UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

CODE OF PRACTICE ON ACCOMMODATING STUDENTS' RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES

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Accommodating Students' Religious Observances

1. Introduction

1.1 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 challenging. Frequently Asked Questions about how this Code operates in practice can be found on the University webpages.

1.2 Legislation relating to matters of equality prohibits discrimination and victimization against a person on grounds of religion, belief and non-belief. It requires public authorities to give due regard to eliminating prohibited conduct, advancing equality of opportunity and fostering good relations when exercising their functions. These positive obligations, commonly known as "the public sector equality duty", cover nine protected characteristics, which includes religion or belief.

1.3 The University of Birmingham is a secular organisation which values the right to debate, pursue and prove knowledge within a culture of academic freedom[1], scientific integrity and an ethical framework.

1.4 The University of Birmingham is enriched by embracing a diverse population of students, and staff,[2] 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.

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

2. Accommodating Religious Calendars

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

2.2 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, can be found at The Inclusion Calendar.

[1] Please see the Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech for more information.
[2] The University's position on accommodating the religion and belief of staff is available at Religion and Belief Guidance for staff and managers.docx.

3. Time off for religious observance

3.1 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, which includes religious observance.

3.2 The University's Regulation 5.2.3(h) (iii) states that:

"Any Registered Student who wishes to be absent from the University for any part of any University Session or other period of required attendance must first obtain permission of the Head of Principal Academic Unit (or nominee)."

3.3 The Head of School has 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.

3.4 The Head of School may consult with the Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience), or the Academic Lead on Religious and Cultural Diversity, or the Equality and Diversity Adviser for Students who should seek advice from the relevant Chaplain. All such cases will be notified to the Academic Lead on Religious and Cultural Diversity who will retain oversight and encourage an appropriate degree of consistency.

3.5 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 granted or refused are consistent with the response to requests for absence on other grounds.

3.6 Students who wish to request time off for religious observance should follow appropriate procedures for applying for authorised absence and extensions to course work, where relevant. When authorised absence is granted, it is the student's obligation to catch up on missed learning, and the University's obligation to provide course materials for missed sessions.

4. Assessment deadlines and taught sessions

4.1 Schools and Departments must ensure that they publicise coursework deadlines and dates of local assessments well in advance. If a 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. If a local assessment falls on an important religious day students must apply for a change of date at the earliest possible opportunity using the appropriate procedures. The School will endeavour to accommodate such requests where possible.

4.2 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 sought from the Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience), the Academic Lead on Religious and Cultural Diversity or the Equality and Diversity Adviser for Students, who should seek advice from the relevant Chaplain.

4.3 Students are expected to arrange to attend prayers during non-teaching times wherever this is possible. Where this is not possible the student must inform the lecturer / demonstrator at the beginning of a teaching session of the need to leave at a particular time. It is the student's responsibility to catch up on missed learning.

5. Examinations and Religious Observance

5.1 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 Academic Tutor or School/Department Examinations Officer. For the deadline for receipt of completed forms by the Examinations Office please check the Examinations Office website.

5.2 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.

5.3 Observance of a faith practice cannot be used as grounds for appeal.

5.4 Students are not permitted to leave and then return to an examination venue for religious observance, such as prayers.

6. Physically Accommodating Prayer and Contemplation

6.1 The University accommodates its various faith communities in St Francis Hall in the Guild of Students.

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

6.3 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.