

## **Religion and Belief Policy**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1. AECC University College celebrates and values the diversity of its staff and students and aims to create an environment where the cultural, religious and non-religious or similar philosophical beliefs are all respected. The University College will strive to create an inclusive learning and working environment where student and staff of all religions or beliefs or have no belief are all respected and we will actively promote tolerance within the University College community.
- 1.2. The University College seeks to ensure that:
  - Individuals are not treated less favourably than others because of their actual or perceived religion, belief or non-belief.
  - Policies, practices and provisions are based on relevant criteria, which do not discriminate on grounds of religion, religious belief or similar philosophical belief (except in the case of a genuine occupational requirement).
  - Policies, practices and provisions do not put people of any specific religion or belief at a disadvantage when compared to other persons.
  - Individuals and groups are treated with dignity and fairness whatever their religious and/or other beliefs may be.
  - Where possible, appropriate services are provided to meet the cultural and religious needs of all staff and students.

### **2. Scope of the Policy**

- 2.1. The policy applies to all staff and students at AECC University College. Visitors, contractors and individuals with honorary status will also be expected to abide by this policy.
- 2.2. The policy forms part of the University College's approach to equality and diversity. The Equality Act 2010 places a responsibility on the University College to ensure that facilities and services do not discriminate against people on the basis of religion or belief, or on the basis of a lack of religion or belief. However, the spirit of this policy is to encourage good practice based on a desire to treat people equitably and not simply in response to legislation.
- 2.3. In developing this policy the University College recognises that the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 places a duty on the University College as a relevant higher education body to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism. This legislation is given specific statutory force through the Prevent duty guidance for higher education institutions in England and Wales, referred to as the 'Prevent Duty'.

### **3. Definition of a Religion or Belief**

- 3.1. For the purposes of this policy, religious or other belief is defined as any religion, religious belief or philosophical belief that has a clear belief system or profound belief that affects the way of life or view of the world of the believer. There may also be collective worship, such as in churches, mosques or gurdwaras.
- 3.2. As examples, the following are faiths covered by this policy:

- Baha'i
  - Buddhism
  - Christianity
  - Confucianism
  - Taoism
  - Hinduism
  - Islam
  - Jain
  - Judaism
  - Rastafarian
  - Sikhism
  - Zoroastrian (Parsee)
- 3.3. This list is not exhaustive and there will be other religious and other faith-based beliefs that will fall within the definition given in this policy.

#### **4. Freedom of Speech**

- 4.1. The University College believes that a culture of free and open discussion is essential in its role as an academic institution. This culture can only be achieved if all concerned behave with necessary tolerance and avoid needlessly offensive or provocative action or language. The University College expects all persons taking part in its activities to respect its values, be sensitive to the diversity of its community and to show respect to all sections of that community.
- 4.2. The University College provides a diverse environment, to encourage discussion, and embrace the critical exploration of questions concerning religion, belief and non-belief. The University College expects staff, students, contractors and visitors to respect the freedom of others to express their convictions, religious beliefs or non-belief in their own terms. The University College will seek to intervene in instances where demonstrating a belief constitute harassment or creates conflict that goes beyond open and reasoned debate. The University College also has a duty to protect students and staff from aggressive, manipulative or covert forms of proselytism.
- 4.3. Guest speakers can be invited to speak on campus within the framework set out in the University College's Freedom of Speech Policy and Student's Event Policy and, where relevant, should be made aware of the provisions of this policy.

#### **5. Religious Dress**

- 5.1. The University College welcomes the diversity of appearance that people from different religious and belief backgrounds can bring. However, there may be health and safety considerations that would restrict certain modes of dress in particular contexts. In such cases, it will be necessary for The University College to consult with staff/students who may be affected by a restriction to see if an appropriate compromise can be reached.
- 5.2. There are some additional occasions where students may be requested to remove face coverings in order to verify identity (for example at examinations, and for ID card photos). The University College will ensure that such requests are handled sensitively, taking into account students' desire for privacy.
- 5.3. It is permitted to wear religious dress as long as this does not impede:
- direct patient contact
  - working with other students
  - examining or treating a patient
- 5.4. There may be some instances where certain items of religious dress may not be appropriate to wear when treating patients, please refer to the Clinical Practice Handbook for more information.

## 5.5. The Hijab

5.5.1. The University College is aware that for cultural or religious reasons some females may choose to cover their hair, ears and neck. Some female Muslims may choose to do this by wearing a headscarf (hijab) which covers the hair, ear and neck but which exposes the face. It is permitted to wear a hijab at the University College.

## 5.6. The Turban

5.6.1. The University College is aware that for cultural or religious reasons some male Sikh students or staff may wish to wear a turban. It is permitted to wear a turban at the University College.

## 5.7. The Yarmulke

5.7.1. The University College is aware that for cultural or religious observance some Jewish men may wish to wear the yarmulke – the skullcap. It is permitted to wear a yarmulke at the University College.

## 5.8. The Niqab and Burka

5.8.1. As part of their religious or cultural observance, some female Muslims may wish to wear a half face veil – a niqab – or a full face veil – a burka.

5.8.2. Learning to communicate is part of the skill set to be achieved by all healthcare professionals. AECC University College expects all its students and staff to demonstrate the same high standard of communication skills. All AECC University College students and staff are required to expose their face in situations where this is important for communication with another person. This means that a student's or staff member's face should be exposed in the following situations:

- in all clinical areas
- when working with other students
- when examining a patient
- for identification purposes including relating to examinations

5.8.3. Please note that on occasions where face masks are required to be worn at all times i.e. during a global pandemic and when public health guidance directs, they must not be removed for communication and identification purposes.

5.8.4. During large lectures, when there is no expectation of interaction with each and every member of the class, students may cover their faces with a niqab or burka. However, if it is considered that communication would be hampered in a learning environment -for instance if facial cues are needed to understand a student's contribution during small group discussions, role play, clinical skills or communication skills etc., then individuals may be requested to remove their face veil.

## 5.9. The Jilbab and the Chador

5.9.1. As part of their religious or cultural observance, in order to avoid showing the contours of their body, some female Muslims may wish to wear a jilbab – a loose dress from neck to ankle which covers the arms including the wrists or a chador (a full-body cloak).

## 5.10. The Kara

5.10.1. Both male and female Sikhs wear the Kara; a sacred bracelet made of steel. It is a religious requirement to wear the Kara. Sikhs are not permitted to remove the Kara. It is permitted to wear the Kara on campus.

5.11. Sikh students should ensure that the Kara is pushed up the arm and secured in place with tape for hand washing and during direct patient care activity.

5.12. The Kirpan

5.12.1. A Sikh may be uninitiated or initiated. Initiated male and initiated female Sikhs are required to wear the Kirpan (a ceremonial sword). The Kirpan is carried in a sheath attached to a cloth belt. It is normally worn discreetly under clothes and most people would be unaware that a Sikh was carrying a Kirpan. The size of the Kirpan may differ depending on the personal taste of the initiated Sikh, but may be only a few inches.

5.12.2. Under the 1988 Criminal Justice Act, the Kirpan is NOT classified as an offensive weapon and therefore Sikhs carrying the Kirpan are exempt from prosecution under the Offensive Weapons Act 2008. It is permitted to wear the Kirpan on campus.

5.12.3. AECC University College recognises that initiated Sikhs have a right to wear the Kirpan. However the University College is also mindful that not everyone is familiar with the full significance of the Kirpan. Therefore as a compromise and in order to avoid undue alarm to others, when on campus, wearers of the Kirpan must ensure this item is worn discreetly. This means that the Kirpan should remain out of sight. Any student wearing a Kirpan should also ensure it is secured so it cannot be easily drawn.

## **6. Laboratory Coats**

6.1. Inside laboratories, students and staff must wear laboratory coats over their clothes and must be able to close the coat up completely. Apart from shoes, students or staff must not wear any clothing that touches the floor, as this could potentially pick up contamination from the floor surface, dangle in chemical or biological hazards, or become a trip hazard.

6.2. Individuals working in laboratories must be able to wear the full range of personal protective equipment such as gloves, eye protection such as safety glasses or face shields. 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.

## **7. Working with Patients**

7.1. We recognise that some students may wish to specialise in treating patients of only one sex once they qualify. However, independent of any individual's future decision, the University College must train all its students to become competent to treat patients of both sexes as required by the relevant professional and statutory bodies (PSRB) Code of Practice and Standard of Proficiency.

## **8. Engaging in Handshaking with Patients**

8.1. 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.

8.2. However, the University College makes all its students aware that patients may have different ways of greeting – this may include not wishing to shake hands for reasons of religious observance. Refusing a handshake is not a disciplinary matter but students and staff 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.

8.3. When public health guidance directs, clinic staff and students are not permitted to greet patients by handshake. This is to protect our students, staff and patients and prevent spread of a virus.

## **9. Clinical Practice**

- 9.1. Clinical training involves the examination of student peers in preparation for patient examination. This teaching is important in helping students to gain basic clinical examining skills before they are asked to examine real patients. Students are not required to act as 'patients' to be examined, but it is a cooperative and generous gesture to fellow students should they do so.
- 9.2. Normally, mixed sex groups of students are taught together. However, the University College recognises that some students will prefer not to examine a student of the other sex, or be examined by a student of the other sex. Should any student have a particular concern about the requirements for participating in mixed-sex peer examination during the clinical technique class, that student should contact his or her tutor to discuss the situation.

## **10. Leave for Religious Observance**

- 10.1. All staff, regardless of religious or similar philosophical belief, are required to work in accordance with their contract. Requests for temporary adjustments to work arrangements will be facilitated as far as is practicable, subject to sufficient notice of religious observance requirements.
- 10.2. Staff practising religious or similar philosophical belief will normally be entitled to take three days of their annual leave entitlement on the dates of most significance to them. Further requests for leave entitlement to be taken at times of religious significance will be treated sympathetically. Statutory leave arrangements include Christmas and Easter, both of which are Christian religious festivals. For all staff, regardless of religious belief, the number of annual leave days overall will remain as in the contract of employment.
- 10.3. Staff may apply for unpaid leave of absence of up to one month on religious grounds. Such requests will be considered by the HR Manager in consultation with the appropriate line manager, who will inform the member of staff of the reasons if leave is to be refused.
- 10.4. Individuals considering permanent adjustments to their contract of employment in order to support religious observance may make a request via the Flexible Working Request Form. The application for flexible working is open to all staff who have completed 26 weeks service. Flexible working is designed to support staff in balancing external commitments with those of work. Managers are encouraged to consider requests sympathetically; however, all applications will be assessed and considered in line with the policy.
- 10.5. Staff may occasionally be required to work at times outside of their usual working hours. If staff have reasons not to work at particular times because of religious observance requirements, these needs should be taken into account where possible by managers in scheduling work.

## **11. Religious Observance and the Academic Calendar**

- 11.1. The University College will consult with staff and students so that religious observance can be accommodated into the Academic Calendar, including scheduling of teaching and assessment, as far as is practicable.

## **12. Religious Observance and Assessment**

- 12.1. Examination period dates are fixed and publicised in advance and are aligned with other events in the academic calendar. As such, it is not possible to change these dates in order to accommodate the full diversity of religious practices.
- 12.2. The University College provides support for students whose religious practices may coincide with the timing of examinations or assessments taken under controlled

conditions.

### **13. Coursework Assessment (including resit coursework)**

13.1. Deadlines for coursework assessment are given in advance to students. Therefore, students who are observing religious festivals around the time of the deadline will need to plan their work so it is completed in good time.

### **14. Prayers and Assessment**

14.1. Students are not permitted to leave a scheduled learning or assessment activity in order to pray. Students whose prayer time falls within an examination should make arrangements to fulfil their obligations to pray either before or after the examination. A student who leaves the exam room for any reason cannot return to the exam. This is in line with the code of behaviour for all examination candidates.

### **15. Keeping a Record of Requests for Religious Practice to be Accommodated**

15.1. The programme offices will keep a record of all student requests for religious accommodations to be made on that student's file. This information will include:

- the student's programme
- the student's religion or belief
- the nature of the accommodation requested
- if the accommodation was made and how
- if not, why not – so as to record the 'objective justification' to making such an accommodation should the institution receive a legal challenge.

15.2. The HR team will keep a record of all staff's requests for religious accommodations to be made on their personnel file. This information will include:

- the member of staff's religion or belief
- the nature of the accommodation requested
- if the accommodation was made and how
- if not, why not – so as to record the 'objective justification' to making such an accommodation should the institution receive a legal challenge.

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Owner	Chief Operating Officer / HR Manager
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Date approved	18 September 2020
Effective from	18 September 2020
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Target	Staff and Students
Policy location	Staff Information Portal
Equality analysis	No direct impact, the policy provides for equality analysis to be undertaken as part of policy review. The policy provides for information to be made available in alternative formats as required, to make reasonable adjustments in line with the Equality Act 2010.