

Student Religion and Belief: Policy and Guidance

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This document is published in line with the University's objective to improve equality policy and guidance for staff and students. Further information about the University's equality objectives is published on our website at <http://www.open.ac.uk/equality-diversity>.

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1 Introduction

The Open University (OU) is open to people, places, methods and ideas. As an organisation with social justice at the heart of our mission and reflected in our core values, we are committed to developing a University community that contributes to an inclusive and just society. This commitment is expressed in the vision and principles set out in our [Equality Scheme](#) and in the [OU Student Charter](#). Our core values are set out in the University's Strategic Plan on our [Mission](#) page.

1.1 Our equality and diversity vision and principles

Our vision of a fair and just society

We are creating an inclusive University community and society where:

- people are treated with dignity and respect
- inequalities are challenged
- we anticipate and respond positively to different needs and circumstances so that everyone can achieve their potential.

Our equality and diversity principles

- i) We value diversity and we recognise that different people bring different perspectives, ideas, knowledge and cultures, and that this difference brings great strength.
- ii) We believe that discrimination or exclusion, based on the following individual characteristics and circumstances, represents a waste of talent and a denial of opportunity for self-fulfilment: age; disability; caring or dependency responsibilities; gender or gender identity; marriage and civil partnership status; political opinion; pregnancy and maternity; race, colour, caste, nationality, ethnic or national origin; religion or belief; sexual orientation; socio-economic background; trade union membership status or other distinctions.
- iii) We recognise that patterns of under representation and differences in outcomes at The Open University can be challenged through positive action programmes.
- iv) We respect the rights of individuals. This includes the right to hold different views and beliefs. We will not allow these differences to be manifested in a way that is hostile or degrading to others.
- v) We expect commitment and involvement from all our staff, students, partners and providers of goods and services in working towards the achievement of our vision.

2. Policy

2.1 Aims

This policy aims to:

- explain University policy and guidelines regarding students' religion or beliefs
- explain the support and resources available to students and how to access these.

This policy relates to supporting students whose religion or beliefs may have an impact on their studies.

2.2. Practical support

Practical support is provided:

- in the learning environment where physical attendance is required and in online tutorials and student forums
- when personal circumstances arise that are related to a student's religion or beliefs and make studying or completing assessments difficult.

The support available includes:

- providing information and advice on how to obtain support:
- discussing implications for study
- arranging practical support connected to:
 - examinations and assessments
 - residential schools including business schools, summer schools and day schools
 - face-to-face and online tutorials
 - graduation ceremonies
 - any other Open University event that students attend
 - carrying out health and safety risk assessments where necessary.

In providing practical support to students, the University aims to adopt a flexible approach that is proportionate and reasonable. The aim is to support students to progress, complete their studies and achieve their study goals, while upholding academic standards.

2.3 Diversity

The University welcomes people from all religious backgrounds and beliefs, (including non-belief, and celebrates the diversity it brings to our University community. The University does not have a particular religious affiliation, nor does it endorse any specific religion or belief or lack of belief but respects and upholds the right of people to their views.

2.4 Inclusion

We are committed to creating an inclusive University community where people are treated with dignity and respect, where inequalities are challenged appropriately and where we anticipate and respond positively to different needs and circumstances so that everyone can achieve their potential. Any form of unlawful discrimination or unfavourable treatment of people that is related to their religion or beliefs or their lack of religion or belief is unacceptable and the University will intervene in such cases.

2.5 Freedom of expression

We are committed to the values of freedom of expression and open debate in online and face-to-face environments and this applies to people with or without a religious affiliation or philosophical belief. However, any expression of belief has to take account of the rights of others to agree or disagree and must also be communicated with respect. Any attempt to bully or coerce others either to join or reject a particular religion or belief is not acceptable and will be dealt with according to the [Student Code for Dealing with Bullying and Harassment](#).

The right to the expression of religious or philosophical beliefs is not absolute and has to be within the confines of the law. The manifestation of such freedom of expression should not be expressed in a way that is hostile or degrading to others or that incites religious hatred. Freedom of expression does not take priority over peoples' rights as embodied in the Human Rights Act 1988.

2.6 Gender segregation

We have a duty to prevent unlawful sex discrimination including that arising from different views and beliefs. Segregation of men and women is accommodated where lawful, for example in providing separate changing facilities or sleeping accommodation at residential schools. Equality law permits gender segregation in premises that are being used for the purposes of an organised religion where its doctrines require it.

However, in line with the Equality and Human Rights Commission's legal guidance we do not permit compulsory or voluntary segregation in any open or public event or meeting organised in the University's name. These include academic meetings, speaking events, lectures or Open University meetings whether or not held on University premises. In line with our equality principles, we respect the rights of individuals, including the right to hold different views and beliefs, but we will not allow these differences to be manifested in ways that discriminate unlawfully.

2.7 Dress codes

We do not stipulate particular dress codes in tutorials, day schools, residential schools, degree ceremonies or any other situation except when health and safety requirements make it necessary for an adjustment to be made for safety reasons. For more detail and examples see section 3.7.

3 Guidance on religion and belief

3.1 Definitions of religion and belief

There is no universal definition of religion and belief. For the purposes of this policy, 'religion or belief' is given an interpretation consistent with the University's obligations under human rights legislation, and the Equality Act 2010 which states that the protected characteristic of religion or belief includes any religion and any religious or philosophical belief. It also includes atheism, agnosticism or other lack of any religion or belief.

In order to be protected under the Equality Act 2010, a religion or belief must be recognised as being cogent, serious, cohesive and compatible with human dignity.

A religion need not be mainstream or well known to gain protection as a religion. It must, though, be identifiable and have a clear structure and belief system. Denominations or sects within religions may be considered a religion. Cults and new religious movements may also be considered religions or beliefs.

'Religious belief' goes beyond beliefs about and adherence to a religion or its central articles of faith and may vary from person to person within the same religion. Alongside the major religions practiced in the UK, smaller religions such as Shintoism, Jainism and a range of pagan beliefs are recognised as being legally protected.

A belief that is not a religious belief may be a philosophical belief, such as humanism or atheism. Vegetarianism and pacifism have been classified as examples of protected beliefs under Article 9 of the Human Rights Act. A belief need not include faith or worship of a god or gods, but must affect how a person lives their life or perceives the world.

3.2 Legal framework

The Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 protects against discrimination, harassment and victimisation of people on the grounds of the protected characteristic of religion, religious belief or philosophical belief including those with no religion or belief.

The Public Sector Equality Duty

The Public Sector Equality Duty states that public bodies are required to show due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act
- advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it
- foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

The European Convention on Human Rights

The European Convention on Human Rights states that:

- people have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including freedom to change religion or belief, or to manifest that religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice or observance
- the freedom to manifest is subject to limitations as prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

The Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006

The Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006 amends the Public Order Act 1986 and provides a new criminal offence of inciting hatred against persons on racial or religious grounds. The offence applies to words or behaviour that are threatening and intended to incite religious hatred.

The Human Rights Act 1998

In the UK the Human Rights Act 1988 provides for the fundamental rights and freedoms contained in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). These rights include the right to respect for private and family life, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression and freedom of association.

Under the Act there is also the responsibility to respect the rights of other people and not to exercise your rights in a way that is likely to prevent others from being able to exercise theirs.

Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998

(applies in Northern Ireland)

This law prohibits discrimination and harassment on the grounds of religious belief and applies to the fields of employment, higher education and goods, facilities and services.

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

(applies in Northern Ireland)

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act provisions for religion and belief are similar to those contained in the Equality Act 2010, namely that the protected characteristic of religious belief is subject to the duty placed on public authorities (which includes the OU) to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and eliminate discrimination on the basis of religion and belief.

In addition, public authorities have a duty to have due regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between people of religious belief or no religious belief.

3.3 Student and staff responsibilities

Everyone who is part of our University community has responsibilities under our equality scheme.

As a student, you are expected to:

- treat all members of the University community with dignity and respect for their rights and beliefs
- challenge appropriately or report incidents of discrimination and bullying
- respond positively and inclusively to individual differences
- observe the principles of the OU Student Charter.

Staff members have the same responsibilities as you and, in addition, they are expected to:

- anticipate and respond positively to different needs and circumstances of members of our University community
- apply equality and diversity principles throughout everyday activities
- keep knowledge of University equality and diversity policies up to date.

3.4 Dignity and Respect

You are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect at all times. Such an environment cannot be created or sustained if students or staff are subject to any type of discrimination because of their faith, religious affiliation, philosophical beliefs or lack of belief.

The [Student Code for Dealing with Bullying and Harassment](#) applies across the OU and includes residential schools, tutorials, day schools, research supervision, degree ceremonies and online environments. Any complaint of bullying or harassment is treated seriously and thoroughly investigated. Disciplinary action can be taken in cases where bullying and harassment have been proved. Cases of alleged serious criminal offence, such as physical or sexual assault, will be reported to the police. In such cases, the University takes no action under the Code for Dealing with Bullying and Harassment, other than suspension if considered necessary, until the outcome of any criminal investigation is known.

3.5 Disclosure

To better understand the profile of our student body, and in line with the monitoring strategy set out in our [Equality Scheme](#), we request voluntary information regarding disability, ethnicity, religion or belief, marital status and sexual orientation. This is to help us assess equality of opportunity across a wide range of characteristics and circumstances. In line with the provisions of the Data Protection Act our aggregated monitoring statistics are fully anonymised and data is held securely. The University will protect your privacy by only using this voluntary information for equality monitoring purposes.

Declaring equality information is always a matter of personal choice. We hope you decide to provide this information, because you are enabling the University to understand and respond positively to the different needs and circumstances of our diverse student community. This information and data can help to point to any inequality that needs to be addressed and we can then take action through our equality objectives.

3.6 OU religious festivals calendar

The University operates a calendar of religious festivals based on the major observance dates of the six religions with the highest populations in the UK. Following research and

consultation the dates have been colour coded as red or amber according to the level of impact they are considered to have on students' or staff's ability to study or work on those days. 'Red' dates should be avoided when planning University work and learning activities. If events are scheduled on 'amber' dates, alternative arrangements may be required for some observants, for example, Jewish observance dates such as Shabbat or the Muslim observance of Ramadan. You can view the [OU's religious festivals calendar](#) on the Equality and Diversity website.

We recognise that we have students who observe other religions and beliefs and for whom different dates are equally significant. They should make their needs known so that reasonable accommodations can be considered (contact details in Appendix 1).

3.7 Dress codes

The University recognises and accepts that students may wish to dress according to their religion or belief tradition.

We do not stipulate particular dress codes in tutorials, day schools, residential schools, degree ceremonies or any other situation except when health and safety requirements make it necessary for an adjustment to be made for safety reasons. In such cases, Health and Safety requirements take priority over religious observance requirements.

Examples of adjustments to clothing for Health and Safety reasons would be when handling chemicals or machinery. In such cases open toe shoes or sandals, for example, would not be permissible, and long hair or head coverings should be tied back or secured to ensure that they cannot be caught in machinery, open flames or contaminated with chemicals.

The wearing of slogans and/or symbols on clothes that are deemed hostile or degrading to others on the grounds of race, sex, religion or other protected characteristic is not acceptable and may be considered as a disciplinary offence.

3.8 Proof of identity

There may be occasions such as at examinations, when a student wearing a full or partial face/head covering will be required to remove such items of clothing in order to verify their identity against the photo ID they are required to bring. This will be done in a courteous and appropriate manner in private and by a person of the same sex. For example if you are a Muslim woman wearing a hijab with a veil covering your face your identity will be checked by a female invigilator giving as much privacy as possible and whenever possible in a private room after the examination. Information about this and other examination procedures is provided in advance in the examination related information sent to students.

If you are a research student based at a regional or national office or at the Walton Hall campus and you normally wear religious dress that partially or fully covers your face you will be issued with a dual Open University Photographic Identity Card. Your main card will show a photograph of you wearing your religious dress and your subsidiary card will show you with the face covering removed. The photos will be taken by a female member of staff in a private room. Any requests to remove religious dress that covers the face in order to check identification will be carried out by a female member of staff and in a manner which gives as much privacy as possible to the individual without compromising anyone's safety.

4 Practical support during your studies

We want you to have the best possible learning experience at The Open University and we are determined to create an inclusive environment, free from discrimination or barriers based on your religion or belief. This section explains the additional support we can make available for you, and Appendix 1 gives details on who to contact to arrange it.

4.1 Prayer/Quiet Room

Residential Schools and ceremonies

At Residential Schools, depending on the venue, there will either be a dedicated room for prayer and contemplation provided by the host university or, if the residential school is in a hotel the student may use their own room for this purpose.

At ceremonies, a quiet room can be made available on request. Please contact the Centre for Qualifications and Ceremonies (CQC) at least 6 weeks in advance of your ceremony.

Examinations

If during an examination it is essential that you leave the room for the purpose of prayer you may do so under supervision for a short period after the first 30 minutes of the examination but you must contact your Student Support Team at the earliest opportunity and at least six weeks in advance so that suitable arrangements can be made.

4.2 Catering for religious dietary requirements

Residential schools

A vegetarian option is offered as standard at all venues. The Residential Schools and Auxiliary Aids and Services Team can make arrangements for most special diets or they may need to discuss an alternative with you. Please contact the Auxiliary Aids and Services Team to discuss this at least six weeks before the start of your school. In some instances we may ask you to supply us with a diet sheet or a list of foods you cannot eat.

Walton Hall and East Campus

The catering outlets at Walton Hall and on East Campus provide a choice of food that includes vegetarian options as standard. The Catering team is happy to discuss individual dietary needs with students and will endeavour to accommodate their requirements wherever possible. This can include advance ordering of food for dietary or religious requirements, although the cost of items may be higher.

4.3 Availability of single sex accommodation at residential schools

Residential schools will endeavour to provide suitable single sex facilities on request depending on the venue. For example, a room on a single sex floor within a mixed sex block.

4.4 Alternative to attending a residential school

If you are unable to attend a residential school for reasons related to your religion or belief, if your module has an Alternative Learning Experience (ALE), it may be possible to achieve the residential school outcomes via this method. Information about ALEs is available to students from the Help Centre on StudentHome under 'Residential schools'. Contact your Student Support Team for details of the ALE and how it is presented.

4.5 Workplace learning

Arrangements for students in workplace learning environments will differ according to the respective employer/placement provider policies that apply. Students are responsible for investigating the policies of the relevant employer placement provider prior to commencement of employment/placement for their religious arrangements.

4.6 Examination location

Some examination venues may be in rooms within religious buildings. If you wish to change to another established examination venue because of this, you may do so provided there is capacity at that location. You must request this before the published deadlines for reallocation. Please contact your Student Support Team for further information. Please note that you will have to meet any additional travel costs incurred as a result of this change yourself.

5 Scheduling of examinations and learning activities

5.1 Examinations

Wherever possible, we avoid scheduling key learning activities and examinations on dates categorised as 'red' on the OU's religious festivals calendar, as described in section 3.6 above.

If a clash does occur, or you observe a different date that does not appear on the calendar and you are unable to attend an examination because of that clash, it is your responsibility to contact your Student Support Team as soon as possible following the date of notification of such examination. This must be at least **eight** weeks before the examination date to discuss the possibility of alternative arrangements.

For example, if the scheduled time or date of an examination creates difficulties for your observance of a religious festival, you may, with supporting evidence from a religious leader on headed paper, be permitted to sit your examination at an alternative session on the same day or be eligible for postponement to the next examination opportunity. This is called discretionary postponement.

If an examination postponement will have a significant detrimental effect on your academic progress, or if the postponed date also clashes with a religious festival, a case may be made to the Exceptional Examination Arrangements and Special Circumstances Sub-Committee to sit the examination on a different date.

You can tell us about your individual circumstances or request a discretionary postponement by contacting your Student Support Team for further information and advice.

Please note that fasting is not considered to be an exceptional circumstance.

5.2 Assessments

End-of-module assessment (EMA) deadline

University policy does not allow extensions to the submission date of the EMA. If difficulties arise with the preparation or submission of your EMA, you can inform the University of these difficulties by using the [special circumstances](#) procedure.

Tutor-marked assignment (TMA) deadline

Contact your tutor as soon as possible should your assessment submission deadline conflict with a recognised religious observance that makes the deadline difficult to meet. Your tutor may be able to offer you a short extension to a TMA deadline. If you are unable to contact your tutor, contact your Student Support Team for further assistance.

5.3 Time out or withdrawal from a study module or qualification

If you need to take time out of study to practise a religious observance you should discuss relevant timescales with your Student Support Team as early as possible so that they can provide the most appropriate information, advice and guidance for you.

The length of time taken out of study can vary and will depend on your needs and circumstances as well as other demands on you, such as work commitments.

5.4 Tutorials

Tutorials are an optional but valuable part of many of our modules. If there is a clash between a tutorial and a religious festival date that you observe please contact your tutor or your Student Support Team as soon as possible to discuss alternative arrangements that can be put in place for you. This might include individual study support sessions or a choice of tutorial dates.

Where alternative tutorial support is provided, for example by phone or online, you may prefer these to attending a face-to-face tutorial. To help you choose the support most appropriate for you, discuss your needs and the available options with your tutor or Student Support Team.

5.5 Residential School dates

Each Residential School offers a choice of dates as well as an Alternative Learning Experience (ALE), which should mean that most students can avoid attending on a particular religious observance date.

5.6 Degree Ceremonies

Ceremonies in the UK

Wherever possible, we avoid scheduling degree ceremonies on dates categorised as 'red' on the [OU's religious festivals calendar](#). However, if there is a clash of dates with a festival that you observe, all students who qualify are entitled to attend any one of the many ceremonies taking place in different locations every year. You are also entitled to attend a ceremony in a year other than the year you qualify.

Information about facilities available at ceremony locations is published on the [Ceremonies website](#).

If you or any of your guests have any particular requirements related to your religion or belief you should indicate these when booking to attend a ceremony. You will be contacted a few weeks before the date of the ceremony by a member of the Ceremonies Team to obtain further details about your requirements and confirm the arrangements that can be provided to support you.

6 Useful references

The following documents are available from the '[Essential Documents](#)' website.

- Equality – The Open University's Equality Scheme
- Assessment Handbooks
- Deferrals and Withdrawals Policy
- Assessment Banking Rules
- Cancellation Procedure
- Student Code for Dealing with Bullying and Harassment
- Data Protection Policy

The [Examination Arrangements Booklet](#) is available from the Help Centre on StudentHome.

The [Student Charter](#) has its own website.

Links to a range of resources relating to religion and belief can be found on the religion and belief pages of the [OU Equality and Diversity website](#).

Appendix 1: How to tell us about your requirements

Activity	How/where to find information about additional support	How to tell us about your requirements	What happens next?
Examinations and assessment	<p>The Assessment Handbook outlines OU policies relating to different aspects of assessment and is available from the 'Essential documents' website.</p> <p>The Examination Arrangements Booklet provides essential information on all aspects of the examination for each module within an examination period.</p> <p>Information about non-standard exam arrangements for disabled students gives some information that may be useful particularly the Exams at Home and Other exam locations pages.</p> <p>If you believe that there are circumstances that have seriously affected your performance in an assessed element of your module, you can request that the Examination and Assessment Board is told about it via the 'Special Circumstances-assignments or Special Circumstances- exams or EMAs online process.</p>	<p>If you think you will need additional arrangements, contact your Student Support Team, via the 'Your contacts' panel in the Help Centre on StudentHome, as soon as possible and at least eight weeks before the examination date.</p> <p>To submit special circumstances visit the Special Circumstances website. The form must be received before midnight on the day following the exam or EMA submission cut-off date.</p>	<p>Your Student Support Team will tell you whether you will be eligible for non-standard arrangements.</p> <p>The information you supply is given to the Examination and Assessment Board for them to take into account when working out your final grade.</p>

Activity	How/where to find information about additional support	How to tell us about your requirements	What happens next?
Examinations and assessment	<p>If for reasons beyond your control you are unable to attend your examination or submit your end-of-module assessment it may be possible for you to obtain a discretionary postponement to the next examination opportunity or submission date. Further information including how to apply is available from the StudentHome Help Centre on What if I can't attend my exam or submit my EMA?</p> <p>Live events and study provides information about support available to help you keep studying even if you have a personal or study challenge. Also see Exam and assignment support.</p>	<p>If you think you will need additional arrangements, contact your Student Support Team, via the 'Your contacts' panel in the Help Centre on StudentHome, as soon as possible and at least eight weeks before the examination date.</p>	<p>Your Student Support Team will tell you whether you will be eligible for non-standard arrangements.</p>

Activity	How/where to find information about additional support	How to tell us about your requirements	What happens next?
Residential schools (includes day schools, business schools and summer schools)	<p>The booklet 'Meeting your additional requirements at residential school' includes information about support offered to students related to pregnancy and maternity.</p> <p>You are asked to tell us about your requirements at least six weeks before your school starts.</p>	<p>Contact the Residential Schools and Auxiliary Aids and Services Team to tell us about your additional requirements and to discuss the support we can offer. SS-RS-Team@open.ac.uk</p> <p>Phone: 01908 653235 from within the UK or</p> <p>+44 1908 6532235 from outside the UK</p> <p>Contact your Student Support Team via the 'Your contacts' panel in the Help Centre on StudentHome to discuss details of the Alternative Learning Experience and how it is presented.</p>	The Residential Schools and Auxiliary Aids and Services Team will endeavour to meet your requirements. Please tell them if your circumstances change.
Tutorials	Contact your tutor, or Student Support Team	Contact your tutor, or Student Support Team via the 'Your contacts' panel in the Help Centre on StudentHome.	<p>Arrangements will be confirmed by your tutor, or Student Support Team.</p> <p>If your circumstances change please contact your tutor or Student Support Team.</p>

Activity	How/where to find information about additional support	How to tell us about your requirements	What happens next?
Ceremonies in the UK	For information about facilities at ceremony venues, visit the Ceremonies website and from the home page click on the venue location.	Indicate whether anyone in your party has any 'special requirements' when booking a ceremony online. Alternatively, contact the Centre for Qualifications and Ceremonies .	A few weeks before the ceremony the Ceremonies Team will contact you (providing you indicated the need for 'special requirements' when booking), to obtain further details. They will also confirm the arrangements that can be provided to support your needs.
Ceremonies overseas	Information about facilities available at ceremony locations outside of the UK, and arranged by international OU educational partners, is provided by the OU educational partner in your country.	If you or any of your guests have any additional requirements you should indicate you have 'additional requirements' when booking the ceremony with your local educational partner.	Arrangements will be confirmed by your local educational partner.
Any other OU-related event	Contact OU event organiser (for example the Secretary of the relevant OU committee).	Contact the OU event organiser.	To be discussed with the event organiser.
Dietary requests	If you have religious dietary requirements and wish to discuss this with the catering team, please contact ISS catering on 01908 652054 or email Est-Catering@open.ac.uk		

Appendix 2: The Open University contact details

Centre for Qualifications and Ceremonies

Phone: +44 (0) 1908 653003

Website: <http://css2.open.ac.uk/students/ceremonies/>

Examinations Office

The Open University

PO Box 720

Milton Keynes

MK7 6ZQ

Phone: +44 (0) 1908 858312

Fax: +44 (0) 1908 858337

Email: examinations@open.ac.uk

Residential Schools and Auxiliary Aids and Services Team

The Open University

Hammerwood Gate

Kents Hill

Milton Keynes

MK7 6BY

Phone: +44 (0) 1908 653235

Email: SS-RS-Team@open.ac.uk

Website: www.open.ac.uk/residential-schools

Student Support Teams (for OU students)

You can see your Student Support Team contact details via the 'Your contacts' panel in the Help Centre on StudentHome and on your module and qualification website.

In addition, the Help Centre contains postal address information for Student Support Teams.

www2.open.ac.uk/students/help/ou-offices

The Equality, Diversity Team

University Secretary's Office

The Open University

Walton Hall

Milton Keynes

MK7 6AA

Phone: +44 (0) 1908 652867/652566

Email: strategy-equality@open.ac.uk

Website: www.open.ac.uk/equality-diversity