Religion or Belief
Guidance for Staff and Students

1. Introduction

Whether at work or in our private lives, we will come into contact with people with different religious beliefs. The UK is increasingly multi-cultural and in the 2001 Census 77% of respondents identified themselves as having a religious affiliation, and 15% of people identified themselves as having no religious affiliation. The five most popular religions in the UK during the 2001 Census were Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and Sikhism\(^1\). Legislation now makes discrimination, victimisation and harassment on the grounds of religion or belief unlawful. The University has a new policy on Religion or Belief, which should be read in conjunction with this guidance.

It is not practical for everyone to become experts in the beliefs, rituals, traditions and history associated with all world religions. This guide is intended to provide helpful and practical advice to staff and students so ensure that no one is discriminated against on grounds of religion or belief.

The University is committed to providing a respectful environment for anyone who may seek to give their particular religion or belief external expression. It acknowledges that religion is both belief and practice. All University staff and students should respect the opinions and human rights of others.

It is equally important to recognise and respect those people holding atheistic or agnostic beliefs. Their religious views and religious non-practice are to be given an equivalent level of respect and discrimination should not be made against them on religious grounds.

It is important also to remember that all beliefs (and none) are practiced by from people from different backgrounds and traditions and with varying degrees of adherence\(^2\).

2. What is “Religion or Belief”?\(^3\)

For the purposes of the policy “Religion or Belief” is defined from a legal perspective rather than a philosophical one. The main legislation regarding Religion or Belief is the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003. Religion or Belief is not explicitly defined in these Regulations. It will be for the courts to decide what is covered by the legislation. The courts will decide which particular groups would be protected by the legislation by considering the presence of the following:

- Collective worship
- A clear belief system
- A profound belief affecting the way of life or view of the world

For the purposes of the University policy, all major religions are covered, including the list detailed below.

Baha’i
Buddhism
Christianity
Hinduism
Islam
Jainism
Judaism
Paganism
Rastafarianism
Sikhism
Zoroastrianism

This list is not exhaustive and other religions or beliefs may also be included. The University will consider the same criteria used by the courts if there are any disputes about what is considered a religion or belief for the purposes of this policy.

The Policy also covers Humanists, and those holding atheistic or agnostic beliefs.

If there is any dispute or concern about whether a particular religion or belief would be covered by this policy, the Equal Opportunities Team can provide further advice.

3. Practical Steps to Take

There is substantial diversity within and between religions and beliefs. It is not practical for everyone to become experts in the beliefs, rituals, traditions and history associated with all world religions. Treating people fairly means taking account of these differences rather than treating everyone the same. If you are unsure about a particular issue, ask the individual concerned. There is no reason for them to be offended if your question is prompted by a genuine desire to make things right. Having a better understanding of their beliefs and practices will help you to facilitating their adherence to them.

Requests/representations from people with less well known religions or beliefs should be treated with the same sensitivity as those with more well known or mainstream religions or beliefs.

To find out more about commonly practiced religions or beliefs, visit the BBC’s website http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/. This site contains useful information about many religions or beliefs including their history, beliefs, ethics and customs.
ACAS have also produced a guide for employers and employees called Religion or Belief and the Workplace which is available online: [http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/f/l/religion_1.pdf](http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/f/l/religion_1.pdf) or you can order a free copy by calling ACAS on 08457 47 47 47.

4. Managing staff - Dealing with requests for time off work

Requests for time off work that relate to religion or belief will usually fall into two categories: time off to attend prayers and time off to attend a religious festival. When dealing with requests for time off, take the following into account:

- All staff, regardless of their religious belief or non-belief are required to work in accordance with their contract.

- Managers should try, wherever it is reasonably practicable and subject to the needs of the service/school, to be flexible with work schedules and holidays for individuals wishing to observe religious festivals and holy days.

- Dates for some religious festivals are approximate as they are based on lunar observation and may change from year to year, or according to different doctrines, or local customs. A religious calendar can be found at [http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/](http://www.interfaithcalendar.org/)

- Managers should be prepared to make reasonable adjustments to working arrangements as long as they don’t cause undue disruption, to enable staff to participate in religious prayers or festivals. Such adjustments could include approving annual leave, time off in lieu, unpaid leave, use of flexi-time and/or flexible working arrangements.

- Sometimes there are religious obligations in relation to birth, coming of age, marriage and death, which can vary according to religion, culture and position in the family. Managers are encouraged to be sympathetic to requests on these grounds and try to accommodate them, wherever it is reasonably practicable to do so, subject to the needs of the service/school (staff should also refer to the University’s Special Leave policies which include Bereavement leave). Arrangements could also include those referred to in the previous bullet point.

5. Managing students - Dealing with Requests for Time-Off Study

For students who wish to observe the requirements of their religion and pray at certain times of the day or attend religious festivals:

- They should, wherever possible, fulfil their obligation to pray either before or after lectures/classes.

- Missed learning opportunities resulting from participation in prayer and religious festivals must be made up by the student.
• Handouts for lectures normally distributed in class, should be made available to the student.

A note about timetabling
General timetabling is a very difficult and complex area. The University tries to bear in mind the needs of all students and staff, taking into account the religious observance requirements of a number of faiths, and seeks to be sensitive to individuals. However, it also needs to ensure that the timetable operates in a way which enables a full lecture and seminar programme to take place effectively within the space available.

The University will seek to avoid as far as possible the timetabling of examinations during the Friday midday period (12pm-2pm).

Timetabling difficulties within dentistry and medicine are substantial and whilst the University is sympathetic to the needs of those who seek to practice their religion, it is not reasonably practicable to timetable examinations, particularly clinical examinations, in such a way that would ensure that no student’s religious observance might be affected.

6. Food and Drink

6.1 Organising catered events
Shared food and hospitality plays an important part in many religions. However, because certain foods are forbidden in certain religions, catering to accommodate everyone’s needs can be complex. The following guidance may be helpful when organising events at which food and drink are available:

• It is good practice to ask attendees if they have any special dietary requirements in advance. You can discuss their requirements in detail if necessary.
• Careful labelling of all dishes will help to avoid anxiety about accidentally eating forbidden foods.
• The best way to cater for a multi faith event so that the maximum number of people can share in the food is to make it fully vegetarian, with some vegan options, and to label each dish.
• For strictly Orthodox Jews, it may be necessary to bring in separate meals which have been prepared in a kosher kitchen. Kosher foods include kosher wine, bread and cheese as well as meats. Such food and drink is marked with a hechsher (seal) which certifies it is kosher.
• Muslims will wish that, ideally, their food has been prepared in a kitchen where the utensils and contents have not been in contact with haram (forbidden) food. However, most Muslims are primarily concerned to ensure that any meat served is halal (permitted and slaughtered in accordance with Islamic law), and are generally happy to eat vegetarian food that has no animal fat or by-products used in its production³.
When organising work functions and social, especially catered events related to work, try to consider potential conflicts between a member of staff’s religious beliefs and his/her ability to engage in social activities related to work. In many faiths, the consumption of alcohol is forbidden and there are also periods of fasting. Consideration should be given to a wide range of activities that will be inclusive for everyone. For example, checking that catered social events do not occur during Ramadan if there are Muslim members present.

6.2 Food and Drink around the Campus

The University has a range of food outlets both on campus and in halls of residence. Vegetarian food options are available at all University catering services, who can also provide Halal or Kosher food if requested. However, please be advised that two weeks notice is usually required.

6.3 Food Storage and other facilities

If staff bring food into the workplace (i.e. packed lunches) they may need to store and/or heat the food separately from other food, due to their religious beliefs. Consult with employees on such issues and find a mutually acceptable solution.

6.4 Fasting

Try to be considerate when other employees are observing a fast and consider how you can support them. However, be careful not to place unreasonable extra burdens upon other workers which could cause conflict or claims of discrimination.

Employees observing a fast may request reduced lunch breaks. These requests should be considered bearing in mind the legal minimum of a twenty minute break for every six hours worked. The University’s Flexi-time Policy also requires employees take a minimum thirty minute lunch break.

7. Prayer Facilities and Quiet Rooms

The University provides a quiet /contemplation room for use by staff and students⁴. There is also a Mosque on the campus⁵. Some individuals may find these facilities inadequate/insufficient. If this is the case, consult with the employee and explore a mutually acceptable solution. If a request has been made to have a new prayer/quiet room in your building, speak to the School/Service manager to see if the request can be accommodated. The regulations do not specifically require the provision of a prayer room/quiet room by employers, but if an employee requested access to a quiet place for prayer in the working day, an employer may be acting in a discriminatory way if they refused such a request. Time taken to pray would need to be unpaid or time off in lieu, or covered by flexi-time arrangements.
Students who are on work placements (e.g. MBBS or PGCE students) may not be able to access the same level of prayer facilities during work placements, nor may they be allowed time off to pray. It may be advisable for students to check with the placement provider before the placement.

7.1 A note about Medical and Dental Students
Students on the MBBS programme are not permitted to miss compulsory sessions on religious grounds. By doing so they would fail to meet the GMC requirements for fitness to practices at the end of the course. More information is contained in the Religion and Belief Policy (Section 5.5).

The Equal Opportunities Team can provide further advice.

8. Dress

The University does not operate a formal dress code and the University acknowledges that some people will wish to wear religious dress (including, for example, turbans, skullcaps, hijabs, the Sikh five Ks, and clerical collars). The wearing of religious dress is permitted provided it is consistent with the University’s pursuit of its legitimate aims. Where a person is required to wear overalls, protective clothing or uniforms, sensitivity and flexibility should be shown and efforts made to accommodate the wearing of religious dress safely.

There are some circumstances where the wearing of religious dress by students is discouraged by external bodies. Where this is the case, students are expected to adhere to the dress codes and any local policies adopted by organisations in which they are working or studying.

9. Naming systems

Not everyone has a surname or family name in the Anglo Saxon sense of family name, nor will this always come last. Ask for people’s first names and family names, not their Christian name. Ask how the individual wishes to be addressed and how their name should be pronounced.

10. Differences in style of communication

In some religions, followers may be expected to follow different rules with regard to their communication with others, for example depending upon their gender. For example, how you address a person, whether or not you shake hands or make eye contact. Agree with the individual how they should be address and how they should address you. If you are not sure about any of these issues, ask the individual concerned and try to agree an approach which is mutually acceptable.
11. **Language**

Our workforce and student base is diverse. We need to make sure that our language is relevant and sensitive. Be aware that using the name of a particular God as a swear word can and will cause offence to some.

12. **Recruitment and selection**

Interview questions should be asked to check for skills and competences needed for the post. Job interviews should not contain any questions enquiring about religious affiliation, or questions designed to reveal if religious requirements might conflict with workplace routines, or workplace schedules*. If there is a need to specify the requirements of the job in relation to hours of work and any out of hours arrangements these should be made clear to **all** candidates and they should **all** be asked if they are able to comply.

Shaking hands upon meeting interviewees or after an interview is commonly practiced in the UK. However, some people may find shaking hands unacceptable because of their religion or belief. To avoid any embarrassing exchanges with candidates, you could simply ask their permission to shake their hand. Remember that interviews are a daunting experience for any candidate and an embarrassing or inappropriate exchange immediately prior to the interview could undermine their performance. If candidates choose not to shake your hand, it should in no way affect the decision making process.

13. **Freedom of Speech**

The Religion and Belief policy should be read in conjunction with the Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech. The Code of Practice does not stifle lawful, legitimate criticism of, or debate about a religion or belief for academic purposes. However, it does take into account other legal obligations, for example, incitement to racial hatred would transgress the bounds of lawful speech.

The Freedom of Speech policy can be found at [http://www.ncl.ac.uk/internal/documents/foi.html](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/internal/documents/foi.html)

14. **Harassment**

Harassment of any member of the University community or visitors on grounds of religion or belief is not to be tolerated, nor is trying to justify harassment on grounds of gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

The following behaviours are also unacceptable:
- Harassment because of a persons religious beliefs or non-belief,
- using religion to justify harassment on the grounds of gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation,
- coercion of others to comply with the requirements or doctrine of a religion, faith or belief system, or a particular interpretation of a religion, faith or belief system.
- ‘Outing’ (revealing a person’s religion or belief without their consent, usually in Public).
- a person being told that they could not make their religious affiliation known when it is a key part of their identity.

15. Security
The Religion and Belief policy includes a statement about security and how the security service would deal with a case of needing to confirm identity, especially for individuals who wish to wear religious dress that fully or partially obscures the face. Any requests to confirm identity would be dealt with sensitively. See the Religion and Belief policy for further information.

15. Further Information
For further information or advice about specific issues contact Julie Bullimore, Equal Opportunities Adviser, Human Resources, 0191 222 3440, julie.bullimore@ncl.ac.uk.

1 Employing People in Higher Education: Religion and Belief, Equality Challenge Unit, 2005.

2 Cultural Diversity: A resource booklet on religious and cultural observance, belief, language and naming systems, HM Land Registry

3 The Inter Faith Network for the UK. [http://www.interfaith.org.uk/index.htm](http://www.interfaith.org.uk/index.htm)

4 The Newcastle University Chaplaincy Service has a quiet room available between 10.00am and 4.00pm every weekday during term. The Chaplaincy, Claremont Building, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU Telephone: 0191 222 6341

5 The University also has an on-site Mosque, for more information contact the Islamic Society, Newcastle University, King George VI Building, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU, tel: 0191 222 5658, email: Islamic.soc@ncl.ac.uk, web: [http://www.societies.ncl.ac.uk/islamic.society/](http://www.societies.ncl.ac.uk/islamic.society/)

*There are very limited circumstances where it is permissible to require a job holder to be of a particular religion or belief. This is known as a Genuine Occupational Requirement (GOR). The Equal Opportunities Team can provide further advice about GORs.

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