

Case Study

Keele Sikh Society

What was your interfaith project?

Keele Sikh Society will be carrying out a number of events which we term as "parchar." Parchar will hopefully help different religious groups and non-religious people gain a better understanding of the Sikh religion rather than focusing on certain superficial aspects (The Five Ks, Singh and Kaur surnames etc). We asked a few prominent Sikh individuals and charities (Everythings 13/ Basics of Sikhi) to assist us in order to coordinate the Street Parchar safely and responsibly. (Their travel expenses were reimbursed from the NUS grant) We had to make it incredibly clear to people at the start that we were not preaching and our aim was not to convert them, in order to have an open dialogue with them. The outcome of the Street Parchar was to increase understanding on campus about the Sikh Religion.

The Street Parchar involves Sikh students on campus asking non-Sikhs firstly if they have a few spare minutes. If yes we then showed them a picture of a Sikh couple, Sikh male, Sikh woman and asked them to identify which religion they thought they were. This created a starting point for the further conversation in regards to the Sikh religion. From this we asked individuals about any previous knowledge they hold about Sikhism, Sikh History and Sikh beliefs. Many students were able to identify Sikh people based on the 5 Ks yet did not know about Sikh beliefs and theology etc. From this we distributed the "three facts leaflet" and we started to explain the vital concepts in order to clear any misconceptions about Sikhism. We then allowed them to ask questions.

How did you ensure students were involved in the development of your project?

We will be carrying out this project during Refreshers week so that we can target students wishing to sign up. As there will be a lot of students, we hope that we will be easily able to run the parchar initiative. Other members of the Sikh Society, in particular first years have offered their services for this project. In terms of targeting students, we set up a small stall in the Keele SU near the cafeteria and I found the initiative to be fairly successful in regards to how many students we had successfully approached. We asked the Christian Union to visit us and asked a few individuals if they could take part in the project too. From 5pm we held a multi-faith talk led by Jagraj Singh from Basics of Sikhi. The lecture was on Sikhism and Science/Atheism. We invited all religious faith groups including the atheist society to the lecture. Many of the members of the Christian Union came and so did many members of the Atheist Society. The turnout from the Sikh Society was substantial. Unfortunately only one representative from the Islamic Society came and the Hindu Society decided "no-show" the event due to personal differences with our former President. We also asked the multi-faith representative to send out reminders before the event. Unfortunately she got this e-mail a week later.

What impact did this project have on students you work with and within your students' union or college?

- How did it deliver one of the following outcomes:
 - o Encourage engagement between faith societies
 - o Increase understanding amongst students about different religions and beliefs

- Increase dialogue and collaborative action
- Were there any other outcomes from the project?

The principal aim of our initiative was to increase understandings and clear previously held misconceptions that other faith societies may have had. We had hoped to share the similarities whilst respecting the differences with various religions. The response from the various Christian Societies was warm and incredibly welcoming, but unfortunately this was not the same for the Atheists who in our humble opinion came there to mock ALL religious societies. (Comments made in the lecture and comments made on social media). In their defense, they did learn a lot about Sikhism. The results were a better dialogue between the Christian and Sikh Societies, and better understanding of the religion for all those who had attended. The Christian and Sikh Societies may be holding an event for the homeless after the Spring exam period (running soup kitchens and feeding the homeless) We are happy to have a joint project with them.

What lessons did you learn in delivering the project that might be useful to other students' unions?

I would advise other Student Unions if they chose to do this event that they should plan time accordingly and give people plenty of notice in order to get maximum attention and awareness possible. Above all else carry out this project with a huge smile on your face and enjoy it!

Do you have any feedback from participants at your event?

Participants from the Sikh Society enjoyed the lecture and the day, whilst the Christian Societies were delighted afterwards and learnt a lot about the religion and praised the Sikh tenets as they is a lot common with basic Christian doctrines, but with a slight twist! Members of the Christian Society approached us after the event and expressed their gratitude to myself and the charities for hosting this event as they learnt a great deal about the Sikh Religion.

Photo/Video evidence of your event: