UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

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Please use documents found there rather than archived documents.

25 October 2006

The University of Birmingham
Accommodating Students' Religious Observance

The purpose of this paper is to provide the University with guidance on how to respond to students who, for reasons of their faith, find that the arrangements of our educational and social provision are problematic.

The University's Charter makes the following commitment;

> No discrimination on the grounds of political opinion, age, colour, disability, ethnic or national origin, gender, marital status, race, religion or sexual orientation shall be exercised by the University in the admission of students, or the appointment or promotion of staff or the awarding of any Degree Diploma or Certificate, or generally, in the execution of any of its Objects as laid down by the Charter.

The University of Birmingham is enriched by embracing a diverse population of students, and staff[1], of different faiths, and of no faith. It acknowledges the desire and right of students to observe their own religion. It aims to facilitate this while remaining true to its secular origins. The University is also committed to making effective use of its resources in its commitment to the delivery of high quality research, learning and teaching as befits a university of international standing that welcomes students from a diversity of cultures and nationalities.

The University of Birmingham is a secular organisation which values the right to debate, pursue and prove knowledge within a culture of academic freedom, scientific integrity and an ethical framework.

The University is obliged to make reasonable accommodation for faith in its provision of services to students. In developing this Policy the University has sought advice on 'reasonableness' in the provision for religious observance and has adopted the standards in the interpretation of good practice and the law in the workplace, as developed by ACAS[2]. These have been adapted to fit our context, as an educational institution.

The University makes every effort to ensure, through the prospectus and admissions procedure, that applicants and students are aware of its policies and of their obligations.

This statement is part of the University's effort to ensure that:

- students are treated equitably, regardless of their religion or belief,
- it is able to cater for a diverse population of students,
- students are aware of, and able to comply with, their duties as learners.

Accommodating the Religious Calendars

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[1] The University's position on accommodating the religion and belief of staff is available at http://www.publications.bham.ac.uk/core/3627ReligionOrBelief.pdf
and
http://www.personnel.bham.ac.uk/diversity/Religion.htm

[2] *Religion or Belief and the Workplace* (ACAS 2005)

In common with other UK institutions, the University calendar is structured around the Christian calendar with breaks over Christmas and Easter.

A faith calendar has been incorporated into the University Diary to raise awareness of the *major* holy days and festivals that occur during the working week and 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).

The calendar, which is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all religions, holy days and festivals, can be found at
http://www.directory.bham.ac.uk/reference/faith.htm

Time off for religious observance

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

The University's Regulation 5.2.2 part 3 states that

> 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).
>
> The regulations regarding absence from teaching sessions and assessments is are provided at
>
> http://www.ppd.bham.ac.uk/policy/ugassessprot/ugcurrent/ugindex.htm
> (Assessment Protocol 8.3)
>
> Details of the student's duty to exercise diligence in their attendance is provided at
>
> http://www.ppd.bham.ac.uk/policy/regs/currentregs/5.2.htm

Reasons for absence may include religious observance and the University will seek to ensure that the manner in which requests for absence for religious observance are responded to are 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 can develop these locally by agreement with the Director of Student Life, who will consult with the relevant Chaplain and will maintain an appropriate degree of consistency. These limits must be clearly publicised to students.

Religious festival and assessment deadlines

Schools and departments are advised to ensure that they publicise coursework deadlines etc. well in advance. If the deadline falls on an important religious day, the student should have been prepared to submit it in advance.

Observance of the Sabbath - from one hour before dusk on Fridays until nightfall on Saturdays - and Friday Muslim prayers which occur just after mid-day usually between 1.00pm and 2.30pm.

Pressure on the academic timetable and on teaching space can mean that these times are included in the student working week. Although the nature of a particular course or placement may prevent this, wherever possible, the Schools and Departments should attempt to accommodate Muslim students, who so wish, to pray during the Friday noon period and for Jewish students to refrain from writing, carrying and using equipment on the Sabbath. Should there be difficulties reconciling a students' educational and religious needs the relevant Director of Student Life and the relevant Chaplain should be consulted.

Exams and Religious Observance

Students who are unable to take examinations on any date during the specified examination period for reasons of religious observance (e.g. Sabbath) should register with the Examinations Office.

Students are requested to complete and submit a Religious Observance Form, which should be authorised by their personal tutor or School/Department Examinations Officer. The deadline for receipt of completed forms by the Examinations Office [in the current year is **Friday 27th January 2006.**]

The Examinations Office will make every effort to avoid the times/dates in students' requests. However due to the constraints placed on the examination timetable this may not be possible and it may be necessary for the University to contact Schools/Departments and the University Chaplaincy to arrange a special sitting.

Physically Accommodating Prayer and Contemplation

The University accommodates its various faith communities in St Francis Hall. In addition, dedicated facilities for Muslim students are accommodated in the Guild building.

Given the size of the Edgbaston campus and the location of the above facilities, there may be a demand for local space for prayer and private contemplation in other parts of the Edgbaston campus, and where appropriate on other sites.

Any request for local provision for prayer and contemplation should be submitted to the Vice-Chancellor by the Chaplaincy Committee for discussion at USMC.

This policy will be reviewed every five years and is due for review in 2011.

KD 9.06