



UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
Transformation Office

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE PROTOCOL

Document type: Protocol
Policy Category: Governance and Compliance

Document number: Rt 384/21

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1. RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE PROTOCOL: WHAT IS IT?

The religious observance protocol is a guideline and framework, developed to strengthen and support institutional culture at the University of Pretoria and enhance the inclusivity of the University experience. The protocol is consistent with and supports the Anti-Discrimination Policy of the University of Pretoria and must therefore be read together with it.

2. MOTIVATION FOR THE PROTOCOL DEVELOPMENT

The University of Pretoria community, like that of most institutions in South Africa, comprises a diversity of peoples and faiths. In addition to those who identify with traditional faith groups, the University community includes those who identify as agnostic or atheist, and those who engage in forms of indigenous and non-sectarian religious or spiritual belief systems and practices.

While the University's anti-discrimination dispensation clearly prohibits discrimination on any grounds, which include religion, some staff, and students continue to perceive the University's institutional culture as Christian and hence exclusionary. This protocol has been developed to facilitate an inclusionary university experience. The protocol has as its point of departure, an affirmation of the value of the diversity of its students and staff. It sees this diversity as a resource that can be marshalled in the fostering of an inclusive university community and institutional culture.

3. PREVIOUS ACTIONS AND DECISIONS

The subject matter of this protocol was first submitted to the Transformation Committee (TC) of the Faculty of Humanities as an item for discussion in 2015. It was submitted to the TC by the Department of Sociology via the Head of the Department Sociology who observed challenges students experience when examinations coincide with religious holidays.

The Faculty of Humanities TC deliberated on this matter and regarded it to be a significant issue related to institutional culture at the University of Pretoria that has an impact on the entire university and not just the Faculty of Humanities. In light of this, the TC of the Faculty of Humanities referred the matter to the university's Institutional Transformation Committee (ITC) for further discussions. The ITC in turn, resolved that this matter should be discussed across the different faculties of the university for purposes of consensus building.

Consultations within the different faculties confirmed the importance and significance of fostering an inclusive institutional culture at UP. The ITC then authorised a task team to put together a religious observance policy document, which would be submitted to management for

consideration. The draft policy document served at Executive (insert date) and, following feedback from management, the ITC task team working on the religious observance policy determined to produce a religious observance protocol instead of a policy as the most appropriate mechanism to deal with the pressing issue of treating all forms of religious expressions within the UP community equitably. This approach was endorsed by the ITC.

4. BACKGROUND

As the University of Pretoria is a secular Public Higher Education institution, religious observance at UP is unregulated and its practices are experienced as ad hoc and biased in favour of the Christian religions in that its calendar takes cognisance of the Christian holiday calendar. This perception arises from, for example, the fact that the current academic timetables in respect of tests, examinations, and leave is structured around, inter alia, the national public holiday structure that follows a predominantly Christian tradition.

This accommodation for Christian public holidays cannot be used as an indictment of the University of Pretoria, as the holidays are set out in national legislation (National Holidays Act of 1994). However, it is important for the University to signal that it is aware of, and recognises, the religious diversity of its community and that it is ready to leverage that diversity for purposes of social cohesion. Thus, for example, more steps can be taken to make provision for diversity of faith-based belief in terms of campus catering and also in marketing and communications. Catering of events at the university often come across as lacking sensitivity to religious diversity on the part of some members of the university community. And, the university can use its existing marketing and communications infrastructure optimally for purposes of building the social cohesion of its diverse religious community.

5. PURPOSE

This protocol asks the University for the development of equitable and uniform rules in respect of tests, examinations and assessments that cannot be written as a result of religious observance and that such regulations be uniformly applied by all Faculties, Departments and staff members. It is believed that the development of such rules will go a long way towards addressing circumstances where the University's secular approach may be experienced or come across as unjust by those of its members who feel that the current dispensation excludes them.

In making a case for the development of equitable and uniform rules in respect of tests, examinations and assessments by the university management, this protocol seeks to address the following. First, it addresses the making of religious observance inclusive and thereby affording equality to students and staff of all religions and creeds.

Second, it seeks to prevent the regulation of religious observance activities from being an ad hoc affair between students, staff and heads of departments. This spirit of inclusivity is aligned with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the National Policy on Religion and Education and the related University of Pretoria's policy documents.

6. PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The protocol recommends interventions in the following three areas:

- Education;
- Catering; and
- University communications.

6.1 Education

The protocol requires of the University to develop a comprehensive, equitable and uniform system for the management of applications for condonation of absence from a test, examination or other assessment that is administered, efficiently, easily and consistently across the University.

In the case of an absence of a student or students from a lecture, the onus is on the student or students concerned to catch up the missed lecture content and to seek assistance where necessary concerning the content.

The lecturer must offer such support to these students as may be reasonable in the circumstances. Where a student or students miss an examination because of their religious observance such a student or students will have to write their examinations as part of special examinations. Students who have to miss an examination, test or lecture because of religious observance must furnish their heads of departments with letters from their religious leaders validating the existence of such religious observance.

While religious holy days may be important to some religions, this protocol recognises that they may be of less significance to the religions of the family and the clan, such as indigenous African religions. What may be more important to these religions, and what may affect some staff and possibly students, concerns the response to the call of the ancestors. The response to the call of the ancestors is significant as far as it is about the commencement of induction into a life of spiritual devotion. Should this call occur within the bounds of the academic calendar, the university must show understanding and make provision for those affected to undergo formal induction into their long-term spiritual journeys. The negotiation concerning the commencement of this formal induction into a spiritual life cannot be a subject of condonation forms but must be handled by the relevant heads of departments and deans. Affected staff and students must furnish contact details of persons who will assist them with formal induction into their spiritual journeys. While the university's leave structure is ample and would allow for staff to undertake this aspect of religious observance, affected students need to understand that this part of religious observance does not take away their financial obligations to the university. Consequently, it may be advisable, where possible, for affected students to consider a gap year from their studies.

6.2 Catering

Second, and as part of validating the diversity of religious observance, the protocol calls for the diversification of the provision of food in university campuses. Food is one of the ways of signalling the diversity of religious beliefs. However, it is equally one of the most important ways of invitation to a celebration of religious diversity. Thus, the diversification of the provision of food in university campuses can serve as a basis for the social cohesion the protocol is aimed at achieving. The provision of food via private service providers as well as food offered for catering in university events has to reflect sensitivity to the diversity of the university community. Food is a central aspect of our religious beliefs and observances and used constructively it can enhance and foster social cohesion. The Procurement Division can make a conscious effort to ensure the diversity of service providers at UP campuses.

6.3 Communication

Third, the university, through the Department of Institutional Advancement, can take practical and intentional steps to foster a culture of inclusion by sending out messages of good will on major religious holidays of those religions that have holidays as important features of their religious calendar. This work can be done in conjunction with the Transformation Office, which is tasked with operationalising the Anti-Discrimination Policy. This responsibility can be seen as part of a broader process of doing diversity work and can form part of campaigns and messaging around faith diversity, which should also recognise those who do not subscribe to any religion, especially given the secular status of the university.

7. DEFINITION OF TERMS

Religious observance

Religious observance refers to commitments or obligations, rituals or activities based on a person's officially recognised religion or creed. This can include the celebration of religious holy days, requirements concerning attire, food, prohibitions, or observance outlined by a recognised religious community. It also includes family ceremonies that are a feature of African indigenous spirituality.

Religion or creed

Religion refers to the expressions of spiritual awareness in terms of beliefs (creeds which refer to people's recognised convictions) and practices.

8. ROLE PLAYERS/STAKEHOLDERS

Institutional Advancement

Procurement Division

Time-tabling

Teaching staff

Facilities Management

Transformation Office

9. ASSOCIATED DOCUMENTS

National Policy on Religion and Education (National Education Policy Act 27 of 1996)

Anti-Discrimination Policy

UP Strategic Plan 2025

Assessment Policy

Examinations and Related Matters

Student Complaint Protocol

10. PROTOCOL LIFE CYCLE

The protocol should be reviewed at least every 3 years.

11. DOCUMENT METADATA

Document number:	<i>Rt384/21</i>
Document version:	<i>Rt384/21 is the first approved version</i>
Document approval authority:	<i>Executive</i>
Document approval date:	<i>19 October 2021</i>
Document owner:	<i>Transformation Office</i>
Document author(s):	
Next review date:	<i>19 October 2024</i>
Visibility: Display on staff intranet Display on student intranet Display on public web	 ✓ ✓ ✓