

FE - Why does NUS work around campus cohesion, faith and belief?

Faith and Belief is an integral part of many students' identity. Supporting students of faith and belief and meeting their diverse needs has been an increasingly important area of work for both students' unions and institutions in FE.

Why faith *and* belief?

Whilst the major world religions are better known and more likely to be catered for, there are a number of faiths and beliefs that the wider student population belong to. These can include the Baha'i Faith, Paganism and spiritual beliefs, as well as non-belief such as atheism and humanism.

We use the terms 'faith' and 'belief' to be as inclusive as possible. We recognise that including and involving those who don't identify as having a particular faith or religion is key to campus cohesion.

We also recognise that people relate to faith and belief in a number of different ways which is very personal to each individual.

Why does faith and belief matter?

Faith and belief can be a key part of people's identities and can result in very specific needs.

Campuses vary considerably in their pattern of diversity, linked to a number of factors including the percentage of overseas students and the diversity of the local community from which students may attend.

If students don't feel safe to express their identities on campus or do not have their needs met this has a huge impact on all other aspects of their student life including academic achievement and social integration.

What is campus cohesion?

A cohesive campus is one in which people of many different identities feel comfortable and are able to exist together in mutual respect.

It is important to understand that people hold many overlapping identities simultaneously and a cohesive campus is a safe space where students can express their opinion without fear of harm.

How did the project start?

Prior to the existence of the project NUS received a number of requests from students' unions for guidance on how to support students of faith as well as requesting advice on how to build good relations between students of different faith backgrounds.



In 2008 NUS received a small amount of funding from the then Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (which is now the Department for Business, Innovation

and Skills) to bring together student faith leaders to discuss options for student-led interfaith collaboration.

This meeting led to the production of a report from which NUS received further funding to set up the project.

In 2014 the project expanded into working in FE specifically with a dedicated FE and Nations project officer.

What are the aims of the project?

The NUS Campus Cohesion, Faith and Belief project seeks to support students' unions. In FE we recognise that many places may not have fully formed students' unions so we work with student officers and staff to:

- Support student faith groups to negotiate for improved services and gain acknowledgement from their institutions of their specific needs
- Understand the risks posed by some external speakers and how to mitigate against these risks
- Respond to tensions between different student faith groups
- Increase interaction, understanding and learning amongst students and staff about the role of faith and belief in students' lives.

What does the project do?

We do a number of things to support students' unions:

- Provide training in a variety of formats including a national residential training event, regional training tailored to FE and webinars
- Provide grants of up to £1000 to students' unions and student societies for activities and social action projects that bring together students of different faiths and beliefs
- Deliver specialist training and support to unions when issues arise

- Create tailored resources to meet the needs of our membership
- Conduct research into areas of student life which may be affected by faith and belief
- Deliver 'I will lead the way for Muslim women' leadership training to encourage Muslim women to participate more actively in their students' unions.

Why is faith and belief important for my role in FE?

Faith and belief comes into the remit of a number of roles in FE institutions. Whether you are an officer, societies coordinator, part of the Chaplaincy or a staff member - the faith and belief of your students and issues related to them will impact on your work.

A national student survey undertaken in FE found that over 70% of students believe that learning and skills providers and workplaces should provide support and services for students and trainees who hold different values, beliefs and faiths.¹



When colleges are not well equipped to handle issues related to faith, belief and the inherent overlaps with cultural practise, tension and conflict can become a significant issue on campus harming students' welfare and in turn disrupting students' educational attainment.

A proactive approach to faith and belief and its overlap with culture and ethnicity is important to not only mitigate against conflict in the student body, but also to equip students to successfully navigate the multi-faith and multi-cultural society they will be in when they leave college.

¹ Learning Skills and Improvement Service (LSIS) Guidance on SMSC, <http://www.smisc.org.uk/webs/288/documents/SMSCWeb.pdf>