

CULTURAL AND FAITH DIVERSITY



Guidelines to help staff respond appropriately

1. Introduction and Background

Cultural Diversity is a term which reflects the complex composition of society. It acknowledges that society is made up of groups which, though they may be distinctive in some ways, also share many common features with other members of the community. These groups may be ethnically-based, religion-based, gender-based, generation-based and so on. Each may have its own sense of history, its own values and a specific 'language' or form of self-expression. Such social variety has a long history and much potential value but can also be a source of misunderstanding and discrimination.

The focus of these guidelines is on cultural diversity based on ethnicity and religion. The UK has been shaped by immigration from the earliest times and like many other areas of the world, its demographic cultural mix is now far broader than it was 50 years ago.

Similarly the mix of nationalities, cultures and faiths represented at the University of Edinburgh is now much broader than in the past. We have increasing numbers both of international students and students from a range of ethnic backgrounds from within the UK and the same is true of University staff.

From a total of over 20,000 students around 3,600 come from an international background, with about 120 nationalities represented on campus, giving us a very cosmopolitan and diverse student community. The numbers of home students from minority ethnic backgrounds is also increasing and in 2001-2002, 3.8% of our home undergraduate students were from a minority ethnic background. Our staff group is also becoming more ethnically diverse with some 3% of staff being from minority ethnic backgrounds

This guidance forms part of the University's Equality and Diversity Strategy and part of its response to the requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act which aims to eliminate institutional racism from public bodies.

The aim of this guidance is to assist staff at all levels and in all parts of the University to anticipate the needs and provide appropriate support to this more diverse group of staff and students. It does not attempt to cover all cultures and

religions represented but gives general guidelines and references where further information can be obtained if required.

The guidance is aimed at all within the University community who have contact with staff and students from different cultural and faith backgrounds. This will include most staff. The guidance will, however, be particularly relevant to Directors of Studies, those providing services to students, those involved in Accommodation services and those involved in catering or organising conferences.

In terms of religion, it aims to cover the main religions of the UK which are:

- Christianity
- Islam
- Buddhism
- Sikhism
- Judaism
- Hinduism

Further information can be found on the Chaplaincy website (www.chaplaincy.ed.ac.uk) and at www.multifaithnet.org

2. Communication

In this section, we consider three aspects of communication which may inhibit successful communication between people of different cultural backgrounds. These are

- communication style
- We tend to base our understanding of what someone else means on our own way of making meaning and are not generally aware that we do this. People brought up among different cultural groups present themselves and interpret meanings differently. This can have an impact on communication even if both parties speak good English. The effect may be accentuated where people are communicating in other than their first language.
- assumptions and values based on experience
- Culture is not simply about whether certain groups do or do not make eye contact or smile at strangers but the cultural knowledge and values of a particular community develop in response to the social and political realities which that community experiences. It is not therefore a fixed entity. For example, experiences of racism as a black person or an understanding of such experiences as a white person may feed into and affect our cultural assumptions.
- power realised through the dominant culture

- In any society there are powerful elites which express the dominant culture. The dominant culture is still mainly based on the values, beliefs and knowledge of the middle and upper-middle class and their ways of talking and writing have come to be seen as standard for British society.

These issues should be borne in mind when communicating across cultures.

3. Religious holidays and other leave

The University Race Equality Policy states that “Line managers should be aware that public holidays observed by the University are related to the Christian calendar. They should be sensitive to the needs of their staff regarding leave and other time required for the observance of other religious practices e.g. prayer times and holidays such as Eid and the Day of Atonement”.

Some of the main holidays for which requests may be received are:

- **Chinese staff** - Chinese New Year
- **Muslim staff** - Eid-ul-Fitr (End of Ramadan, Eid-ul-Adha (end of the Haj) and Al-Hijra (New Year)
- **Hindu staff** - Divali/Deepavali (The festival of light)
- **Sikh staff** – Divali, Birthday of Guru Nanak, Baisaki (Sikh New Year)
- **Jewish staff** – Pesach (Passover), Rosh Hashanah (New Year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)

In relation to students, the policy states that “The needs of students who cannot sit exams or take part in other forms of assessment because of religious observance will be taken seriously and alternative arrangements made, wherever practicable.” At the moment, the University does not hold examinations on Sundays but examinations are held on Fridays and Saturdays which coincide with days of religious observance for certain traditions. Students with serious concerns about examination arrangements should make these concerns known, as early as possible, to their Director of Studies who can then consider alternative arrangements.

Information on religious holidays for all the major religions can be found at <http://www.support4learning.org.uk/shap/index.htm>

4. Prayer times

The issue of time for prayers arises mostly in Islam where there is a requirement to pray 5 times a day - at dawn, at midday, in the afternoon, after sunset, in the night. Some of these times will obviously coincide with work or study time and most people will wish to have a private space in which to pray. This can be done in an individual office or other private space. Managers should be sympathetic to

requests for such space and also requests for flexibility on a Friday when many Muslims will want to visit the Mosque for prayer. The Central Mosque is close to the central area campus and there are designated Prayer Room at Kings Buildings and Moray House (Holyrood Campus).

5. **Food and drink**

One of the most obvious ways in which we must try to cater for cultural and religious diversity is in the food we provide as a University: for students in University Accommodation, in the range of catering sites around the University and in catering that we provide for events such as public lectures, conferences or training events. Dietary requirements and issues relating to consumption of alcohol should also be borne in mind when organising field trips or departmental social events. As general principle it is always good practice to find out the dietary requirements of the people being catered for in advance and then take steps to meet their needs. Where it is not possible to do this and a diverse group of people is likely, the following guidelines may be helpful:

Food

- Ensure that food is carefully labelled. This removes anxiety about eating food that is not acceptable for religious or belief reasons. This is also good practice for people with food allergies and other dietary requirements
- Always have vegetarian and vegan options
 - ❖ Vegetarians do not eat any meat or fish or items made with animal products
 - ❖ Vegans are strict vegetarians who do not eat any dairy products or eggs. Most vegans do not eat honey.
- Have some vegetarian dishes with no eggs and ensure that some of these do not contain garlic or onions
- Ensure there is no animal fat in vegetarian dishes and that any cheese used is free from rennet
- Puddings should not contain gelatine – or should be clearly labelled if they do
- No alcohol should be used in the preparation of food
- Kosher rules have different interpretations but it is normally sufficient to provide vegetarian food with disposable cups, plates and cutlery
- Muslims will normally be happy with vegetarian food but any meat used needs to be halal (permitted and slaughtered in accordance with Islamic law)
- If meat is served, use chicken or turkey and avoid beef and pork
- Make sure vegetarian and non-vegetarian food is served on separate plates and preferably on separate tables
- Seek advice from the appropriate bodies such as faith groups or the Vegetarian Society (www.vegsoc.org)

Drinks

- There are different traditions and varying approaches to the consumption of alcohol, tea and coffee
 - Alcohol is forbidden by Islam and there are warnings of the dangers associating with people drinking alcohol
 - Baha'is don't drink alcohol and it is considered undesirable for Hindus and Jains. Some Christian groups also advocate abstinence
- If alcohol is provided at an event, always ensure that non-alcoholic drinks are available and clearly identified
- As stimulants are avoided by observant members of certain traditions and by increasing numbers of people for health reasons, an alternative to tea and coffee (e.g. herbal teas, juice or water) should always be provided
- It is important therefore to consider where social events are held, including informal practices like going to the pub after a tutorial and this may exclude certain people.

6. Dress

In most areas of the University, there is no strict dress code and staff and students are free to dress in a way they choose and which meets with their cultural and/or religious tradition. In other areas, there is a requirement to wear a uniform and it should be borne in mind that uniform requirements should be flexible so as to take into account different cultural and religious traditions. The following guidelines may be helpful:

- If a uniform is required, ensure that the version for women includes the option of wearing trousers
- If a uniform includes headwear, Sikhs should not be prevented from wearing turbans unless there is an over-riding Health and Safety need
- Staff and managers should not discourage the wearing of traditional dress of any culture.

7. Changing facilities

A number of cultures and religions have requirements relating to modesty which particularly apply to women. In areas of the University where such facilities are provided or on residential courses or field trips these issues should be considered and private space for changing should be available if required.

8. Accommodation

Single sex flats are available in some accommodation blocks. Accommodation staff have a particular role in ensuring that practical implications of particular cultural differences are thought through e.g. when university and external workmen and male technicians are working in female accommodation.

9. Summary

It is not possible for us as members of University staff to know about all the particular norms and requirements of every culture and religion represented among our staff and student body. It is important, however, to recognise that these cultural differences do exist and to take steps to meet the needs of all our staff and students.