

## Guidance Notes on Religion and Belief

### 1. Background

- 1.1 The University has wide-ranging responsibilities. It is an open institution where academic freedom and freedom of speech is fundamental to its functioning; where debate, challenge and dissent are not only permitted but expected, and where controversial and offensive ideas are likely to be advanced. Intellectual freedom is fundamental to our mission, teaching and research.
- 1.2 However, all freedoms have limits imposed by law, in order to protect the rights and freedoms of others. The rules are neither simple nor always easy to apply; and they continue to change. The Equality Act 2010 requires Aston University to protect certain defined characteristics; and makes it clear that there is no hierarchy of characteristics; all are equally important.
- 1.3 In accordance with the University's Equality and Diversity Policy Statement these guidance notes are intended to ensure that:
  - Whilst the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is absolute, the right to manifest beliefs is qualified by the need to protect the rights and freedoms of others and although people have a right to their own belief system, they have no right to force it on others.
  - Members of any religion or none are treated with equal dignity and fairness.
  - Where possible, appropriate provision is made to meet the cultural and religious needs of all employees.

### 2. Cultural and Religious Dress

- 2.1 Aston University imposes no overall dress code on its staff, students or visitors. The University welcomes the variety of appearance brought by individual styles and choices. In posts where uniforms are standard, such as security or reception, or in circumstances where professional standards of dress are required, these do not preclude adherence to an individual's cultural or religious standards.
- 2.2 Health and Safety requirements may mean that for certain tasks specific items of clothing such as overalls, protective clothing etc need to be worn. If such clothing produces a conflict with an individual's religious belief, the issue will be sympathetically considered by the line manager or tutor responsible for the activity, with the aim of finding a

satisfactory solution. However, Health, Safety and Security will be paramount.

### **3. ID Cards**

- 3.1 All staff and students at Aston University are required to provide a full face photograph for their identity card. Head coverings for religious or medical reasons are allowed provided the face is fully visible.
- 3.2 Students normally upload their own photographs for their student ID Cards in Stage 2 of enrolment and they cannot progress to Stage 3 until they have done this. Students who refuse to provide a photograph should not be permitted to enrol on their course.
- 3.3 To produce ID cards for staff, photographs are taken by staff in ISA. To ensure that the photograph can be taken by a female member of staff in private, anyone who wears a face veil will need to make an appointment to have their photograph taken.

### **4. Identity Checks**

- 4.1 For security and examination purposes, women who choose to wear a niqab or burka may occasionally be asked to remove them to have their identity confirmed. Anyone asked to remove their niqab or burka must not refuse, but the process should be handled with respect and sensitivity. A female member of staff will need to verify the identity of the woman by comparing her face with the photographic identity document which should normally be the student or staff ID card. This check should be carried out in a private room without any males present.
- 4.2 If a student card or staff card is not available, other forms of photographic verification, such as a passport or driving licence, could be used. However, students should not be permitted to sit any examination unless their identification can be verified with a student card.

### **5. Religious Observance**

- 5.1 Aston University will make reasonable efforts to provide a suitable space for prayer and ablution if practical. In some cases individual's requirements will be met by facilities in the neighbourhood.
- 5.2 Aston University undertakes to assess the demand for food that meets religious dietary requirements (e.g vegetarian, kosher, halal) regularly in consultation with the relevant religious groups. It will provide such food in its canteen(s) according to the demand for it.

### **6. Offensive Actions or Behaviour**

- 6.1 Any attempt at coercing others to comply with a particular belief system, for example, through threats, will result in disciplinary action. The University undertakes to remove any offensive literature or graffiti

found on its premises which promotes racist behaviour or religious intolerance and will take disciplinary action against those found responsible.

## 7. Employment Issues

7.1 **Hours of Work** - All staff, regardless of religious belief or non-belief, are required to work in accordance with their contract. There is likely to be some flexibility over how the hours are worked. Line managers should make every attempt to ensure that those whose religion requires them to pray at certain times during the day are free to do so. In addition, reasonable efforts should be made to accommodate requests from those who require, for reasons of religious belief, to have minor adjustments to their working hours eg, an extra hour at midday on Friday, or not to work beyond sunset on Friday or at certain times at weekends.

7.2 **Leave for Religious Festivals** - Holiday arrangements include a day off at Christmas and Good Friday, both of which are Christian religious festivals, together with Easter Monday. In the interests of equality, those practising other religions or beliefs will be able to book three days of their annual leave entitlement on the dates of most significance to them. Depending on the type of post these days should be booked at the beginning of the leave year, the academic year or when timetables are being drawn up for the forthcoming year. Where it is not possible to give accurate dates at the appropriate stage, employees should inform managers at the earliest possible opportunity. Further requests for holiday entitlement to be taken at times of religious significance will be treated sympathetically.

The number of annual leave days overall will remain as in the contract of employment, for all staff, whatever their religious belief. (Note: The main religious dates for each year and dates of University holidays will be accessible through the University's website.)

7.3 **Extended Leave** - If a member of staff requests extended leave at a particular time for the purpose of going on religious pilgrimage, the line manager should attempt to accommodate the request. In most circumstances, taking extended leave will involve taking a combination of annual and unpaid leave. In deciding on the balance between these types of leave employees and managers should consider the following (this should not be considered to be an exhaustive list):

- The amount of outstanding annual leave
- The point in the leave year at which extended leave is requested
- Other outstanding leave requests during the current leave year
- Operational requirements
- Staff with relatives abroad may have particular religious/cultural needs for occasional extended leave for births, weddings, deaths. Line managers should consider such requests sympathetically if reasonable and practical, taking into account the issues noted above.

## 8. Religious Harassment

8.1 Harassment on the grounds of religion contravenes the University's Prevention of Harassment Policy. Where staff, students or visitors feel that they have been subject to religious harassment they should refer to the policy, procedures and guidance notes for further information.

## 9. Student Issues

9.1 **Leave during Assessment or Examination periods** - Students have a responsibility to fulfil the requirements of their course of study in order to achieve the relevant award. Students should complete a *Religious Commitments, Examinations and Assessment form* at the beginning of the Academic year, stating any religious festivals during which they would be unable to undertake examinations or assessments for religious reasons and return this to the relevant School's Director of Programmes by the date stated on the form. The University's Examination's Officer will then be advised of requests affecting formal examinations. In consultation with the appropriate faith leaders, the University will endeavour, to a proportionate and reasonable extent, to make arrangements for students whose faith requires them to miss assessments for reasons of religious observance to take assessments at a different time. Where there is no written notice of the appropriate dates, the University will normally treat the delayed assessment as a referral.

9.2 **Extended Leave** - Students are expected to make a commitment to the full Academic Year of Study. However, in exceptional circumstances a student may request extended leave at a particular time for the purpose of going on religious pilgrimage. Such requests should be made in writing to the relevant School's Director of programmes at the earliest opportunity, along with a letter of support from a member of the appropriate faith group. Students will be responsible for making good any missed learning opportunities. If the extended leave involves missing significant periods of study and/or assessments the student may be required to repeat relevant modules and assessments or the whole of the academic year.

## 10. Implementation and Responsibilities

10.1 All staff are responsible for familiarising themselves with these guidance notes and for following them unless there are good reasons for not doing so.

10.2 Any students or members of staff who feels that they are not being treated fairly in accordance with this policy should first try to resolve the matter informally. If this fails to resolve the issue they can use the relevant Grievance or Complaints Procedure.

### Version Control:

Reference Number	Version No	Date	Executive Lead	Author	Consideration by	Notes
R&B - GN/ 2016/1	1	10/03/2016	CEO	J Tyrrell (Associate Director of HR)	Executive Operations Group  Consultation with Student Services and Exams Office	Originally produced on 17/08/2005  Updated 11/03/2016