

AHS feedback on Religion or Belief in Higher Education report



5th May 2011

About the AHS

The AHS is the National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies. We are the umbrella organisation for all non-religious student societies in institutes of higher education across the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

Our vision is a thriving atheist, humanist or secular student society in every institute of higher education in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, networked together, with a shared voice in public life, whose members can contribute to and be part of the wider national and international movement.

It is our mission to build, support and represent atheist, humanist and secular student societies; to facilitate communication between them; to encourage joint actions; and to ensure that their members have opportunities to be part of the wider national and international movement.

The AHS currently has 33 member societies, and is rapidly growing (we have more than doubled in size since last summer). We believe there are about 50 active non-religious student societies in the UK.

Background to the first draft

Prior to the production of this first draft, the ECU issued a draft survey amongst staff and students in order to increase understanding of the situation in a variety of areas, and subsequently ran a survey that was modified in response to feedback from the draft.

After the survey went live, the AHS took issue with much of the way in which this survey was constructed, and how many of the questions were asked – largely as a result of changes meant subsequently to the survey consultation.

We are happy to say that a few of the flaws with the survey have been redressed in the report, but we would like to highlight one of the issues that we raised.

The survey often asked about subjects in a way that people could respond by saying "*yes, I am discriminated against*". However, the survey did not allow a respondent to state whether the religious views/beliefs of others impinge on their own sensibilities. The perfect example is that there was no way for a respondent to express the view that their HEI/SU shouldn't serve un-stunned meat, or that it should not provide exclusive space for religious groups. In fact in the former case, the box to add comments surrounding this issue disappeared as the respondent answered "*no, I do not have dietary issues*" to the preceding question! In both cases and many more, the option simply wasn't there to provide a secular response. Hence we feel the survey failed to represent a good portion of its target audience.

The AHS presented its issues to the ECU, and there followed a discussion between AHS President Richy Thompson and ECU Policy Advisor Chris Brill. On the point of un-stunned meat and other issues, Chris highlighted questions 62-65:

Q62 Do you ever feel informally excluded in your university/college as a result of your religion or belief?

(For example, not being invited to social events; not being included in gatherings at coffee/lunch?)

Yes

No

Q63 If you would like to elaborate please do so here:

Q64 Do you feel that you have encountered discrimination or harassment as a direct or indirect consequence of your religion or belief?

An example of harassment might include incidents of threatening behaviour due to someone's religion or belief or graffiti which was targeted against a particular religion or belief. An example of indirect discrimination might include exams being held on religious holidays. An example of direct discrimination might be a student receiving a worse mark because of his/her religion or belief.

Yes

No

Q65 If you would like to elaborate, please do so here

Chris stated that the point of these four questions was to allow people to write in the kind of information that was missed elsewhere. However we pointed out that these questions only dealt with cases of discrimination that had occurred, not potential for discrimination, so still didn't allow someone to put in that they had issues with un-stunned meat (for example). Chris said that there simply wasn't room to put in comment boxes everywhere, to which we reiterated that on the un-stunned meat example there is a comment box that vanishes when a person puts no. Chris then apologised for this. In fact he called the survey design poor.

Chris stated that the points of view the AHS expressed should be adequately covered in the final report. We asked that the report not only adequately reflected the point of view of the non-religious and secularists, but also that it detailed the issues raised with the survey itself. We do not feel that these issues have all been adequately addressed, as we will outline.

When the survey was running, the AHS advised its members that it was challenging issues related to the construction of the survey, but when no changes were brought, we did not subsequently advise them to fill it in, as we did not feel the survey was adequately constructed to represent our members' views. Many non-religious viewpoints are likely to have been missed.

AHS review of the report

The ECU asked stakeholders four questions. The AHS will focus on the second:

Are there any particular areas which could include more/less detail? Are there any additional considerations institutions should consider that have not been covered?

This is as we feel there are many areas where the point of view of the non-religious and secularists is not adequately represented, and there are other areas which should be covered but are not. We will start by going through the report, and then at the end deal with areas missing entirely.

On page 15, the report states that *“It is important to note that this survey was not meant to be statistically representative”*. Having stated that the survey is not meant to be statistically representative, **it is surprising to see how the responses from it are then consistently presented, along with percentages – thus in a manner that implies they *are* statistically representative, with no nearby statement that this is not the case.** This can be seen every single time a table is used, or any other time a percentage is used. It is highly likely that others subsequently using this report as a source of data will miss this statement, and as such the disclaimer on page 15 should be associated with every such instance of the use of the data.

Opening sections

The AHS’s name on page 2 is incorrect (it should be *“National Federation of...”*).

We note on page 3 the statement *“Full reports on the surveys, stakeholder meetings and the literature review can be found on the project page”*. These have not yet appeared, and (given the background) the report on the survey is of particular interest to the AHS. Would we have a chance to give feedback on this prior to publication?

We note with surprise the statement in the executive summary, *“Many HEIs incorporate acts of worship within the fabric of mainstream activities such as graduation ceremonies. Although in principle this might be thought to give rise to issues of equity as between religious groups, from the research there is little evidence to suggest that this is widely unacceptable or of major concern”*. This appears to differ from what is in the subsequent report.

It is commendable that different non-religious identities have been regrouped in the presentation of results, and this addresses one of the major grievances the AHS had with the survey construction.

Section on data collection and consultation

On page 20, the report suggests that,

Students and staff will by now be familiar with the religious affiliation questions that have been asked (albeit differently in the different countries of the UK, with the exception of England and Wales) on a voluntary basis in two decennial Censuses. Therefore there might be a prima facie case that the form of any similar data collection in HEIs could benefit from being the same in order to enable “mapping” of HEI religion or belief data onto wider data.

Such a technique may well be useful to ensure that no groups are discriminated against in admittance to an HEI.

However, whilst the AHS believes resources should not be allocated on the basis of levels of religion or belief, it is undeniable that this does sometimes happen. And as such, it is worth pointing out that the results of the Census are massively skewed in such a manner as to under-record the levels of irreligiosity – see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). Using, for example, the British Social Attitudes Survey, would be better.

Section on teaching and learning

On the teaching and learning section (p21-25), the linked-to [HEA faith guides](#) (in the executive summary) may not provide the best example, as at times they come across as promoting the views of the religions in question, or promoting particular views within that religion. For example, the [Christianity guide](#) argues (p10-11) that Christian views are defensible, and not outmoded: “*Christian students who can clearly identify a set of beliefs could make a strong case that a thorough-going rationalism which denies the possibilities of miracles and the existence of God may take just as much faith as their own.*” This seems to us to be a bizarre thing for a (supposedly) neutral guide to the tenets of a particular faith to argue.

The report takes a neutral tone on religion or belief, and this section is focused mainly around ethics. It is interesting that nothing to do with science and scientific fact is presented, as issues to do with religious individuals challenging scientific consensus seem to be relevant to this section – was this because no-one raised such issues in the survey or fieldwork? Regardless, the AHS would hope to see the report present the view that Universities should not alter their scientific curriculum to take into account non-scientific views with a religious basis on areas such as creationism.

Section on dietary matters

With regards to the section on dietary matters (p25-28), this is an area the AHS took particular issue with during the survey phase of the project, and despite assurances from Chris Brill that the AHS’s concerns would be reflected in the subsequent publication, this has not been realised.

To repeat: The survey was constructed in such a way as to disallow individuals from stating that they did not feel, for example, that non-stunned meat should not be served by Universities and SUs. Chris Brill assured the AHS that not only this survey flaw would be presented, but also this point would be presented.

The first, the flawed design, is not touched upon at all.

The second is mentioned in passing (p28), but the case for that point of view is not made – in fact, it is quickly succeeded by the suggestion that many such campaigns are entirely motivated by anti-Muslim sentiment, and not be genuine ethical concerns. Furthermore, the report ultimately endorses providing un-stunned meat.

The case against un-stunned meat should be presented much more clearly, as the evidence that slaughter without stunning is inhumane is overwhelming. The RSPCA, for example, take the [following position](#):

The RSPCA recognises that religious beliefs and practices should be respected. We also believe that it is important to ensure that animals are slaughtered under the most humane conditions possible. Scientific research has clearly shown that slaughter of an animal without stunning can cause unnecessary suffering. Accordingly, the RSPCA is opposed to the slaughter of any animal without first making it insensible to pain and distress until death supervenes.

We continue to press for changes in the law that would improve the welfare of all animals at the time of slaughter. Until this occurs, the RSPCA proposes that:

The Jewish and Muslim communities in the UK should review their slaughter practices. In New Zealand, for example, all animals slaughtered by the Halal method are stunned before slaughter, and all animals slaughtered by the Kosher method are stunned shortly after the incision is made in the animal's neck. The progress already made in the UK in these areas should be extended to cover all animals slaughtered.

All meat produced from animals that have not been stunned before slaughter should be clearly labelled in some way, so that it can be identified by consumers. The RSPCA believes that consumers have the right to choose whether or not they wish to buy meat from animals slaughtered without pre-stunning.

This position is also taken by the British Veterinary Association and the Farm Animal Welfare Council, the non-departmental body responsible for advising the Government on farm animal welfare. As a result, the statement *"It's easy enough to get vegetarian food, vegan food, dairy free. Why not halal. It's just one other option"* by the student on page 27 is simply misrepresenting the situation. Halal is not simply another option in the same way that the first three options are.

Chris Brill stated that un-stunned meat was included in the survey as this may be covered by the Equality Act, but that this would be up to case law which hadn't yet been established. It would be much better if the report spells this ambiguity out, instead of taking the position that un-stunned is covered, and therefore advocating for its provision.

It may also be worth pointing out that in fact 80% of halal meat in the UK *is* stunned prior to slaughter. It may well be the case that most Muslims are happy to eat such meat, and this approach could be advocated as one that would please almost everyone.

(On the other hand, no kosher meat is stunned prior to slaughter, so ironically the anti-halal campaigns would have probably done better to focus their efforts elsewhere!)

It is also worth noting that tables 2.9 and 2.10 do not make as clear as they could that they are referring to the dietary requirements of the respondent, not to dietary requirements by religion or belief groups in general (whether the respondents' requirements, or those of others).

Section on alcohol, exclusion and inclusion

The section on alcohol, exclusion and inclusion (p28-32) is well-presented. The only comments the AHS has are that chaplaincy, where it is religious in nature, may not serve as a similar refuge to non-religious students who do not drink alcohol; and that another approach that could be advocated, and would go some way to alleviating the problem, is to educate students and staff about the issue, in order to reduce peer pressure at events where alcohol is provided. Whilst some individuals may not feel comfortable being around others that are drinking, for many it is the peer pressure that comes with such situations that makes it unbearable – not the drinking itself.

Section on facilities for worship

In the section on facilities for worship (p38-40), the AHS would prefer to see no exclusive space provided for one particular religion or belief group or even for religion or belief groups in general, as this is unfair on students who do not actively participate in activities associated with religion or belief, and on other, secular groups around campus. On this approach, the report states that,

A number of HEIs have taken the decision not to provide any specifically designated space for groups to meet for religion or belief purposes and have instead moved the responsibility for securing space for prayer or worship to religion or belief groups themselves and/or to individuals to book space. This can be disruptive as the rooms which are allocated will often be different each week and therefore students have to make an effort to identify the room each time they wish to participate rather than having a single focus for their observances.

This is understandably an issue; however it is worth noting that many secular and almost all AHS groups that choose to hold regular weekly events face exactly the same problem. As a result, this issue is not one of religious groups being worse off than other groups, but of everyone facing a less than ideal situation together.

One potential solution, however, would be to allow the booking of space months in advance and through a more transparent booking system. This way, groups can work to ensure a consistency in the location of their activities simply through taking advantage of a better system.

An issue the report has failed to touch upon is non-religious belief groups being excluded from access to multi-faith facilities. HEIs need to be careful, if they have multi-faith facilities (and choose to call them this), that this is understood to mean belief groups with no faith, as well as faith-based groups.

Section on religion or belief associations and societies

The section on religion or belief associations and societies (p40-41) is entirely a presentation of the survey results of rates of attendance, which brings us back to the issue that these results are not statistically reliable – and yet, they are presented here as if they are. It is undoubtedly true that a lower proportion of non-religious students than religious students are active with a religion or belief society. But as the AHS advised its members that it was challenging issues related to the construction of the survey, and did not subsequently advise them to participate, the results for the non-religious are likely to be skewed.

Section on indirect discrimination

In the section on indirect discrimination (p53-54), on the poster example, there is also a related issue at the same University. Events can be promoted by email to all students by the society sending an email to one of the committee's JCR or MCR secretaries, who then forwards it on to all the others, who then put it in their weekly JCR and MCR emails. Some of the secretaries have been known to choose not to pass on emails from the student AHS society, possibly due to their having a different religion or belief. This problem likely affects other religions and beliefs as well. If the first JCR/MCR secretary sent the story is the one who chooses to drop it, then the event simply doesn't get promoted through this method. This issue is likely to also occur in other Universities which have similar methods of promotion through email.

Section on interaction between members of religion or belief groups

In the section on interaction between members of religion or belief groups (p62-63), one serious aspect that is missing is exclusion of non-religious groups from such issues. The name "interfaith", which means "between faiths", is unhelpful in often leading to this exclusion, however there is no

widely understood alternative term and so this is something non-religious have to accept. A good example of the non-religious being excluded is [Oxford Interfaith Week](#), which ran once in March 2009, had amongst its aims “to promote the role of religion in the university”, and to “celebrate the diversity of religious expression”. The irreligious societies at the University were not even invited to participate. This is clearly not a good situation.

A related issue is also highlighted here, namely that the week also set out to promote religion itself. Promoting religion or faith as concepts is also something that non-religious individuals would take issue with.

Another good example can be found at Bristol, where the AHS group is an active participant in the Student Multifaith Forum, however there is no non-religious representative on the [Multifaith Chaplaincy Team](#), or involving in its governance. The issue of chaplaincies will be returned to later.

Section on freedom of expression

In the section on freedom of expression (p69-70), the survey failed to distinguish between students and staff taking part in religious activities on campus within their religion or belief group, and students and staff proselytising to other students and staff. Whilst the former is clearly something that should be allowed, the latter should not, especially within the workplace. The wish of many not to be proselytised to is not touched upon in the report.

Missing areas

Funding

In terms of other areas missing from the report, one area is on differences in terms of funding. Secularists believe that religions and beliefs should get no funding from the Government or, for that matter, from University. However, often that is not the case.

For example, often Universities will fund a chaplaincy including a number of chaplains, and these are primarily Christian. This is unfair on other religions or beliefs, and to those who hold no strong religion or belief. One approach to tackling this issue would be to fund chaplains in other religions or beliefs as well, however this is unlikely to succeed as there are so many different religions or beliefs that it would be impossible to cater to everybody. This approach would also be unfair on those who do not subscribe strongly to any religion or belief. Hence the fairest approach would be to require each faith community to fund their own chaplains.

Exclusion from chaplaincy

There are other issues surrounding chaplains as well. If the University promotes chaplains within a narrow range of religions or beliefs only (quite aside from whether they fund them), then many will feel excluded. It is extremely rare, for instance, for a University to have a Humanist chaplain – indeed, the AHS is only aware of 4 Universities providing one.

There is in fact disagreement among the non-religious as to whether Humanist “chaplains” are the best approach, and the British Humanist Association is currently [conducting a review](#) to establish its policy on the area. The review aims to establish “(i) is there anything distinctive in the pastoral care

that is (eg in Belgium, Norway etc) or could be (in Britain) provided by humanists in these settings (ii) is there a need and demand for such services.”

Nonetheless, if there is not a Humanist chaplain, then secular alternatives should be presented alongside religious chaplains so that the non-religious are *just as able* to access the functions chaplains provide, should they need it. And the issue remains that the non-religious should not be excluded from the governance of multi-faith chaplaincy.

Terminology

One final particularly important issue that has not been touched upon is terminology. The issue for many non-religious with the term “interfaith” is discussed above. However, there is also the issue of Universities and SUs not always being careful to ensure they include beliefs along with religions, sometimes just referring to “religions” by mistake.

For example, Oxford Freshers’ Fair, organised by Oxford University Students Union, [placed Oxford Atheist Society in the “religion” section](#). This was described as “*A place to promote all views and beliefs regarding faith and spiritualism.*” Not only does this lead several non-religious students to skip visiting the room and hence miss the society, but it also leads religious individuals to accuse the society of being in the wrong place, or to challenge that “*atheism is a religion too.*”

More work could hence be done to spread understanding of the term “belief” in meaning non-religious life-stances, and to ensure that this term is widely adopted.

Equally, much more work needs to be done to ensure that “interfaith” is understood to include those of no faith, and hence to prevent the exclusion of the non-religious from interfaith activities and fora on campus.

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