

Good relations

- = Should your institution develop policies and strategies to facilitate good relations between members of different religion or belief groups?
- = Can the sector develop any further guidance and models of practice to help HEIs deal with complex issues around the tensions between different protected characteristics?
- = What effects do certain sorts of discourse (and in some cases, harassment and discrimination) have on the ability of others in a university community to practise their right to freedom of speech? Does this have an impact on their right to express their belief or religion on campus?
- = What is the difference between freedom of speech and academic freedom? Should different regulations apply in the context of the curriculum versus extracurricular activities at university?
- = When tensions between equality strands occur, what tools exist (or should exist) within HEIs to resolve them?
- = Should HEIs or the sector as a whole develop clearer guidelines about attempts to bring others over to your point of view? The purpose of such guidelines could be to clarify commitments to freedom of speech and to sharpen definitions of what actually meets the legal definition of harassment.

Further information

The full research report and further background information on the project are available online.

Religion and belief in higher education: researching the experiences of staff and students is available to download in full from ECU's website:

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/religion-and-belief-staff-and-students-in-he

Further background information, including details of stakeholder engagement and ethical issues raised by the project, is available on the research website:

www.derby.ac.uk/ehs/research/religion-and-belief-in-HE

Equality Challenge

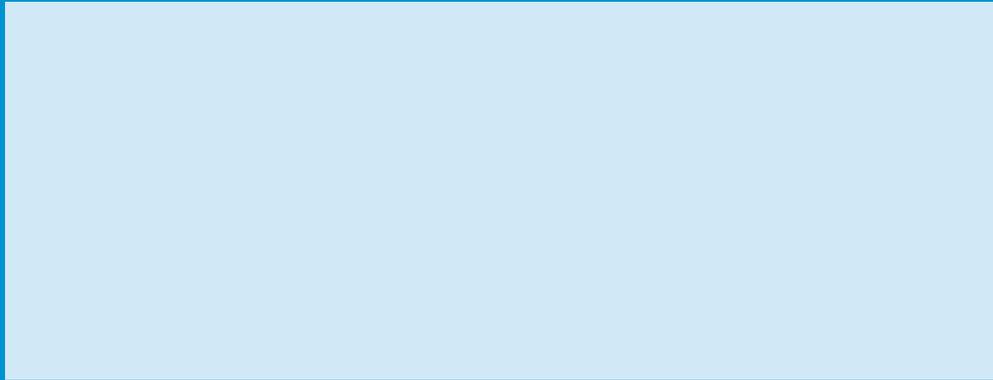
Unit works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education across all four nations of the UK.

ECU works closely with colleges of higher education and universities to seek to ensure that staff and students are not unfairly excluded, marginalised or disadvantaged because of age, disability, gender identity, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity status, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, or through any combination of these characteristics or other unfair treatment.

Providing a central source of expertise, research, advice and leadership, we support institutions in building a culture that provides equality of both opportunity and outcome, promotes good relations, values the benefits of diversity and provides a model of equality for the wider UK society.



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