

Responding to student or staff requests for flexibility on grounds of religion or belief

Background

The Equality Service's recommendations relating to timetabling and work scheduling are based on the University's commitment to promote equality and respect the religious belief or non-belief of all staff and students. This guidance also flows from the value of "inclusiveness (diversity, equal opportunities and access)" – one of the five core values that are integral to the University's strategy.

Our legal obligations are also crucial here. By law, the University must not treat individuals less favourably than others on grounds of religion, belief or non-belief and we must ensure that our practices and provisions do not (even inadvertently) disadvantage people because of their religious belief, or lack thereof. In some situations, it is clear that a refusal to take a flexible approach in terms of timetabling, work scheduling or annual leave requests can amount to unlawful discrimination on grounds of religion. For more information about anti-discrimination law, visit www.equality.leeds.ac.uk.

Accordingly our institutional timetable is set to accommodate religious observance where possible. We appreciate, however, that issues often feel or become more complex at an individual school or service level.

Dealing with individual requests

When an individual member of staff or student requests an adjustment to their timetable or the scheduling of a particular aspect of their employment or course on grounds of religion or belief, we recommend the initial response of the relevant area is to take all reasonable steps to try to accommodate these requests. **In essence, we encourage all parts of the University to try to foster and demonstrate an instinctive response which is flexible and takes full account of the benefits to the organisation of meeting, rather than rejecting, these requests.**

At the same time, it is entirely reasonable for us to require staff or students to provide sufficient notice of their religious observance requirements (providing these timescales are well-publicised).



Occasionally it will not be possible, despite our best endeavors, to meet an individual request. In these situations (which we suggest should be the exception, rather than the norm), it is important, and generally considered good anti-discriminatory practice, to document clearly why it was not reasonable or practicable to meet the request. You can also seek advice from The Equality Service to assist you in such circumstances.

Some practical suggestions

If you receive a request for flexibility from a student or staff member, here are some practical steps you might wish to consider taking:

- **Do some research** to understand the relevant religious practice or celebration issues that are being raised. As a starting point, you might wish to consult the ACAS guide on religion, entitled [Religion or Belief and the Workplace](#), or the [BBC's multifaith calendar](#).
- **Consult people.** The best practical solutions to meet everyone's needs often arise out of open consultation and discussion. What starts as a blanket request to be absent on particular days might turn into a request for a quiet room to observe prayer on those days. Make sure your starting point here is to want to understand and be flexible where possible – rather than seeing the request as a nuisance. At the same time, don't be afraid to explain the practical constraints you are under, which might limit how flexible you can be, so long as you do this openly and are prepared to listen.
- **Consider bringing in an external person** to facilitate a discussion or give a presentation. This approach can work particularly well in a situation in which you have several requests for a particular adjustment – perhaps from several students or staff members. It can be particularly useful to bring in someone who is from the particular religious or ethnic group in question and can talk from experience about the challenges of aligning practical issues (e.g. the business needs of the University, health and safety issues, etc.) with issues relating to the practice of a particular religion.
- **Consider bringing together a small group of people to find a way forward or, alternatively, open up a discussion about the issue up at a team meeting.** When doing this, you should ensure that you do not leave the person or people who are making the request feel exposed and isolated. Generally, it is a good idea to consult the person or people concerned on the best way to open up this discussion. It might be appropriate, for example, for someone who is making a request for flexibility to open up a discussion themselves at a team meeting and perhaps start by providing some background information about the relevant religious issues involved. In other situations, it might be better for a team manager to open up the discussion. It is also important to frame any discussion by describing your desire, and the University's commitment, to be inclusive and to demonstrate flexibility wherever possible.

Benefiting everyone

A final point that is worth noting here is that being more flexible in our approach will often make things easier for everyone – this is not simply an issue that affects people from particular religious groups. We all, at various times, require flexibility from the institutions we engage with – perhaps because of our childcare or caring responsibilities, perhaps because of our busy schedules, perhaps for disability-related reasons, etc.

We fully accept that providing complete flexibility at the University on all fronts is impossible, and, indeed, undesirable if we are to work as effectively as possible. However, the more advance warning we can provide of our timetabling, and the more flexible we can be in terms of meeting the needs of individuals, the less likely we are to discriminate inadvertently against particular groups and the more likely we are to foster goodwill and improve the experience of our staff and students.

You are also very welcome to contact the team of Equality and Diversity Managers within the Equality Service to discuss how these issues impact on the work of your individual school/faculty.

Equality Service, Equality and Diversity Team, Email: equality@leeds.ac.uk, www.equality.leeds.ac.uk

These guides provide some general guidance and information from the Equality Service about key legal concepts within anti-discrimination law and related good practice. Anyone needing to know how the law applies in a particular situation should seek specialist or legal advice.