Tolerance

Freedom of expression is one of our fundamental human rights. Everybody has the right to hold and express opinions; to enjoy these freedoms and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by a public authority. Against this backdrop universities should encourage tolerance and acceptance through:
- establishing clear rules of engagement,
- respect for academic freedom,
- setting boundaries and limits to develop an inclusive community based on respect,
- providing support and putting in mechanisms to address any emerging issues,
- valuing the diversification of the university community, and the range of belief systems,
- engaging in meaningful interaction to increase understanding and reduce prejudice.

Intolerance to Extremism

Organised political intolerance has seen the increased presence of far right organisations such as the BNP and the National Front. To many, such doctrines promote and incite hatred against minority ethnic, disabled and LGBT groups. Slogans such as ‘Making Britain Better’ seem positive and hopeful. However, look more closely and the messages tap into society’s fears of different cultures, reflecting intolerance of immigration or Islam and consequently of the people who belong to these groups.

Hate crime is one result of extremism and may be motivated by prejudice whether racial, religious, gender, disability, sexual orientation or other factors that may result in actual physical or verbal abuse. Understanding the underlying issues that lead to hate crime may prevent the detrimental impact they have on communities.

Challenges for Universities

- To promote tolerance, freedom of expression, respect for academic freedom and at the same time combat intolerance and extremism.
- To engage with staff and students of different faiths, to promote debate and understanding.
- To break down religious barriers and encourage dialogue and interfaith activities.
- To dispel ideas that extremism is about Islam and promote awareness of issues that may lead to extremism, including incitement of hatred.
- To generate a community where all staff and students have the right to work, study and live without intimidation or harassment.

Breaking Through

- Ensure students are both able and comfortable enough to report any discrimination by providing a supportive environment, with mechanisms for reporting issues and access to advice.
- Promote good campus relations through a wide range of diverse cultural activities and events.
- Develop and promote religious literacy on and around the Birkbeck campus.
- Increase student support, develop peer group support and links with community groups.
- Be sensitive to organising trips, events and campaigns around the university.
- Encourage people to be respectful of others, whilst being confident of their religious identity.

"The highest result of education is tolerance." - Helen Keller
Tolerance and Extremism

Multi-cultural Britain has seen increased ethnic and faith diversity reflected in society, which has impacted on the student and staff populations. The growth of an international student body has brought with it a broader range of diversity in religion and belief among the higher education community. This has seen a divergence of viewpoints from secular to religious positions in institutions, with legal changes establishing religion or belief as a protected characteristic.

Universities have been seen as a breeding ground for the radicalisation of young people in education, and there has been much intellectual debate, at times contentious, about freedom of speech, religious autonomy and invasive surveillance of students and staff.

There have been other high profile incidents with links to universities in mind. They have highlighted the challenges that campuses face in balancing freedom of speech with academic freedom whilst at the same time dealing with intolerance and extremism.

"Fanaticism is the child of false zeal and superstition, the father of intolerance and persecution."

— Samuel Fletcher

Legal Framework

The following pieces of legislation were designed to promote equality, prevent discrimination and help us to deal with the challenges of extremism.

The Education Act 1986 and Education Reform Act 1988 place a duty on universities to ensure that all academics have the freedom to question and test received wisdom. To put forward new ideas as well as those that may be controversial or unpopular.

The Human Rights Act 1998 has some key Articles that focus on freedoms and rights, these are:

- Article 9: Freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- Article 10: Freedom of expression.
- Article 11: Freedom of assembly and association.

Other relevant legislation includes:

- Terrorism Act 2006.

The Equality Act 2010 is a significant piece of equality legislation that has consolidated and updated previous legislation to promote equality and prevent discrimination based on the nine protected characteristics. This has been extended to make it illegal to discriminate on the grounds of religion or belief, covering both religion and perceived religion; including philosophical beliefs. The Act requires all public bodies to meet a general duty to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation,
- advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between people who do and do not share a protected characteristic.

Tolerance

A fair, objective, and permissive attitude toward those whose opinions, practices, race, religion, or nationality differ from one’s own.

Intolerance

An unwillingness to accept views, beliefs, practices, or behaviour that differ from one’s own.

Extremism

The holding of extreme political or religious views.