

Universities, faith and respect: background paper

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Creating the interfaith environment

The term environment can be interpreted in different ways: that of academic freedom to express or discuss faith or non-faith ideas both in formal teaching and outside, or the local infrastructure and services that are the visible statement of the university views.

- Under the first aspect the whole issue of how much staff and students can challenge the faith base of the university without hindrance is key. How can these values of a university be upheld such that sound intellectual engagement is encouraged? Should debates be held on campus to express these and should speakers of other faiths be welcome to express these on campus without censorship? If the university is truly academically rigorous how can it be protected from external influences especially if there is a faith base for a specific region or country.
- The academic infrastructure and services of universities raises a few different interrelated aspects:
 - Multi-faith spaces – i.e. prayer rooms
 - Religious observance and the academic calendar – i.e. holidays
 - Catering services and alcohol
 - Accommodation

Multi-faith spaces

There has been a move toward a more multi-faith model of rooms at some universities to actively incorporate people of all faiths. In doing this, a need arises to ensure that these spaces are genuinely inclusive so that individuals feel that the spaces are open and available to them. In many countries around the world there may not be a legal statutory requirement that obliges universities to have such spaces available to students and staff, however it would seem that some institutions have been taking the initiative to provide such facilities for prayer and contemplation.

Two contrasting ways of sharing space have been identified (Crompton, 2013) as 'positive' and 'negative'. The 'positive' method shares space by having all-inclusive images and artefacts from different faiths which is believed to promote a sense of unity and inclusion. On the other hand, a 'negative' style sees a shared space as having an absence of images and iconography, which implies a degree of separation between faiths.

While the 'negative' method could be seen as lacking a sense of shared ownership, dialogue and positive social cohesion, there are also complexities with 'positive'. It is therefore understandable why the negative use could be more dominant as it ensures lack of offence. For example, some faiths cannot pray with signs and icons; and permanent statues and written materials are not permitted. Different faiths have different requirements which can interfere with a multi-faith space model – for example some faiths may require the space more frequently than others, which can possibly lead to a perception of faith-dominance. How then does an institution work around this at the same time as promoting a shared space? Each university needs to consider an approach that is based on its own unique circumstances.

Two particular ways (Lee, 2015) that can point to the positive model of sharing space are the:

- **'Single space' option:** a single large space for all faith groups to use simultaneously for their prayer needs.

Benefits: smaller and takes account of campus footprint under development pressures; cheaper to develop and manage due to size; encourages essential multi-faith dialogue and interfaith understanding as negotiation required to manage use of space (i.e. booking times).
Complications: Use of iconography from different faiths; the issue of noise – some faiths require chanting/singing whereas others are performed in silence

- **‘Multi-box’ option:** proposes a larger space with individual prayer rooms as well as shared communal/social areas

Benefits: Won't lead to a perception of faith-dominance by one group; interfaith dialogue due to shared communal space; allows for permanent religious iconography or fixed furniture in groups' designated areas; addresses issue of noise due to groups' designated areas.

Complications: such a space would have to be quite large, expensive to build and manage, resource intensive, may be difficult to have oversight of activities taking place; finding the physical space to build the facility could be difficult; separate faith spaces may not be big enough to accommodate large events – for example Jummah (Friday prayers), etc.; while there won't be any one particular faith dominating the space, certain groups might require bigger spaces due to membership numbers, therefore leading to perception of faith-dominance; may need to keep adding designated spaces as additional faith groups emerge.

Religious observance and the academic calendar

While some religious holy days may be enshrined in the legal framework of a particular country, others may not. Therefore a potential remains for institutional practices (such as timetabling lectures and exams) to conflict with certain religious calendars, especially when some religious calendars can vary annually. One particular way to address this is for channels of communication to remain open and for consultation to occur with staff and students to understand the religious makeup of the campus to appreciate what religious observances are important. This can be achieved in multiple ways, for example via discussion groups, working groups, union societies and staff and student surveys, etc. At the same time, staff and students may not necessarily have a right for the accommodation of their beliefs and the needs of the university need to be balanced with the needs of the individual.

With regard to work patterns of staff, it could be said that creating an environment where staff feel comfortable to request certain alterations is of key importance to promoting mutual respect for other faiths.

Catering services and alcohol

With catering services being provided to staff and students at some universities – for example canteens, shops, catering for meetings, etc. – a diverse range of dietary requirements will need to be considered. Such considerations can include storage and preparation methods, keeping foods separate to avoid contamination, labelling foods to help staff and students make informed choices, considering different approaches to the presence of alcohol and non-alcohol related events (for example how to be more inclusive at student events).

Accommodation

Some institutions may choose to offer targeted forms of accommodation to cater to different religious needs and to ensure inclusivity of varying faiths. In considering this, a balance may be needed to promote cohesion and good relations between different groups at the same time as respecting specific religious needs. Careful attention may need to be given not to inadvertently create a sense of separation between different groups, thereby paradoxically making a less inclusive living and learning environment. Such issues to address could be: single sex accommodation; and shared kitchens where students of different faiths may have different requirements for food preparation.

Questions for consideration

- How can academics and staff from different faith backgrounds be assured of equal support from the university and how can marginalisation or persecution be avoided?
- How can a true intellectual debate between faiths be encouraged without losing the faith base of the university?
- To what extent does the visible infrastructure and services of a university reflect its openness to inclusion?
- What provision does your institution make available for worship, meditation, prayer and celebration space? How is this space allocated and how are priorities decided between different groups?
- When planning the academic timetable, in what ways can your institution accommodate individuals' requirements for religious observance?
- How far does your university expect staff and students to participate in religious elements of institutional activities? How does the institution communicate these expectations?
- How far are acts of worship integrated into institutional business? How does the institution accommodate individuals who do not share the institutional religion or belief position?
- What religion or belief occasions does your institution celebrate/ mark? How have these celebrations been chosen and have any religion or belief positions been left out?
- Should your university review the place that alcohol has within the institution?