Religion & Belief Guidance for Staff and Students

Introduction

At York St John we are proud of our reputation as a university that encourages students and staff to flourish in an inclusive, accessible and friendly environment.

Every day across campus we make real the commitment in our mission "to the provision of excellent, open and progressive higher education that embraces difference, challenges prejudice and promotes justice in practical ways that enhance the experience of our diverse student and staff communities".

The aim of this guidance is to provide practical information about ways in which York St John supports students and staff in relation to their religions and beliefs. It covers common issues related to faith and how to deal with such issues in a fair and practical way.

The guidance supplements the University’s Equality, Diversity and Human Rights Policy Statement and for further information about faiths please refer to the ‘Guide to Major Faiths’ booklet and our online guide to Ramadan and Eid For dates of significant religious festivals please visit our website. [http://www.yorks.ac.uk/equality-and-diversity/equality-and-diversity/diversity-calendar.aspx](http://www.yorks.ac.uk/equality-and-diversity/equality-and-diversity/diversity-calendar.aspx)

The University aims to provide an environment where the religions, beliefs and non-beliefs of all individuals are respected, and to prevent religious discrimination and harassment. We expect individuals to respect the freedom of others to manifest their convictions, religious beliefs or non-belief on their own terms, within the law. Where reasonable, appropriate provision is made to meet the cultural and religious needs of both students and staff.

This document is intended to provide general guidance on some commonly occurring issues which may arise during University life either as a student or as an employee. It is not intended to be overly prescriptive, but rather as a working document to encourage dialogue and understanding.
Student and Staff Recruitment

The selection of staff and students must be based on merit, ability and potential.

Applicants are invited to make requests to meet their specific needs and this may include requests for timetabling interviews and assessments to accommodate religious observance. These requests should be met where reasonably practicable.

Example: timing of interview

An applicant applies for a position at the University and their interview is scheduled to take place at noon on a Friday.

The candidate has requested that this be changed as, for them, this is an important weekly prayer time.

It is recommended that the interview time is changed to accommodate this request. Another candidate could be contacted to ask whether they were able to swap their interview slot. Alternatively, the panel could start the interviews earlier, finish later – or see the candidate on an alternative day

Good to know: all applicants are invited in advance to indicate specific needs to make it possible for them to take full part in the recruitment process.

Tips for staff recruitment

❖ Ensure that there are no unnecessary selection criteria or standards which could prevent someone applying because of their religion or belief.

❖ Make it clear what the job entails so applicants can consider before applying if the job might conflict with their religious or belief convictions.

❖ Make it clear in the advert if a genuine occupational requirement¹ is applicable to a vacancy.

❖ Our standard invite to interview letter invites applicants to make any specific requirements known before an interview so they can be taken into consideration when arranging the interviews.

¹In certain limited circumstances that are specified in the relevant legislation, an employer may discriminate by expressly setting out to recruit either a woman or a man, a person from a specific racial or religious group, or a person of a particular sexual orientation based on the requirements of the job itself. Essentially this is lawful where being of a particular gender, race, religion or sexual orientation is a genuine occupational requirement (GOR) or genuine occupational qualification (GOQ) for the specific post.

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Don’t ask personal questions which may be perceived to be intrusive, and imply discrimination. Questions should only relate to skills, experience and competencies.

Religious Observance and Timetabling

Because of religious observance, some students may be unable to attend or participate fully in lectures at certain times of the week or year. Students are asked to inform their Head of Programme at the earliest possible time so that this can be considered in the timetabling. This would include an ongoing requirement or ad-hoc requests. Open and timely communication between students and lecturers/tutors can help accommodate alternative ways for students to make up the time requirements of the course, causing minimal disruption to the class.

Further information is available in the Timetabling Policy:

http://intranet.yorksj.ac.uk/intranet/timetable/Yorksj2013/PDF/Timetable%20Policy.pdf

Staff should take steps to avoid clashes of course work, assessments and major events with obligatory religious observance, as far as is reasonably practicable. The diversity calendar on the University’s website lists significant dates in the religious calendar. The booklet Introduction to the main Religions and Beliefs’ highlights some specific religious and major festivals.

Example: clash with religious festival

A student is unable to attend a seminar on a day which falls when Eid-Ul-Adha is celebrated.

The lecturer should consider whether it would be possible for the student to attend a seminar later in the week with an alternate tutor group. It is also recommended that support is given so that they can get hold of any notes of the seminar.

Good to know: the diversity calendar on our website lists dates of significant religious festivals.

Example: organising an event during a religious festival

You are looking to plan an event which happens to fall during Ramadan (please see the Diversity Calendar for specific dates).
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Try to avoid holding events during normal meal times whilst other staff/students may be eating. If this can’t be avoided then you can offer a quiet space for Muslim people. At the start of an event, explain where the prayer facilities are on campus.

Good to know: our website has a guide to Ramadan and Eid which includes practical tips.

Extended Leave for Staff and Students

Many religions and beliefs have special festivals or spiritual observance days and an employee may request a holiday to celebrate them. Many festivals do not fall on the same date each year as they are aligned with lunar phases and so change from year to year. When authorising time off for members of staff to celebrate religious festivals, care should be taken not to disadvantage those who do not hold any specific religion or belief.

Students may request extended leave at a particular time for the purpose of going on pilgrimage, or because of particular religious needs for occasional absence for births, weddings, deaths (in particular if they have relatives abroad).

Tutors should agree to such requests if reasonable and practical, looking at factors such as length of absence, timing of absence (e.g. exams, assessments, placements), the type and level of programme, whether it disrupts other students’ participation. Students requesting such leave should be aware that extended absences may impinge on their ability fully to participate in a programme and / or satisfy academic or professional requirements. It could also affect exams/assessments during this period. However, a student may choose to apply for intercalation as a mechanism for ensuring that both their individual needs and programme needs are met. In such circumstances the programme’s decision about such issues is final.

If a member of staff requests extended leave at a particular time for the purpose of going on pilgrimage or other religious observations, early discussions between the member of staff and the line manager will help the institution to accommodate the request if reasonable and practical.

For all staff, regardless of any religious belief or similar philosophical belief, the number of annual leave days overall will remain as in the contract of employment. Therefore, if an employee wishes to take leave due to a religious festival then they should use their annual leave entitlement.

Any requests should be considered sympathetically and if reasonable and practical, and the individual has sufficient holiday entitlement, it should be granted. If an individual requests to take the time off as unpaid, or take the time off and make the
hours up, this again should be considered sympathetically, and if reasonable and practical, should be granted.

**Example of staff requesting extended leave for religious reasons**

An employee of Hindu faith has had a family bereavement. In Hinduism, following the cremation, close relatives of the deceased observe a 13 day mourning period during which they remain at home. The closest male relatives may take the ashes of the deceased to the Ganges, in India. The employee has therefore requested extended leave. You should sympathetically consider such a request where it is reasonable and practical for the employee to be away from work.

If it is not possible due to the needs of the service, in these circumstances you should discuss the matter with the employees affected, and with any recognised trade union, with the aim of balancing the needs of the University and those of the employee.

**Good to know: extended leave, beyond annual leave entitlement, is unpaid.**

**Dress code**

York St John University imposes no formal dress code on its students or staff, and would expect staff and students to dress appropriately. Where the University has a specific requirement for a dress code it will communicate these clearly and in a timely manner. Prior to imposing a dress code you should carefully consider whether you need it and the impact on any particular religious groups.

The wearing of items arising from particular cultural/religious norms (e.g. hijab, kippah, mangal sutra) is seen as part of our diversity. However staff and students are advised that they should be dressed appropriately for all practical sessions.

There are some limitations:

- Health and safety requirements may mean that for certain tasks specific items of clothing such as overalls, protective clothing etc. need to be worn. Any such requirement needs to be communicated clearly and timely, in the handbook, with individuals being given the opportunity to raise potential conflicts with their religious belief. The University will consult with the individual to see if an appropriate arrangement can be reached.

- In some programmes, students will be required to practise on each other and be willing to act as models for the purpose of demonstration of techniques by staff. These practical sessions will involve students being suitably clothed to permit demonstration. Any such engagement should be clearly flagged to students on application to the programme and in the handbook.
There are some roles at the University which require staff to wear a uniform, for example, the Portering and Cleaning teams. Where this is the case and staff feel that this creates a conflict with their religious belief then this should be discussed further with their line manager.

**Example of consideration of religious needs in dress code**

An employee may wish to dress modestly for reasons related to religion or belief. A manager wants to introduce a dress code which requires a blouse to be tucked inside a skirt or trousers to present a 'more professional image'. However, this may conflict with the employee's religious requirement as it accentuates their body shape. In this case, it may still be possible to achieve the desired professional image if the individual is allowed to wear the blouse over the outside of the skirt or trousers and it is recommended that the manager is flexible in introducing any such dress code.

**Good to know:** in some cultures/religions people wear a dress or jacket over their trousers. This would be acceptable as long as it supports a professional image.

The guiding principle in assisting decision-making around dress should always be based around the 'impact of dress upon the employee's ability to do their job'. If you consider this, decisions will tend to be objective, fair and consistent. Wherever there is doubt about what suitable clothing might be. Further advice and support is available from the University faith advisors.

**Modesty**

Some religions or beliefs require individuals to behave with modesty. Different religious groups and individuals interpret this requirement in different ways but some activities which may be considered immodest include:

- shaking hands with a member of the opposite sex
- being alone in a room with a member of the opposite sex
- showering or getting changed in the company of others
- having their photograph taken
- dressing in a particular way

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Examples of meeting modesty-related needs

If you are organising an over-night trip which will include shared sleeping accommodation, students should be given advance notice of the arrangements and be able to arrange private accommodation if required. Any additional cost would need to be met by the student.

If you are organising an event where a handshake is expected (e.g. graduation ceremony) explain this in advance information and suggest how the handshake may be avoided (e.g. keeping arms down.

When taking photographs, give people an opportunity to indicate that they do not want to have their photo taken.

Food requirements

The University responds positively to requests for food that meets individuals’ dietary requirements related to religion or belief (e.g. vegetarian, kosher, halal). Wherever reasonably practicable it will provide such food according to demand. Any queries should be directed to the Catering Manager or Head Chef.

When organising an event involving catering, staff and students should always enquire about dietary needs as this will allow the catering team to provide appropriate alternatives as required.

Where alcohol is used in the preparation/cooking of food, this should be clearly indicated. Alcoholic drinks are only served at events at the request of an organiser and a soft drink alternative is always provided.

Students and staff are also able to access additional information and menus online.

Fasting is a particular issue during the Muslim month of Ramadan, while some Christians may also fast during the six weeks of Lent. The timing of Ramadan is based on the lunar calendar, so it may occur at different points in the academic year (e.g. the start of the year or during exams).

Catering will work with individuals to meet their specific needs during this period – this may include, for example, provision of packed meals to enable individuals to eat prior to sunrise, or break their fast after sunset.

Those providing food at events should be aware that not all those attending will be able to join in. Additionally, the Students Union ensure Fresher’s week includes a range of events that do not involve alcohol.

Considerations when arranging an event:

- Is it necessary to hold the event at a certain day or time of day when there may be a clash with a religious observation?
Does alcohol need to be served?

When arranging work-related social gatherings, bear in mind that not all employees may feel comfortable going to places where alcohol is served, such as pubs and bars.

Example of accommodating religious dietary requirements

An employee who, for religious reasons, is vegetarian feels unable to store her lunch in a refrigerator next to the meat sandwiches belonging to a colleague.

Following consultation with the team, the Faculty introduces a policy by which all food must be stored in sealed containers and shelves are separately designated ‘meat’ and ‘vegetarian’. This arrangement met the needs of all staff at no cost to the University.

Work placements and volunteering

The University expects external providers of work placements and volunteering opportunities to promote equality of opportunity and to avoid discrimination and harassment against any of our students and staff on the ground of religion, belief or non-belief. If a student or member of staff is aware of potential discrimination or harassment, then they should raise these concerns immediately with either their line manager or tutor as appropriate.

Study or Work Abroad

Everyone should have the same opportunity to take part in placements or work experience overseas. Tutors and managers should check the Foreign Office website for any particular situations, advice or guidance which would apply to a particular country. Consideration should be given to whether the same or similar experience could be gained in an alternative country where the individual’s religion and beliefs would be respected.

Offensive Actions, Behaviour or Harassment

All members of the University’s community have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. However, if religions or beliefs are manifested in a way that breaches the law or unjustifiably restricts the rights and freedoms of others, then this will not be tolerated. It is important to note that when rights of different people are involved, there will often be a balancing exercise as far as the right to freedom through conscience and religion and the freedom of speech are concerned.

Members of staff experiencing harassment can speak to any of our trained Dignity and Respect contacts.
Students or staff witnessing offensive speech, literature or graffiti should immediately report this to their tutor or line manager. York St John University undertakes to remove / paint over any offensive literature or graffiti found on its premises and to take action against those found responsible.

**Gender segregation**

We aim to create an inclusive environment and this means we won't permit gender segregation at events held on our campus. However, requests for gender segregation in order to meet religious needs for worship will be considered on a case-by-case basis, with regard to the guidance issued by the Equality and Human Rights Commission


**Queries and feedback**

If you have any queries about this guidance then please contact the University’s Equality and Diversity Adviser or Human Resources.

Alternatively, if you have examples of best practice we would like to hear from you.
Appendix 1

University Chaplaincy

There are a number of Christian Chaplaincy volunteers and our voluntary faith advisers includes Baha’i, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Sikhs, both male and female. They help address the religious and spiritual needs of staff and students, give advice and guidance to York St John and support the work of the Faculty of Education & Theology. They also offer contacts for other religious groups.

Faith Group meetings are held on Thursday evenings at 7pm in term time only.

Sacred Quiet & Prayer space

- The Chapel offers sacred, quiet and prayer spaces for people of all beliefs. It is open 8.00am – 6.00pm, Monday to Friday. Access is available outside these hours via Security. The Chapel is regularly used for University events, especially for music students and concerts as lunchtime. There is also a small quiet neutral space available in a room next to the Chaplain’s office which is available to any individual during the day for rest, relaxation or prayer.

- The Chapel of Christ the Teacher (the prayer room) is the small chapel to the right on entering the building. It is used by the Chaplaincy for lunchtime prayers and is always available for prayer.

- The Contemplation Room, situated in Quad North behind the Temple Hall, is a secluded prayer space for all to use. It is always available for quiet prayer and contemplation and Hindu worship takes place monthly. Regular Muslim prayers are held at 12.40pm each Friday. There are prayer books and mats for use by world faiths in the room and a curtain is provided for privacy. Wudu washing facilities are located on the ground floor of New Wing.

- The Japanese-style Peace Garden is a special haven and contains the ‘Hiroshima’ tree. The entrance gate is next to Chaplaincy.

Contact Details

University Chaplaincy

Religion & Belief Guidance for Staff and Students. April 2015
http://www.yorksj.ac.uk/chaplaincy/chaplaincy/who-we-are.aspx

To contact any of the Faith Advisers call into the Chaplaincy, between the Students’ Union and the Chapel.

T: 01904 876606/7 E: chaplaincy@yorksj.ac.uk

Christian Union
CU is a student led group, they have small groups and prayer meetings through the week.

York St John Students’ Union
http://www.ysjsu.com/

Human Resources
http://www.yorksj.ac.uk/human-resources/hr.aspx

Student Services
http://www.yorksj.ac.uk/student-services/student-services.aspx

Equality and Diversity Website
http://www.yorksj.ac.uk/equality-and-diversity/equality-and-diversity/further-information/contact-us.aspx

Catering Manager
http://www.yorksj.ac.uk/campus-residential-services/campus-residential-services/catering/dietary-requirements.aspx

Faith and practice in the city of York
Higher York provides information about different faith groups in York and details for specialist shops within York that cater for religious dietary requirements.
http://www.higheryork.org/study/living-in-york/faith-in-york/

External sources of advice and information


Inter Faith Network http://www.interfaith.org.uk/