

Building an Interfaith and Belief Forum

An inter faith and belief forum can provide a place for students of different faiths to engage with each other and meet a specific need: for students' unions to increase formal engagement and representation with faith societies and their members.

This guidance helps students' unions support the development of an inter faith and belief forum which can be a place where members of different faith societies can meet regularly and discuss issues of common interest and concern.

It can also be a context for the union to:

- consult regularly with students of faith and identify their needs, discuss issues and find solutions to any problems that may arise;
- engage with faith and inter faith activities on campus

Also provided are some key things for you to consider in setting up your forum and a template agenda for you to use in your first Inter Faith and Belief Forum meeting.

What type of interfaith and belief forum?

Inter faith and belief forums take different forms at different students' unions depending on the specific needs and interests of those involved.

Some 'forums' are relatively informal. Others aim for some degree of representation from different groups. For example, one approach is to have a forum with representatives from each faith and belief society (ideally two from each – one male, one female), and at least one person from the students' union (the societies, activities or welfare officer). It can also be useful to invite participation from the chaplain(s) and someone from the institution.

Whatever the type of forum may be, it should model the relationships the students' unions would like to see amongst students on campus: positive, respectful and mutually engaged.

Who sets up an inter faith and belief forum, and how?

When an inter faith and belief forum is set up the questions arise of who sets it up, and how it should be run. The students' union may want to have a direct role in the setting up of an inter faith and belief forum. This could have some benefits in terms of implementation and communication of what the students' union would like to achieve and could add to the standing of a forum in the eyes the university or college, and give the students' union a more hands on ability to encourage inter faith activities. However, complex and potentially controversial decisions about who is included in the forum then become the direct responsibility of the students' union.

Alternatively, the students' union may want to take on a facilitative role: encouraging the faith societies and individual students to set up their own inter faith forum. The union could promote the inter faith and belief forum, provide it with financial support and recognition. A students' union inter faith and belief officer could attend meetings and get involved in the group providing support when required.

Whether or not the union directly sets up a forum, there is the possibility that the students' union representative may chair the forum. If this is the case then it is worth considering appointing a representative from one of the faith and belief societies to be a co-chair, promoting the good relations between the union and faith and belief societies.

Eventually the model that you choose to employ depends on the circumstances on your campus. It is recommended that you ask this question at your initial meeting to find out what those involved think is the best approach to take.



Campus Cohesion, Faith and Belief Project – Training

It is important to understand that, regardless of how an inter faith and belief forum is set up and run, students should play an active role in designing, planning, and running regular inter faith activities for themselves and in partnership with the students' union. Both the students' union and the faith and belief societies should seek to facilitate a certain level of student inter faith and belief activity. The position of your institution's chaplaincy team should also be considered. They can be an invaluable resource in setting up any venture with multiple faiths and beliefs and may also have access to resources and facilities. There are many careful balances to be struck in each individual situation with regards to how inter faith and belief functions on campus.

Additional campus inter faith and belief initiatives

Remember that even if a formal inter faith and belief forum is developed, individual student faith societies and individual students may also want to organise inter faith and belief activities and events. They might even want to form an inter faith and belief society or regular dialogue group – probably more informal with individual students from a variety of backgrounds. This is not incompatible with the suggested forum approach above, and should also be supported.

Using a variety of approaches may be the most suitable for your campus, and students' needs. If you do take this approach, it is important to have one person responsible for communicating between the different activities that exist. The union might want to appoint an inter faith and belief officer to take on this role and organise events encouraging inter faith and belief dialogue between students (with little formal interaction with faith and belief societies). He or she might also service the student inter faith and belief forum. This latter approach can be particularly useful at institutions where there are few or no faith and belief societies.

In most cases it is probably appropriate for the first meeting to be chaired by an officer from the students' union. You will also want to appoint someone to take minutes of the meeting (including names and contact details of everyone who attended). Within agenda item 6 you should discuss how future meetings will be chaired – you may want to consider having a rotating chair, by the forum members.

Key considerations

Below is a list of key things for you to consider when setting up an inter faith and belief forum and organising the first meeting:

- The students' union officer or other person responsible for convening the forum should meet with each of the representative groups before the inaugural meeting to clarify its purpose and agree the aims of the initial meeting. This can help manage each groups' expectations of what will be achieved from the first meeting and the forum generally.
- Manage any existing or arising tensions in the meeting (or where possible beforehand). If tensions are ignored members of the forum are likely to get frustrated and stop participating.
- Communication: decide in the first meeting how members will communicate with one another between forum meetings; how they can add items to the next meeting agenda; and, how often the forum will convene.
- The convenor should follow up with everyone individually after the meeting. This is a good way to keep people engaged, check out any concerns and ask them for their feedback.
- In addition to the activities the forum organises for all students, you could propose that the forum members organise an activity for themselves to get to know one another. For example, visiting a place of worship or local exhibition together; or participating in some inter faith and belief training together.
- Alternatively, you could propose the members of the forum model the activities they want to see other students do. For example, piloting an inter faith and belief dialogue programme (such as [Conversations for the Soul](#)), before rolling it out.

It is important to note that while an inter faith and belief forum may be an excellent way of discussing issues students of faith and belief have on your campus, it is unlikely also to serve as an inter faith and belief dialogue group.

Template agenda

Below is a template agenda for the first meeting of your inter faith and belief forum. This template is for use where a general purpose for the forum has been agreed by all parties before the meeting.

Date: _____ Time: _____ Venue: _____

Attendance: *(Name, society and role/position within society)* _____

1. Welcome (by chair)

- Clarify the purpose of the Forum
- Outline the agenda and what you hope will be achieved by the end of the meeting

2. Introductions

- Quick round robin of who everyone is
- If representing a faith society allow two minutes for everyone to also introduce their society

3. Ground-rules

- Agree the ground rules for the forum

4. Issues and opportunities for inter faith engagement on campus

- Identify the opportunities
- Invite students of particular faiths [and beliefs] to raise any faith and inter faith issues that they would like discussed in the future
- Invite faith societies to raise for future exploration any issues concerning being a faith society on your campus.
- Open invitations to all present to raise any faith or inter faith issues that they believe need future discussion

5. Ideas for things the forum could deliver (in addition to providing an opportunity to discuss the issues raised above)

The opportunities, issues and ideas raised in the agenda items 4 and 5 should be used to develop a simple terms of reference for the forum, following the first meeting

6. Roles and responsibilities within the Forum

- Discuss what responsibilities there are within the forum so that it functions well, and what roles might be created for these responsibilities
- For example: Who will convene the next meeting?

7. Summary of any actions agreed

8. Agree date for next meeting
