



RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL OBSERVANCE FOR TEACHING, LEARNING, ASSESSMENT AND RESEARCH

Guidance for staff and students

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1. Introduction

Plymouth University is a secular institution that has a commitment to diversity, and celebrates the diversity of its staff, students and local communities. This is embedded in the University's core values, which state that the University is

Creative in celebrating and respecting difference in background, identity, ideas and beliefs and encouraging a creative and inclusive working and learning environment.

(Plymouth University values, <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/your-university/about-us/vision-mission-and-values>)

1.1 Scope

This guidance is intended to enable staff and students to:

- gain a greater understanding of the support students can request from the University in fulfilling their religious beliefs in relation to teaching, learning, assessment and research;
- gain a greater understanding of how to support students, where applicable and appropriate, in fulfilling their religious beliefs in relation to teaching, learning, assessment and research.

This guidance should be read in conjunction with the University's policy for accommodating religious observance in teaching, learning and assessment activities, available on the University website, via <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/student-life/your-studies/essential-information/religious-observance-teaching-learning-and-assessment> .

This guidance covers only those aspects of religious observance related directly to students' teaching, learning and research, and to assessment. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the University's Equality and Diversity policy and its Religious Diversity policy, both available at: www.plymouth.ac.uk/equality .

In recognition of the wealth of study opportunities available to students, and the specific requirements of each, this guidance has been structured around the various learning or research environments that students may experience during their time at the University. These include:

- a) Classroom / library environment
- b) Clinical environment
- c) Laboratory / workshop environment
- d) Fieldwork environment
- e) Placement environment
- f) Marine environment
- g) Performing arts environment
- h) Sport and recreation environment
- i) Formal examination environment

1.2 Definitions

Both the Religious Observance for Teaching, Learning and Assessment policy and this associated guidance has been developed in line with, and makes reference specifically to, the definitions and requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

Religion or belief is a protected characteristic under the [Equality Act 2010](#). Under the legislation:

- (a) Religion means any religion, and a reference to religion includes a reference to a lack of religion.
- (b) Belief means any religious or philosophical belief and a reference to belief includes a reference to a lack of belief.

The Equality Act 2010 requires that a public authority, which includes Plymouth University, must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to:

- (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

2. Students and Religious Observance

The University community is committed, where reasonable and practicable, to accommodating religious observance on campus and will consider adjustments to working and learning practices wherever reasonably possible in order to accommodate a more diverse community.

The University's policy covers only aspects of religious observance that occur at times known in advance. Other aspects that are unforeseeable or unpreventable (such as the death of a close relative when specified forms of mourning are required) should be handled under the arrangements for considering extenuating circumstances

2.1 Requesting that reasonable accommodation be made.

Should any student wish to request that a reasonable accommodation be made on the grounds of religious observance, they should approach their Faculty Registrar in the first instance, who will liaise with the relevant parties.

2.2 Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

Through the processes of programme approval, annual review and periodic review, as well as any programme revalidation activities, the University expects staff responsible for all aspects of the curriculum to identify and manage any adverse or positive impacts that the curriculum and its content and / or manner of delivery or assessment may have on individuals or groups with protected characteristics.

2.3 Timetabling

Students will be notified of the normal pattern of attendance at the point of application. Normal attendance will be between Monday and Saturday.

Religious holy days are based on different calendars, including the lunar calendar, which is determined by phases of the moon. They can fall within a range of days, the exact date not being determined until very close to the time. Where these dates fall within term times, there may be a conflict between observing the holy day and meeting academic requirements.

Plymouth University will try to make every reasonable effort to minimise conflict with the main religious festivals when arranging the timetable. Please note: the BBC has a new [Religion and Ethics](#) website which can provide further information and details of religious festivals and events.

If religious observance affects any student's attendance at normal teaching and learning activities in ways that will cause problems, they should discuss the issue with his or her School. The School will give sympathetic consideration to the problems and will try to make reasonable adjustments. However, adjustments can only be made provided they maintain the standard of the degree (e.g. students will not simply be excused from parts of the programme affected by religious observance or from satisfying overall attendance requirements). Students should also understand that adjustments may not always be possible (e.g. a programme that has been designed to run at weekends, to accommodate part-time students who work on weekdays, is unlikely to be changed to accommodate the needs of students committed to religious observance at weekends).

If a student's attendance is affected through religious observance, it is his or her responsibility to catch up on any material missed.

2.4 Examinations and Assessment

Examination periods are published in advance on the [Exam Timetables](#) webpage.

Wherever possible, staff responsible for setting coursework deadlines, tests and examinations should consider the main religious festivals and provide appropriate coursework deadlines and examinations.

If religious observance affects a student's attendance at an assessment organised by the School (e.g. presentations, in-class or practical tests) they should inform his or her Personal Tutor or Director of Studies, and Faculty Registrar immediately in writing. The School will try and make reasonable adjustments. The School also needs to be notified immediately in writing of any conflicting dates when the assessment dates are published.

Deadlines for handing in coursework are published in advance and will not be extended to allow for religious observance. Students must manage their time and workload accordingly, handing in their assignment prior to the deadline date if necessary. The University will not accept religious observance as a valid extenuating circumstance.

If no reasonable alternative can be found, the University reserves the right to hold examinations on any day and time during the examination period. If that means a student misses an examination, they will be required to take the examination when it is next held. This may involve an interruption of a programme or an extension to the student's period of study, which would not typically be eligible for Extenuating Circumstances. If a student feels they have been treated unfairly, they should submit a complaint through the University complaints procedure.

Further information on exam arrangements can be found on the [Exams webpages](#).

2.5 Dietary Requirements

Schools, Faculties and departments holding learning activities where refreshments are offered should take into account meeting the religious or belief dietary requirements of those invited to attend wherever possible. Where the University is unable to accommodate a student's dietary requirements for learning activities, the School, Faculty or department should notify the student in advance to allow sufficient time for the student to make their own arrangements.

When arranging catering for learning activities, staff should invite participants to state any particular dietary requirements in advance. This includes, but is not limited to, provision of non-alcoholic drinks and vegetarian, vegan, halal or kosher food. Participants should be made aware that it might not always be possible to meet all dietary requirements.

Schools, Faculties and departments organising field trips which extend over meal time(s) should advise students whether the University will make catering available. Where the School, Faculty or department is making catering arrangements, the University should consider the religious or belief dietary requirements of those participating in the field trip wherever possible. Students should be aware that it will not always be possible for the University to meet all dietary requirements. Where the University is unable to accommodate a student's dietary requirements in the field, the School, Faculty or department should notify the student in advance to allow sufficient time for the student to make their own arrangements.

Students with special dietary requirements must be prepared to make their own arrangements with regards to food when on placement. Placements will not be changed because of an individual's dietary requirements.

3. **Religious Dress**

The University respects each student's right to wear lawful items arising from cultural and religious norms (see below). However, there may be certain situations and learning environments in which a student is expected to make modifications to their dress. The requirements of each learning environment are set out in section 4 below.

3.1 Identification checks.

The University appreciates that for religious or cultural reasons, some students may choose to wear a facial covering when on campus. However, it is important that all students realise that from time to time the institution may wish to verify the identity of an individual in order:

- To allow access to premises
- For the purposes of taking an examination
- To carry out a security check

This is usually done by carrying out a visual check against photographic student ID issued by Plymouth University.

Arrangements will be made in these cases, wherever reasonably possible, for authentication procedures to be conducted in a private by staff of the same sex as the individual concerned. However, students should be aware that in an emergency situation, it may be necessary for a member of the opposite sex to check the student's identity.

Where there is a requirement for identity to be established through visual recognition (and exposure of the face for that purpose), failure to permit an id check will lead to the student's exclusion from that activity, including examinations, or refused access to premises. Students should be aware that missing teaching, learning or assessment activities may have an adverse impact on their assessment profile.

4. Learning and Research Environments

Where learning and / or research takes place in an external environment (in other words, somewhere outside the University), students are required to adhere to the religious observance requirements of the external environment. This may include, for example, occasions on which students may conduct interviews in interviewees' homes.

4.1 Lecture Hall / classroom / library environments.

It is unlikely that there will be any restriction on the student's right to wear lawful items arising from cultural and religious norms in the lecture hall / classroom / library environment, unless for ID purposes as set out in 3.1 above.

4.2 Clinical environment

Medical and dental students undertaking teaching, learning, assessment and / or research activities in the clinical environment may also wish to consult additional guidance produced by the Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry, available via <https://resourcestore.plymouth.ac.uk/plymouth/file/7556c7c8-dc0f-4a35-a09b-ac03f85a935b/1/PU%20PSMD%20Standards%20of%20Dress%20and%20Religious%20Observance.pdf>

Each NHS trust or other practice placement environment has its own regulations, and dress code is decided locally by each Trust or other practice placement environment's clinical managers and infection prevention and control team. Therefore, dress permitted at one placement may not be permitted at another, depending on decisions made by the clinical managers and the local infection prevention and control team.

Each NHS Trust or other practice placement environment has its own regulations. That Trust or other practice placement environment's clinical managers and infection prevention and control team decide what dress is appropriate. Students should be

aware that the University cannot recommend any exemption to an NHS Trust or other practice placement environment's own dress code.

'Bare below the elbows' Department of Health policy

In 2007 the Department of Health (DoH) published its document *Uniforms and work wear: An evidence base for developing local policy*. This policy was updated in 2010. This document has become widely known as the 'bare below the elbows' policy and it aims to help combat infection and improve patient confidence in the cleanliness of the healthcare environment. When involved in direct patient care activity, all students need to be bare below the elbow. Any sleeve must be able to be rolled or pulled back and kept securely in place during hand-washing and direct patient care activity. There are no exceptions to this rule.

The policy emphasises the vital importance of hand washing as part of infection prevention. All healthcare individuals, including students, who come into contact with patients need to wash their hands between patients. An individual may also need to wash their hands several times when examining or treating the same patient.

Working with patients

The University must train all its medical, dental, nursing and healthcare students to become competent professionals and to reach the 'core competencies' required by their programme of study. Students are required to examine patients, peers and model patients as required during their training (irrespective of their gender, sexuality, culture, beliefs, disability, or disease), and must be willing to examine any individual as fully as is required as part of their training. Therefore all students must examine patients of both sexes during their training – this obligation extends to any individual who may act as a patient during practical examinations.

Shaking hands with patients

Communication skills are crucial to developing a good professional patient relationship. For many patients in the UK, shaking hands is seen as an important courtesy that helps build rapport so the patient feels comfortable. However students should be aware that patients may have different ways of greeting, and will need to learn how to negotiate these expectations effectively – this includes students who may not wish to shake hands for reasons of religious observance.

Refusing a handshake is not a disciplinary matter but students must always be mindful of not causing offence to a patient. If a patient offers their hand, and a student wishes to offer an alternative greeting they must handle this matter tactfully and sensitively.

Alcohol-based hand gel

The Muslim Spiritual Care Provision (MSCP) in the NHS have advised that as alcohol-based hand gel contains synthetic alcohol, it does not fall within the Muslim prohibition against natural alcohol (made from fermented fruit or grain). Alcohol-based gel is used widely in Islamic countries within healthcare settings. It is permissible for Muslims to use such gels.

4.3 Laboratory / workshop environment

In the laboratory and / or workshop environment, students should understand that health and safety will be given priority over the need for religious expression.

Inside laboratories, students must wear laboratory coats over their clothes and must be able to close the coat completely. Inside workshops, students must wear any protective clothing required. Students must not wear any loose-fitting clothing that could become trapped in machinery or equipment.

Apart from shoes, students must not wear any clothing that touches the floor, as this could potentially pick up contamination from the floor surface, drape in chemical or biological hazards, or become a trip hazard.

Individuals working in laboratories and workshops must be able to wear the full range of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, eye protection such as safety glasses or face shields, on occasion full face masks and, in some areas, a filtering face mask. Head wear must allow individuals full frontal and peripheral vision at all times and must allow for communication in an unobstructed manner especially during emergency situations or when alarms are sounding.

Individuals working in laboratories may be required to use alcohol-based hand gel. The Muslim Spiritual Care Provision (MSCP) in the NHS have advised that as alcohol-based hand gel contains synthetic alcohol, it does not fall within the Muslim prohibition against natural alcohol (made from fermented fruit or grain). Alcohol-based gel is used widely in Islamic countries within healthcare settings. It is permissible for Muslims to use such gels.

4.4 Field work environment

The Universities Safety and Health Association (USHA), in association with the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA), defines fieldwork as 'Any work carried out by staff or students for the purposes of teaching, research or other activities while representing the institution off-site'¹.

(Fieldwork also includes expeditions). Fieldwork is organised under the University's Code of Practice on Off-site activities and Fieldwork, available via <https://exchange.plymouth.ac.uk/intranet/intrSAFE/Public/policies/CoP%20-%20Off%20Site%20Activities%20and%20Fieldwork%20Nov%202013.pdf>

Schools involved in arranging field trips which are part of a programme of study should consider students' religious requirements and consider any requests based on such requirements sympathetically.

Inevitably, field trips will vary in terms of duration, learning activities, geography etc and it would not be appropriate to formulate a universal set of religious dress guidance to cover all field trips. It is recognised that students involved in diving expeditions with the School of Marine Science, for example, will have different health and safety requirements than students visiting a gallery in Italy for an Art History programme.

¹ USHA/UCEA (2011), Guidance on Health and Safety in Fieldwork.

Schools involved in organising field trips will arrange for a risk assessment to be drawn up for each field trip. Students wearing religious dress should ensure that doing so does not breach the health and safety requirements of the field trip. Students who are uncertain about whether their religious dress will breach health and safety requirements should seek advice in advance of the field trip. It remains the responsibility of those supervising the fieldwork to ensure that compliance with health and safety requirements and the local risk assessment undertaken is satisfied. Therefore, the decision of those supervising the fieldwork is final.

Students working on field trips must be able to wear the full range of personal protective equipment (PPE) required by the field trip, such as high visibility jackets, hard hats and so on. Head wear must allow individuals full frontal and peripheral vision at all times and must allow for communication in an unobstructed manner especially during emergency situations.

Students undertaking fieldwork overseas will be given preparation on the cultural expectations and differences in the environment. Students should also make themselves aware of the different cultural context in which they will be required to undertake their learning, assessment or research.

4.5 Placement / work-based learning environment

Placement is defined as a period of vocational experience, paid or unpaid, undertaken as an integral part of the student's course where:

- There is a transfer of direct supervision of a student to a third party
- The placement is integral to the individual student's course
- The student is enrolled at the institution during the period of placement

All students should be provided with opportunities to disclose periods of religious observance which may affect their placement.

It is important to understand that the development of any dress code is considered locally. Therefore, dress codes remain the responsibility of each placement organisation and as such, students need to be aware that local dress codes may vary between placements. Dress permitted at one placement may not be permitted at another, depending on decisions made by the organisation's managers.

When students are on placement, they need to recognise the religious and cultural requirements of their employing organisation. The policies and practices of the placement provider, including any religious observance policy or equivalent and health and safety policies, will take precedence over the University's religious observance policy.

If a student involved in work-based learning, such as a placement, has a religious observance request which requires some alteration to work arrangements, he or she should discuss this in the first instance with a relevant tutor in the University or the Faculty Registrar. If the student decides to make the request to the employer this should be done as soon as possible and a relevant tutor or Faculty Registrar should be informed.

The employer will take account of business needs and current policies and practices in reaching a decision and it cannot be assumed that the employer will grant permission.

If the request is turned down, and the University considers this decision to be unreasonable, it may be prepared to make its own request to the employer and/or to assist the student in finding a suitable alternative arrangement. However, it cannot guarantee to do either and the student should not withdraw from the arrangement without the permission of the University.

In some cases it will not be possible, due to legitimate reasons, for a religious observance request to be granted yet still necessary for a student to continue in the placement or with other work related learning.

Students undertaking placement work overseas will be given preparation on the cultural expectations and differences in the environment. Students should also make themselves aware of the different cultural context in which they will be required to undertake their learning, assessment or research.

4.6 Marine environment

Students working in a marine environment will be governed largely by the health and safety requirements of that environment.

Individuals working in laboratories must be able to wear the full range of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, eye protection such as safety glasses or face shields, on occasion full face masks and, in some areas, a filtering face mask. Head wear must allow individuals full frontal and peripheral vision at all times and must allow for communication in an unobstructed manner especially during emergency situations or when alarms are sounding.

Students who undertake diving expeditions as part of their programme must wear the correct equipment at all times. However, students should understand that health and safety will be given priority over the need for religious expression.

Students are advised to consult the sections on laboratory work (4.3 above), field work (4.4 above) and placements (4.5 above) as well.

4.7 Performing arts environment

Performing arts students (according to the arts discipline they are studying) will need to be willing to portray a character or a role of any gender, race or faith; human and non-human. Classes, rehearsal and performance may involve touch and other forms of physical contact. It is vital that students who are offered and accept a place on a performing arts programme accept that these liberal, secular principles are fundamental to training for a successful career in the performing arts.

Students should recognise that in performing arts training, certain forms of dress will be required for one or more of the following reasons: health and safety, ease of movement, enactment of a role, or tradition and custom in a particular art form. Schools will make every effort to address issues where religion and belief come into play (for example, modesty of dress or wearing a religious symbol) and reach a mutually acceptable solution on a case by case basis. Students will not be asked to wear anything which makes them feel uncomfortable for religious or other reasons. However, students should understand that there is likely to be little room for adaptation in the costume/clothing required in performing certain roles in an acting,

circus or dance performance and that health and safety will be given priority over the need for religious expression.

In the past, theatres and other performing arts venues in the UK observed a broadly Christian tradition and were closed on Sundays and other Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter. This is no longer the case and students may be required to participate in public performances which will occasionally take place on any day of the week and at any time of the year including Bank Holidays. Students are being trained for a professional career as performers or technicians, when they will be expected to work on any day of the year and will need to accept that there is little, if any room for acknowledgment of religious festivals. There may be occasions during their programme of study on which students are expected to rehearse or perform on any day of the week, including weekends, religious festivals and bank holidays.

4.8 Sport and recreation environment

Students should recognise that in the sport and recreation environment, certain forms of dress will be required for health and safety reasons, ease of movement, or team identity. The dress requirement will vary depending on the specific context.

Schools will make every effort to address issues where religion and belief come into play (for example, modesty of dress or wearing a religious symbol) and reach a mutually acceptable solution on a case by case basis. However, students should understand that health and safety will be given priority over the need for religious expression.

Students studying on programmes with a sport and recreation element may be required to participate in sporting events on any day of the week and at any time of the year, including weekends, religious festivals and Bank Holidays.

4.9 Formal examination environment

It is unlikely that there will be any restriction on the student's right to wear lawful items arising from cultural and religious norms in an examination hall or *viva voce* examination, unless for ID purposes as set out in 3.1 above.

Students undertaking practical examinations (in laboratories, theatres, workshops, sports fields, clinical environments and so on) should consult the requirements of their specific assessment environment, as set out above.

5 **Implementation and Responsibilities**

5.1 All students are responsible for:

- (a) Familiarising themselves with the Religious Observance: Teaching, Learning and Assessment policy, and the associated guidance (this document).
- (b) Informing appropriate parties of students' particular requirements.
- (c) Respecting students who choose to use the policy, and supporting their use of it.

- (d) Making up any time lost as a result of cultural / religious observance, as required.
 - (e) Reporting any associated complaints through the [Student Complaints](#) procedure.
 - (f) Adhering to all health and safety and / or research ethics requirements of their learning or research environment.
 - (g) Making themselves aware of different cultural contexts in which they are required to undertake their learning, assessment and / or research, including, but not limited to, any study overseas.
- 5.2 Students who perceive that the University has not made adjustments to teaching, learning or assessment practices, where reasonably possible, in order to accommodate religious / cultural observance should raise their concern within the context of the University [Student Complaints](#) procedure
- 5.3 The University is responsible for:
- (a) Keeping the policy statement and associated guidance (this document) current and appropriate.
 - (b) Ensuring the appropriate use of this policy.
 - (c) Amending this policy as necessary in line with good practice and legislation.
 - (d) Communicating this policy widely to all students, staff and visitors.
- 5.4 All staff are required to participate in mandatory equality and diversity training. It is recommended that staff ensure that their training is up to date, particularly to assist them in fulfilling their responsibilities to students.

6. Further University information

Further information and support is available from any of the following:

- Equality and Diversity Team www.plymouth.ac.uk/equality .
- Faculty Registrar / Programme Team
- Plymouth University Multi-Faith Chaplaincy <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/student-life/services/learning-gateway/faith-and-spiritual-support>
- Students' Union Advice Centre <http://www.upsu.com/advice/>

7. Further reading

- Equality Act, 2010 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents>
- Equality Challenge Unit (2009) *Religious observance in higher education: facilities and services* www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/religious-obs-facilities
- Equality Challenge Unit (2009) *Religious observance in higher education: institutional timetabling and work patterns* www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/religious-obs-timetabling

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- Equality Challenge Unit (2011), *Religion and belief in higher education: the experiences of staff and students* <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/external/religion-and-belief-staff-and-students-in-he-report.pdf>
- Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education Programme (2010), *Religious Literacy Leadership in Higher Education*, <http://religiousliteracyhe.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/RLLP-Case-Studies.pdf>