UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

ACCOMMODATING STUDENTS' RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES POLICY

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Accommodating Students' Religious Observances

1. Introduction

(a) The purpose of this document is to provide the University with guidance on responding to students who, for reasons of their faith, find that the arrangements of the University's educational and social provision are problematic.

(b) Equality Act 2010 prohibits discrimination and victimization against a person on grounds of religion, belief and non-belief'. Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 requires public authorities when exercising their functions to give due regard to eliminating prohibited conduct, advancing equality of opportunity and fostering good relations. These positive obligations, commonly known as the public sector equality duty, cover nine protected characteristics including religion or belief.

(c) 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.

(d) 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 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.

(e) The University is committed to making reasonable accommodation for faith in its provision of services to students.

2. Accommodating Religious Calendars

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

A multi-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,

[1] The University's position on accommodating the religion and belief of staff is available at https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/hr/documents/public/Religion-and-Belief-Guidance-for-Staff.pdf

can be found at https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/resources/diary/faith-calendar.aspx

3. 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 (f) (iii) 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 are provided at http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/regulations-part7.pdf.

Details of the student's duty to exercise diligence in their attendance are provided at http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/university/legal/regulations-part7.pdf.

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.

The Head of School will have the authority to agree to these requests but may limit the number and regularity of these absences where there are sound and defensible pedagogic reasons. The Head of School may consult with the Director of Student Services, the Equality and Diversity Adviser for Students or the University's Senior Tutor, who may seek advice from the relevant Chaplain. All such cases will be notified to the Senior Tutor who will retain oversight and encourage an appropriate degree of consistency.

These limits must be clearly publicised to students.

4. Assessment deadlines and taught sessions

Schools and Departments must 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. Students should therefore ensure that they plan their work in advance so they meet deadlines.

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 the student's request. Should there be difficulties reconciling a student's educational and religious needs, advice can be accessed from the Director of Student Services, the Equality and Diversity Adviser for Students or the University's Senior Tutor and the relevant Chaplain should be consulted.

5. Examinations and Religious Observance

Students who are unable to take examinations on any date during the specified examination period for reasons of religious observance should register with the Examinations Office at the start of the academic year.

Students must complete and submit a Religious Observance Form, which should be authorised by their personal tutor or School/Department Examinations Officer. For the deadline for receipt of completed forms by the Examinations Office please check the Examinations Office website (https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/cladls/exams/religious.aspx; https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/cladls/exams/documents/public/religious-observance-form.pdf).

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.

Observance of a faith practice cannot be used as grounds for appeal if extenuating circumstances are not accepted.

6. 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.

The College of Medicine and Dental Sciences has a prayer facility in the Medical School.

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