



## Supporting Cultural and Religious Diversity

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The Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies has been working with other parts of the Higher Education Academy (including other Subject Centres) to explore the implications of cultural and religious issues in higher education. For example, ***how does cultural and religious diversity impact upon teaching style, content, assessment and student support?*** The project was set up in response to interest from the academic community as they find themselves working with an increasingly diverse student population. Moreover, new legislation has recently been introduced which has given rise to concerns, and some uncertainty, about implications for the curriculum. The Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003, introduced in response to the Employment Directive, outlaws discrimination on grounds of religion or belief in employment and vocational training. While this will have implications for students engaged in work-based learning, there is no consensus as to whether it applies to academic study more broadly. Further information about this legislation can be found at:

[http://www.acas.org.uk/publications/pdf/guide\\_religionB.pdf](http://www.acas.org.uk/publications/pdf/guide_religionB.pdf)

The aim of this interim report is to provide an overview of the work already achieved (from 1st June-30th September

2004), as well as to indicate future directions that will be taken once additional funding is secured. The need for a thorough analysis of the impact of cultural and religious diversity upon learning and teaching is of clear relevance to the widening participation agenda as well as employability. These are issues that are becoming increasingly important to higher education recruitment, retainment and quality of student experience. Not surprisingly, there has been significant interest in this project and a recent THES four page supplement, to mark the launch of the Higher Education Academy, is to include an article about this initiative.

## Overview

The initial phase of the project involved the dissemination of a questionnaire via the subject centre websites (<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/diversity/index.html>). Owing to the excellent rate of response the closing date for the return of questionnaires was extended by one month, to the end of October 2004 to ensure that other colleagues had the opportunity to reply. The questionnaire was designed to encourage colleagues to share their experiences of working with students from a range of religious and cultural backgrounds, to outline any difficulties experienced and to give examples of how they dealt with challenging situations. Respondents were asked if they were prepared to submit a case study at a later date. We have received around twenty offers of case studies: these are to be requested during the next phase of the project and will be posted on the project website.

However, another central aim of the questionnaire was to ask colleagues what resources could be provided in order to help them to accommodate cultural and religious diversity in their work. On the whole, colleagues requested resources that provide examples of good generic practice that can be replicated or extended to suit different situations. The case studies will be a relevant contribution to this end. There was also a desire for factual information about the content of cultural and religious traditions that can be easily referenced and digested. During the initial phase of this project, the team has begun work on a searchable on-line resource that will make use of reliable and informative material on the web. Colleagues will be able to search for information relevant to their experience of working with religious and cultural diversity, from details about the dates of different religious festivals (so that they can be avoided in timetabling and assessment deadlines), to the meanings of various dress and dietary customs. The 'Faith Guides' that are being produced by subject centre (not a part of this project) will also complement this aim. The subject centre is also involved in the development of the SHEFC (Scottish Higher Education Funding Council) race/religion toolkit.

## Key finding of questionnaires

In July 2004, the project team at Leeds organized a day's workshop with the other participating subject centres and during this meeting it was decided that a list of frequently asked questions, which had emerged from the questionnaires, would be provided on the subject centre website (<http://www.prs-ltsn.ac.uk/diversity/index.html>). The minutes of this meeting as well as a power point presentation will also be available here.

We have received about 130 responses to the questionnaire, from colleagues working in a range of disciplines (although around half were submitted anonymously). While the highest response level has been from staff working in health-related departments (eleven responses), psychology (eight), and education (seven), other areas are also well represented including student counselling/welfare, engineering, business, biology/ecology, law, geography and computing. Interestingly, our own subject area, philosophy, theology and religious studies, did not show a high response (only three from theology and religious studies, and none from philosophy).

There were four main areas that emerged as of particular concern:

- Religious festivals and holy days: colleagues did not know the dates or significance of such occasions but recognized the need to avoid these dates when timetabling courses or arranging assessment deadlines (see <http://www.support4learning.org.uk/shap/>)

*The left hand column?'religious calendars on-line'?enables you to choose from series of resources. The first one, produced by City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council, can be printed off as a wall chart. However, it does not indicate which days need to be 'no work days' for members of different traditions. The resource produced by the 'East of England Faith's Council' provides this information and can be found at <http://www.eefaithscouncil.org.uk/calen.htm> A calendar of religious festivals can be ordered from <http://www.shap.org/calendar.html>'The Shap Calendar of Religious Festivals').*

- Course content: colleagues were concerned either that course content reflected a 'western' perspective or that certain subjects were problematic for some students (e.g. evolutionary theory, sex(uality) or vivisection). Also, respondents were keen to retain the critical openness of academic inquiry but felt constrained by their desire to be sensitive to the cultural and religious views of particular students.
- Teaching styles: colleagues had noticed that some international students, in particular, experienced difficulties adapting to UK learning and teaching methods (e.g. independent study, group work or questioning the views of the tutor or classmates). Respondents indicated a lack of knowledge about teaching styles in other countries. (We are in the process of putting together an annotated bibliography of academic articles that discuss, as well as critically assess, the issue of divergent teaching styles according to cultural context. This will be made available on our website).
- Student participation: colleagues noted that some students found participation in social events difficult if their dietary customs were not catered for or if alcohol was available or were uneasy about working in mixed sex groups. (A useful article can be found at [http://www.salesvantage.com/news/etiquette/taboo\\_offerings.shtml](http://www.salesvantage.com/news/etiquette/taboo_offerings.shtml)??Taboo Table Offerings: The Intricacies of Intercultural Menu Planning? for a brief discussion of different cultural attitudes towards food and alcohol).

There was an opportunity on the questionnaire for respondents to state the ways in which they had dealt with problematic situations. Suggestions include to:

- Stress that the course content reflects a western perspective and welcome comparative and contrasting views from students wherever possible.
- Also stress that there are divergent opinions on topics and that from an academic perspective it is important to be aware of these. Awareness of diverse views can also make one's own position stronger ?one needs to be able to withstand critique.
- Try to illustrate to students that evolutionary theory is not necessarily incompatible with religious perspectives on creation.
- Avoid using the word 'we' when discussing examples as this suggests that there is one viewpoint to which everyone subscribes.
- Mix students from different cultural backgrounds in the classroom setting so that they can learn from each other.
- Ask students their views beforehand and make it possible for students to opt out of sections of the course if necessary (e.g. dissection, watching videos with sexual content).
- Avoid topics during particularly politically sensitive periods. One institution issued guidelines to all staff not to discuss terrorism and the Middle East in the build up to the Iraq war.
- Find out from international students what teaching styles they are used to and how staff can make it easier for them to get used to the British method. One-to-one sessions at the beginning of a module would enable

colleagues to gather student views. Problems arise when students are 'thrown in at the deep end' and have no opportunity to adjust.

- To organize social events that are 'alcohol free' and to liaise closely with catering staff to ensure that food is clearly labelled according to different religious restrictions.

## Future Directions

The questionnaire replies revealed a very strong emphasis upon the need to avoid stereotyping. However, without appropriate knowledge and resources many felt unable to sustain this important educational value. We consider that the work undertaken so far by this project has confirmed the initial premise that cultural and religious diversity is of importance to teaching and learning in higher education, but that it has not yet received the prominence it warrants. Moreover, our questionnaire responses have indicated a need for further work in this area in terms of higher education recruitment, retention, quality of student experience and employability.

In response to this we are about to run a series of focus groups with students to canvas their needs and concerns. While the questionnaires targeted members of staff, the student view is essential in order to provide a comprehensive assessment of the various challenges facing an agenda which aims to support cultural and religious diversity in the university environment. This will mark the end of the first phase of this project.

During the next phase of the project we will develop a module for staff training on cultural and religious diversity that would then be delivered in-house in different educational contexts. The need for such a training module was expressed in a number of questionnaire responses, and it was felt that this was an initiative that the Subject Centre for PRS was qualified to undertake. We also aim to investigate ways of incorporating the development of 'cultural and religious literacy' into the higher education curriculum. Our questionnaire responses have indicated that cultural and religious diversity issues cut across all academic disciplines. However, considering the rigid boundaries that exist between academic disciplines, tutors do not know how they can build these issues into their courses. Nevertheless, the importance of religious and cultural literacy as a key employability skill has been recognised by this project. The introduction of the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 suggests a broader social commitment in the UK to the creation of culturally inclusive places of work. Also, both the Home Office and the Department for International Development have recently expressed their commitment towards working more closely with faith communities and encouraging interfaith dialogue. All these developments reveal a need for students from UK universities to acquire the skills and knowledge that reflect this growing concern for cultural and religious literacy in British society.

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