

## 6 Summary and recommendations

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# Faith and Belief on Campus: Division and Cohesion

## Exploring student faith and belief societies

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Universities are a symbolic battleground in today's debates about our shared values. They are accused on the one hand of restricting freedom of speech, and on the other of being hotbeds of extremism. Polling conducted by YouGov for Theos in January 2019 found that over half (52%) of British adults think freedom of speech is under threat in UK universities, and a sizable minority (29%) think 'Islamic extremism' is common in them.<sup>1</sup> As the places where our future leaders develop their values, how universities accommodate debate and diversity is a critically important issue for the health of our society.

This report considers these difficult matters through the eyes of students who attend faith and belief societies on campus. It finds that tensions and controversies over religion or belief issues do sometimes arise on campus, but these are exceptions to the norm of peaceful campus relations between different groups.

Faith and belief societies play hugely important roles on campus in building community, supporting students pastorally and spiritually, and driving social action. However, they often face challenges which limit the contribution they can make to campus life, including their capacity to build bridges across different groups. While they are strong sources of 'bonding social capital', building bonds among their own members, they are less effective at being sources of 'bridging social capital' between groups. They need better resources and support from universities and students' unions in order to meet their potential of being key sources of cohesion on campus.

### Methodology

This research was conducted in a partnership between Theos, the UK's leading religion and society thinktank, and Dr Kristin Aune of the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University.

To establish the full spread of faith and belief student societies in the UK, we undertook three quantitative exercises:

- 1) A search of students' union websites to see which societies were listed as operating at which UK universities;

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/articles/research/YouGov-Theos--Universities-free-speech-2019.xlsx>

- 2) A survey of students' unions which received 47 responses (about a third of all UK universities);
- 3) A survey of national umbrella organisations supporting particular types of faith and belief society.

We undertook interviews with over 70 students of different religions or beliefs at six different universities around the country.

### Mapping faith and belief societies nationally

- There are at least 888 faith and belief societies in UK campuses. The average university has 6.3 such societies.
- Traditional Elite and Red Brick universities tend to have more faith and belief societies (on average 9 and 10 respectively) than Post-1992 and Cathedrals Group universities (5 and 3 respectively).
- Christian Unions are the most prevalent type of faith and belief society across UK universities, followed by Islamic Societies.
- As well as Christian Unions, there are many other types of Christian society. There are more independent Pentecostal / Charismatic / Evangelical societies than there are Christian Unions, though the latter tend to have larger memberships.
- The average size of a faith and belief society is 21 members. Islamic Societies have on average 90 members, Hindu Societies have 60, and Christian Unions have 43. The largest recorded membership from our research was an Islamic Society with over 800 members.
- Overall, more than 18,000 students are estimated to be members of faith and belief societies, not including students who attend society events but who are not formal members.

### Activities and contributions of faith and belief societies

- **Providing space to practise, learn about and develop students' religion or belief.** This is particularly important for students of minority religions or beliefs who may not have easy access to religious institutions in their local area.
- **Building community and friendships.** The societies can be crucial sites for combatting loneliness and supporting students with poor mental health.
- **Providing pastoral and spiritual support.** Leaders in these societies sometimes act as informal chaplains, acting as mentors and providing a listening ear to other students facing problems.
- **Opportunities for women's leadership and exploration of women's issues.** Women-led faith and belief societies act as critical sites for female empowerment, particularly for women of minority religious or ethnic backgrounds.
- **Giving back to the wider community.** Faith and belief societies contribute hugely to wider society in terms of social action projects and charitable fundraising.

### Challenges facing the societies

- **Patchy support from universities and students' unions and patchy provision of needed space and resources.** While some universities offer high quality facilities and resources to students of different religions or beliefs, others do not, with students feeling insufficiently accommodated. This is a particular concern for Jewish and Muslim students with some universities lacking suitable access to kosher or halal food or prayer facilities.

- **Organisational and funding issues.** Committee members of the societies face significant pressures in terms of time and decision-making responsibilities which can sometimes be overwhelming. Some societies struggle to secure sufficient funds to carry out activities.
- **Internal divisions over sectarian, denominational or ethnic orientations.** Some faith and belief societies are dominated by specific sects or ethnic groups, and students from outside those groups can feel excluded or assume (rightly or wrongly) that they would not be welcome.
- **A lack of capacity to undertake interfaith activities.** Faith and belief societies are often willing to form collaborations with different societies, but logistical issues frequently prevent them from doing so. Societies that are primarily focused on faith-sharing are often less interested in forming collaborations with societies of different religions or beliefs.

## Handling controversial issues

By and large, universities are places where different religion or belief identities flourish harmoniously alongside each other. But religion or belief issues also underpin significant controversies on campus. We found the following in our research:

- **Freedom of speech on campus is not in crisis, but a minority of students feel under pressure to self-censor their views.** The crisis narrative about freedom of speech is largely exaggerated. Most students feel free to express their views. However, there are some factors which can chill freedom of speech on campus, including student activities (like intimidating behaviour of protesters) and structures like the Prevent Duty. Some students feel under pressure to self-censor their views, including students with socially (or politically) conservative views; students who support the policies of the State of Israel; and some (though not all) Muslim students who feel unfairly targeted by the Prevent Duty.
- **Extremism is not a significant issue in universities, but a significant proportion of Muslim students feel negatively affected by the Prevent Duty.** In a NUS survey of 578 Muslim students conducted in 2018, a third felt they had been negatively affected by Prevent.
- **Gender and sexuality are still sources of tension among some societies.** For example, some Christian Unions continue to have internal debates about whether women can be in charge. Some Muslim students (women as well as men) believe it is important to put limitations on interactions between the genders, but feel unable to practice gender segregation as they wish to because of a wider cultural disapproval of this.
- **Where faith-sharing activities occur, in general these are met with amicable or at least indifferent responses from other students, rather than hostility.** In general, students adhere to the principle of tolerance and adopt a ‘live and let live’ approach to these activities, as long as they feel they are not manipulative. There is little consensus across faith and belief societies on the acceptability of proselytism.
- **A significant minority of Jewish and Muslim students feel vulnerable to Antisemitic and Islamophobic abuse.** In the NUS survey of 578 Muslim students conducted in 2018, a third were worried about experiencing abuse on campus, with Muslim women who wore religious coverings feeling particularly vulnerable. In a NUS survey of 485 Jewish students conducted in 2016-17, 26% were similarly worried, and 23% said they had actually experienced abuse or a crime which they believed to be motivated by hostility to their Jewish identity. We heard examples of Antisemitic incidents on campus in our case studies.

## Summary of recommendations

For the full list of recommendations, see pages 163-9 of the report, available at [www.theosthinktank.co.uk](http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk)

### For faith and belief student societies:

- Faith and belief societies should explore ways of increasing the frequency with which they collaborate with other such societies (and indeed societies which are not faith and belief-related).
- Faith and belief society committee members should seek support from their students' union when facing difficulties in the organisation or management of their society.

### For universities:

- Universities should ensure they provide suitable facilities for all major religions or beliefs on campus, such as prayer rooms, suitable kitchen spaces and access to chaplaincy services. They should regularly engage with students of different religions or beliefs to learn what they require in order to practice their religion or belief freely.

### For students' unions:

- Students' unions should assign a permanent member of staff a religion or belief brief. This person must receive appropriate religious literacy training. Their role should include supporting faith and belief societies in achieving their goals and rectifying problems, and encouraging them to undertake interfaith collaborations.
- Students' unions should organise alternative welcome / Meet and Greet events in Welcome Week which are alcohol-free, to ensure that teetotal students of different religions and beliefs feel included.

### For universities and students' unions:

- Universities and students' unions must be proactive in ensuring that students and staff of all religions and beliefs are and feel safe on campus, particularly Jews and Muslims in light of persistent Antisemitism and Islamophobia.
- Both universities and students' unions should be conscious that some of their policies, such as those for the fulfilment of the Prevent Duty or external speaker vetting processes, can potentially contribute to a chilling effect on freedom of speech. They should prioritise the upholding of freedom of speech as they carry out their duties.

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