

Non-religious identities as lived

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This presentation is based on two research projects:

1. Religion and Belief in Higher Education project Project website: <http://www.derby.ac.uk/ehs/research/religion-and-belief-in-HE>
2. Religion and Belief, Discrimination and Equality in England and Wales: Theory, Policy and Practice (2000-2010)
Project website: <http://www.derby.ac.uk/religion-and-society>



Religion and belief in higher education: the experiences of staff and students



About the project

- Project on religion and belief in higher education.
 - Funded by the Equality Challenge Unit.
 - Undertaken by a team from the University of Derby.
 - Report available from the ECU website. Published as
 - Weller, P., Hooley, T. & Moore, N. (2011) *Religion and belief in higher education: the experiences of staff and students*. London: ECU
- <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/religion-and-belief-staff-and-students-in-he>



Methodology

- Literature review
- Stakeholder consultation
- National online survey (responses 3077 staff, 3935 students)
- 7 case studies of institutions



Focus

- Participation and access
- Accommodating religious observance
- Discrimination and harassment
- Good relations

The report gives general findings relating to each of these issues.

Key issues that emerged

- Most participants would be willing to provide further monitoring data around religion and belief. The current lack of this data offers challenges in understanding religion and belief in the sector.
- Alcohol plays an important role in the student (and to a far lesser extent the staff) experience. This intersects with religion and belief identities in sometimes problematic ways.
- Some staff were unsure how to balance the sector's commitment to freedom of speech with sensitivity to individuals' religion and belief positions.
- Many issues relating to religion and belief emerge in the context of the curriculum.

Secularism and the politics of the study

- The research team represented a mix of religion and belief positions. However, it included a high profile religious scholar. This led to concerns about impartiality and hidden agendas.
- A few individuals with no religion (and the National Secular Society) assumed that a project of this nature was seeking to privilege or entrench a religious position.
- A few individuals with no religion objected to the use of public money to investigate this issue.
- Some individuals with no religion did not recognise that “belief” could or should include them.



Survey responses

	Staff (3077)	Students (3935)
No religion	36.5%	31.4%
Spiritual	4.5%	4.8%
Other	2.1%	1.8%
Uncodable	0.4%	0.1%



Participation and access

Those who described themselves as spiritual or having no-religion were...

- more likely than most other groups to feel uncomfortable with (officially) disclosing their religion or belief.
- less likely than most other groups to feel that their course was not sensitive to their belief position.
- less likely than most other groups to feel that their institution makes no provision for their dietary requirements.

Furthermore...

- A few staff with no-religion expressed a lack of certainty as to how they should handle religious issues that emerged during teaching and learning.
- A few people with no-religion disagreed with the accommodation that was made around diet for people with religious beliefs.
- In institutions where attempts have been made to limit alcohol some people with no-religion felt that their perspective was not being respected.

Religious observance

Those who described themselves as spiritual or having no-religion were...

- Less likely to join a belief based society (e.g. secular and humanist student societies) than most other groups.

Furthermore...

- A few non-religious students found public observances of religion challenging and unwelcome (e.g. around festivals).
- A few non-religious people raised concerns about the incorporation of religious observation in institutional business (e.g. prayers and hymns at graduation) .

Furthermore...

- A few non-religious objected to the use of religious venues for institutional events or religious symbols on institutional publications.
- A few individuals with no religion objected to the allocation of (publicly funded) space to religious groups.
- Many of these issues were particularly highlighted in faith based or faith informed HEIs.
- Where there was compulsion to attend an event with a religious element non-religious participants expressed greater concerns.

Discrimination and harassment

Those who described themselves as spiritual or having no-religion were...

- Less likely to feel discriminated against or harassed than most other groups.
- However there were still some cases (particularly in faith-based institutions) where those with no-religion described themselves as having been discriminated against.



Good relations

- Staff who described themselves as spiritual were more likely to disagree with the statement “my place of work values freedom of speech” than any other group.
- A few people with no-religion said that they felt that “inter-faith” activities excluded them.
- Some tensions exist between religious groups and members of other protected characteristics (e.g. gender, race, sexuality). Some people with no-religion highlighted these issues.



Conclusions

- Our survey suggests that there is a large and identifiable group of people who describe themselves as having no-religion in HE.
- Our survey suggests that there is a larger than expected group of people who describe themselves as having a spiritual belief in HE.
- There are a range of ways in which their belief position interacts with their experience of HE.
- There is a vocal minority of people with no-religion who expressed a wide range of concerns about their experience.

Religion and Belief, Discrimination and Equality in England and Wales (2010-2012)



About the Project

AHRC / ESRC Religion and Society Funded Project

- Religion and Belief, Discrimination and Equality in England and Wales (2010-2012)
- Project website: <http://www.derby.ac.uk/religion-and-society>
- Six Focus Group Discussions with 'Non-Religious': Derby (pilot study), Leicester, Cardiff, Blackburn, Newham, Norwich
- 50 participants in all including pilot study



Methodology

‘It has become something of a cliché to begin social-scientific studies of non-religion, secularity, atheism, and related topics by bewailing the dearth of previous research’

Bullivant & Lee, 2012

- Participants’ experiences, perceptions and understandings of: (1) ‘non-religiosity’ and (2) discrimination and equality
- Recruiting participants,
- My own positionality within the research

Interim Findings: What's in a name?

(Health Warning: Draft Findings, Not for quoting)

‘Non-religion is anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion’- Lee 2012

- What is the default position?
- How?: ‘A journey away from faith’, ‘coming out as non-Religious’, ‘never knew anything different!’
- Diversity: Atheist, Humanist, Secularist, Agnostic, Non-believers, non-religious, etc:
- Labels as problematic: ‘ [...] but I have no desire to give myself another label’
- Relationships with and opinions of Religion – Multiple opinions which did not always agree with each other

Definitions of 'Non-Religious'

(Health Warning: Draft Findings, Not for quoting)

- 'Religion is a set of rules. In every religion you have rules for prayers or the crucifix and you have to belief in God. People who don't believe in god and don't have a set of rules are non-religious.'
- ' ... if you imagine a diagram and you've got a circle in the centre and that's religious and then everything else outside of that is non-religious! Because if you define what's religious then surely non-religious is everything else'
- 'A stance that is based on scientific and logical reasoning, a moral stance and the possibility to be spiritual (without being religious)'



Interim Findings – Unfair Attitudes

(Health Warning: Draft Findings, Not for quoting)

- Looked down upon
- Perceived as lesser human beings
- ‘there is this default position that you are supposed to be religious preferably Christian in this country and if you’re not you are in some way a bad person, or a deficient person or a dodgy person in some shape or form’

Implications of such attitudes

- Occasional difficulties with ‘religious’ friends;
- assumptions about attending religious functions;
- more serious implications



Interim Findings: Unfair Treatment-1

(Health Warning: Draft Findings, Not for quoting)

Education

- Schools – Faith schools, Religious Assemblies, Home Schooling
- SACRE - Religious Education Committee membership

Employment

- Teachers
- Prejudice in the Workplace
- More Holidays / Facilities for Religious People



Interim Findings: Unfair Treatment-2

(Health Warning: Draft Findings, Not for quoting)

Broader / National / International Issues

- Monarchy as Religious / Head of Church / Bishops in the House of Lords
- Legal frameworks that make special allowances for religious groups
- Sunday working hours
- Campaigns led by Religious groups such as anti-abortion campaigns
- Euthanasia
- Media Portrayals – ‘lots of mischaracterisations, a typical one would be that you can’t be good without religion’ ; ‘Militant Atheism’



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Thank You

