IDEALS
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Building student relationships across religion and worldview difference

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1. Executive Summary

Survey research with over 8,000 students in 2021 and 2022, together with case study research at four very different universities, investigated students' views about, and experiences of, worldview diversity on university campuses. It revealed what universities are doing to facilitate relationship-building and makes recommendations to improve universities' work in this area. The research found:

Overall

Students want to meet people with different worldviews at university and build relationships with them. Their hopes are partly fulfilled. University provides opportunities for formal, curricular and informal engagement. The majority of students engage informally; a minority do so formally or via their studies. These experiences are affected by the type of university students attend and their own pre-existing religion or worldview. Over one year, students make small gains in positive attitudes to those of different worldviews. Their gains are greatest when they participate in formal interfaith activities, when they see the university as religiously and non-religiously diverse and welcoming of religious and non-religious diversity, when universities provide safe spaces for students to express their worldviews, and when students have provocative encounters that challenge their views. Gains are also greater for students living at university (rather than in their family home). Experiences of coercion (feeling pressured to change their views or keep quiet about them) and receiving insensitive comments about their worldview obstruct those gains. Some students experience these negative aspects of university life more than others, including students at traditional elite universities and Jewish students. This report offers 12 recommendations for how universities can enhance their efforts to prepare students to engage with others in a diverse world.

In more detail:

1. A large proportion of students studying at UK universities expect those universities to provide opportunities for interfaith engagement.

2. Once at university, only a small proportion of students take part in formal interfaith events, while much higher proportions engage in interfaith relations informally, via personal conversations with their peers and friends. (23% of students have discussed religious diversity in at least one of their academic modules; 62% of students have socialised with someone of a different religious or non-religious perspective since being at university).

3. The majority of students are satisfied with the level of religion and worldview diversity at their university; Buddhist, Jewish and Sikh students are the least satisfied. Just over half of all students agree that their universities accommodate their needs in relation to religious observances, such as holidays or rituals.

4. Traditional elite institutions are the type of university where there is the most formal interfaith engagement. However, these are also the institutions with the highest levels of division, conflict, insensitivity, hostility and discrimination along religion or worldview lines.

5. Cathedrals Group students are less likely to view their universities as religiously diverse and/or welcoming places for students from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds. However, those same students are also much less likely to report divisions and conflicts on campus, mistreatment, and personal experience of divisive, discriminatory or hostile interactions.

6. A small minority of students (10% or less) report feeling pressured on campus to silence, modify or police their expression of their own religious or non-religious worldview. Conversely, a clear majority (around three quarters) view their university as a safe space in which to express their worldview.

7. A small minority of students report encountering insensitive comments about their worldview from others on campus. Christian and Hindu students are the group most likely to report encountering this frequently among their friends or peers; Jewish students are the group most likely to report hearing frequent insensitive comments from staff. Jewish students are also the group most likely to report feeling mistreated on campus and the group most likely to feel silenced from sharing their experiences of prejudice and discrimination.

8. A significant minority of students report having 'provocative encounters' – in which students receive critical comments from others that make them question their *own* worldview, as well as encounters that provoke students to rethink their assumptions about *others'* worldviews – on a frequent basis. These are most common at traditional elite universities and among Jewish students. The fact that these universities and students also report relatively high levels of coercion, hostility and insensitivity on campus highlights the fine line that needs to be walked between provocative encounters that are positive learning experiences, and negative encounters accompanied by coercion, discrimination or insensitivity.

9. Longitudinal data show students make small but significant gains in interfaith learning and development during one year at university. Students' attitudes to people of *all* religious and worldview groups become more positive. Having a campus that is perceived as diverse and welcoming makes a difference to the capacity of universities to build attitudes of acceptance, understanding and respect among students towards those who are different from themselves.

10. Interfaith learning and development is positively influenced by students perceiving their campus to be religiously diverse, having space for faith-oriented support and spiritual expression, and with individuals having provocative encounters (i.e. having their views challenged) on campus. By contrast, experiences of coercion (i.e. feeling pressure to silence, modify or police the expression of one's worldview) and insensitivity towards matters of worldview diversity on campus are negatively associated with interfaith learning and development (in other words, these seem to discourage it).

2. Introduction

This report presents findings from the project **Building positive relationships among university students across religion and worldview diversity**. The project is called IDEALS UK for short because it adapted to the UK the ground-breaking US study Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS).[1] The project asked how we create a positive university climate for student engagement across religion and worldview diversity. It addressed four questions:

1. How do students' attitudes and behaviours in relation to religion and worldview diversity change during university?

2. What impact does attending universities of a different ethos or institutional identity have on students' attitudes toward religion and worldview diversity?

3. How do different aspects of university life affect impact interfaith learning and development?

4. What are the implications for the future of interfaith work in universities and other educational settings?

Why is this research important?

The ability to relate to people of different beliefs and backgrounds, at university and afterwards at work and in wider society, is essential for the c.2.8 million students studying in UK higher education.[2] Being able to relate to others and resolve conflicts enables social cohesion and social progress at individual, group and institutional levels.

Ensuring equality of provision for, and stopping discrimination or harassment of, students who have particular beliefs is a legal and moral obligation for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Yet the provision and quality of faith support, the opportunity to relate to those of different beliefs and how positive interfaith relations are fostered varies massively across the sector. Research can show us how to maximise opportunities for students to build relationships across worldview differences.

Despite their egalitarian reputation, universities are often sites of prejudice, with students facing discrimination based on socio-economic background, ethnicity, disability and religion. Although most students with a particular religion or belief have a positive university experience, a significant minority do not. Equality Challenge Unit found 6% of students felt discriminated against or harassed because of their religion or beliefs; this figure was higher for Jewish students (27%), Sikhs (17%) and Muslims (14%).[3]

One-fifth of 925 Jewish students surveyed by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research said they had been subjected to antisemitism that academic year, and a further third had witnessed an anti-Semitic incident on campus.[4] The Community Security Trust recently reported a 22% increase in on-campus antisemitic incidents compared to two years previously; most were online and spiked when the Israel-Palestine conflict escalated. Universities can also be slow to deal with complaints.[5] In 2017, the National Union of Students (NUS) surveyed 578 Muslim students in further education (FE) and higher education (HE): a third had experienced abuse or crime at their institution, with one in five subjected to verbal abuse. While most students do not experience religion or belief-related harassment, fear of harassment affects the broader student population. According to a 2012 NUS survey of 9,229 FE and HE students, fear of abuse led one fifth of students to alter their behaviour or appearance, with proportions highest amongst Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims.[6] Policies intended to level inequalities or protect students from harm or radicalisation can have unintended consequences: the negative impact of the Prevent Duty on young Muslims, who perceive themselves as unfairly targeted and monitored, as well as stigmatised as a 'suspect community' during their time at university, is a case in point.[7] Addressing patterns of inclusion and exclusion is not just a matter of mapping and tackling prejudice, but ensuring policy initiatives have a positive impact.

Conflict related to freedom of speech and religious expression is a live issue. Research found students tend to spend most time with those of the same worldview, and this can hinder opportunities to tackle conflict.[8] Public debates are one of the few contexts in which conflicts can be addressed, but their combative format can damage relations between groups and reinforce stereotypes.[9] Conversely, in some universities, public debate is closed down by student societies determined to 'no platform' speakers they deem offensive, reinforcing a perception that freedom of expression is under threat.[10] For many observers, universities struggle to accommodate diverse viewpoints and do not equip students to disagree openly, respectfully and constructively. If positive relations across religion and worldview difference are to be built and maintained, then we need to take a closer look at the campus climate at UK universities. This project takes up this challenge.

Results from this project speak directly to the 'freedom of speech' versus 'safe spaces' question. In HE and society generally, debate is polarised between those advocating freedom of speech, which allows all speakers to argue their case no matter how controversial or offensive, and those advocating safe spaces, which supports and

protects students' identities from any speech that might denigrate those identities. Our findings make the case for a combination of both: safe spaces where students are supported and what we call 'provocative encounters,' where students' beliefs and identities are challenged in ways that enable learning and development.

Switching the lens away from the negative aspects of university life for religious students, this report focuses on promoting good relationships on campus. Which institutional practices and resources help students thrive in a diverse environment? What kinds of university experience, such as housing, the classroom, study, leisure and social participation, make a difference for students? Our findings offer a resource to shape the on-campus work of a range of organisations and individuals, including students and Students' Unions, university staff and managers, and religious and interfaith organisations on and beyond campus (e.g. chaplains or religious student organisations).

Research Methods

Working with youth research agency YouthSight, two surveys were conducted, of 4,401 students in Autumn 2021 and 4,618 one year later. Each survey represents a snapshot of university life at that time, and we draw on these surveys in Sections 3 and 4 to illuminate the current realities of campus life. Section 5 considers the 1,000 students who took both surveys, allowing us to track their responses over the course of a year, measure their *change* in attitudes and identify the aspects of their university experiences that have most influence on this change. The surveys adapted questions developed by the US IDEALS team, and respondents included UK university undergraduates and postgraduates; full-time and part-time students; and home and international students (see Appendix 1 for demographic details). Of the 142 UK universities we identified at the start of the project, students from 133 of these are represented in our data.

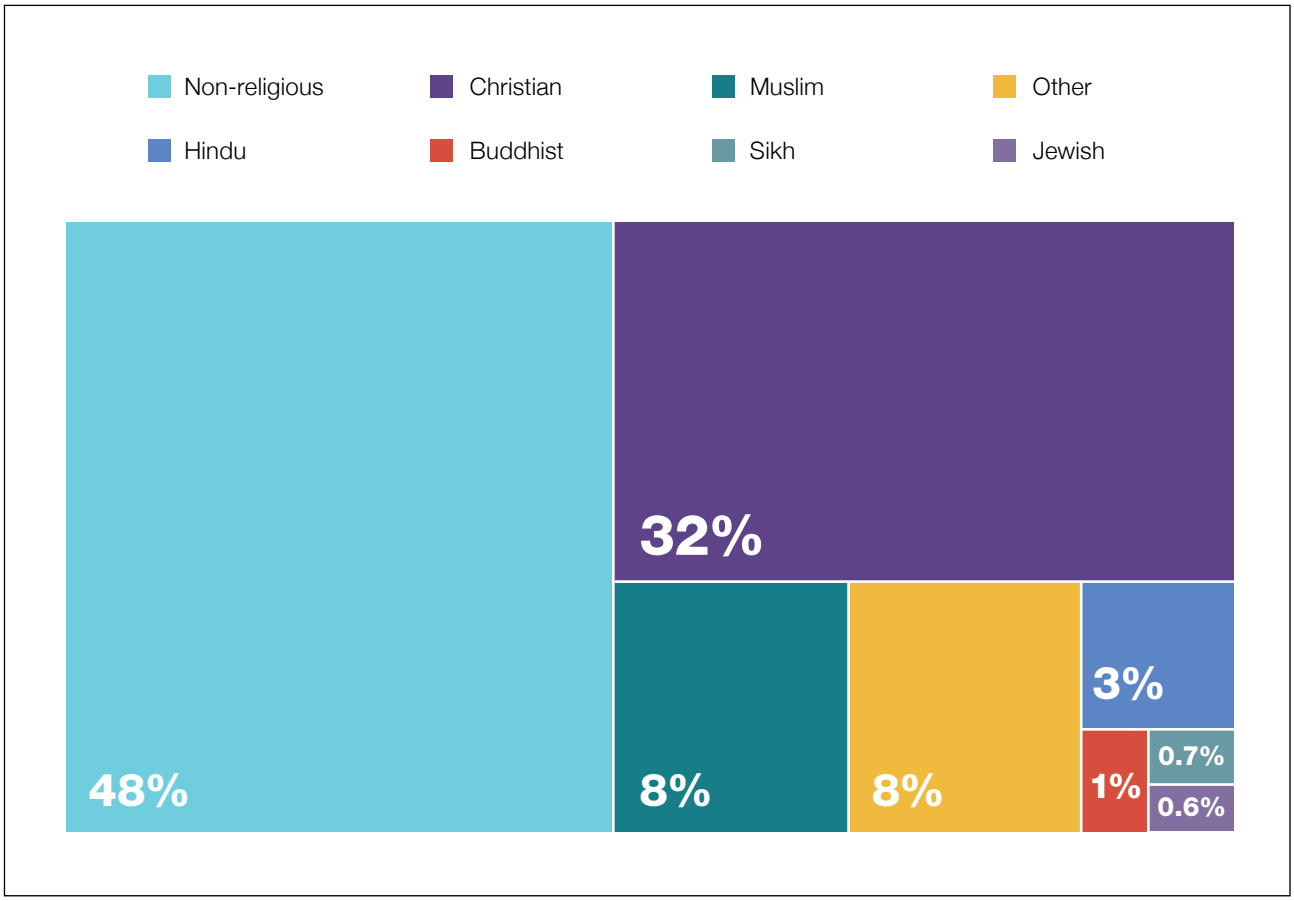


Chart 1: *Breakdown of 2022 survey respondents by religious and non-religious worldview*

Taking our second survey as the most recent representation of student makeup across religious and non-religious perspectives, just under half of respondents are non-religious (48%). These include students who self-identified as atheist, humanist, non-religious, and none. Just under a third (32%) are Christian, including those who are Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Mormon/ Latter Day Saints. Smaller proportions are Muslim (8%), Hindu (3%), Buddhist (1%), Sikh (0.7%) and Jewish (0.6%). 8% of students identified as 'other', which encompasses agnostic students, plus a range of other perspectives including Jain, Shintoism, Spiritualism, Wiccan and Satanist among others. We recognise a wider variety and more complex picture of religious and non-religious perspectives among students than the latest Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures, which state that just 4% of students are spiritual (2%) or 'another religion or belief' (2%).

One challenge we faced was the varied terminology used for religious, spiritual or philosophical views. By adopting the terminology 'religion and worldview diversity' we recognise that barriers in communication and understanding can arise from differences of perspective not captured by conventional categories of religion. Considering 'worldview' as broader than religion helps us understand the range and complexity of prejudice and misunderstanding related to faith-based identities, including misunderstandings that can occur within and between non-religious and religious perspectives. We offered this definition of 'worldview' to our participants:

> *The term 'worldview' describes a guiding philosophy or outlook on life, which may be based on a particular religious tradition, spiritual orientation, non-religious perspective, or some combination of these. For example, you might be a socialist, a vegan, a Muslim, a feminist or an atheist. Worldviews are perspectives that guide the way we live our life and affect our decisions, the relationships we build, etc. You can think of your worldview as the lens that makes up how you view the world.*

The main focus of this report is relations between students of different religious worldviews, although we include some references to other worldviews, for example political or social justice-oriented. Subsequent publications will address findings not reported on in this report.

Given the diversity of the HE sector, in the survey we compared universities of three types: Christian-ethos (subdivided into institutions with a Roman Catholic foundation and those with an Anglican/ecumenical foundation), traditional elite universities with a history and institutional context shaped by Christian tradition, and secular universities without an official or historical connection to religion. Secular universities make up the majority of the HE sector, including red brick, 1960s campus and new or 'post 1992' institutions.

Four case studies were conducted, one each in a secular university, a traditional elite university, a Catholic university and an Anglican university. The Catholic and Anglican universities are part of the 'Cathedrals Group' of 15 church-foundation universities. At each institution, we conducted student focus groups, student and staff interviews, and observed relevant events, such as religious student societies, chaplaincy gatherings and open days (see Appendix 2).

The **traditional elite university** is an ancient university located in a medium sized city. It was described as 'Christian' by many of the interviewees because its Christian heritage shapes many aspects of university life: chapels are venues for events and meetings, chaplains have a higher profile welfare role than in many universities, and prayers are used at formal dinners. The Christian heritage is off-putting to some students from minority religious backgrounds. Hindu student Adnan called it: ''a very, very strongly Christian institution… rooted in Christianity… I think that does make students of different religious backgrounds feel a bit like, I mean, less important." But Christian chapels and chaplains are also vehicles for integration and support for students of all worldviews and the student and staff body is increasingly non-religious and religiously diverse. The university supports religious diversity via the Students' Union and its many worldview-based student societies. These enable students to meet and make friends with likeminded students and are especially important for students with non-Christian worldviews.

The **secular university**, located in a large city, was described as 'secular' by several interviewees, and this ethos shapes students' experiences of religion and worldview and their interfaith learning and development. The university's approach mixes neutrality towards religion and friendliness to all religions and worldviews. The university seems to follow the approach of the Equality Act 2010, which sees religion or belief as a 'protected characteristic', and Sarah the chaplaincy

manager explained that the chaplaincy 'come[s] under EDI[11]' in terms of management. This has enabled religion to be prioritised and understood alongside other equality issues. The university's work on these issues is well established and this was the only university where we did not hear concerns that black and minority ethnic (BAME) students were not treated equally. The university recently set up a religion working group, although during the period of study this group did not appear very active. The university provides good Muslim, Christian and multi-faith prayer and chaplaincy spaces, staffed by a team of chaplains, most of them volunteers.

The **Anglican university**, located in a small city, has a prominent chapel and close links with the local Cathedral, where graduation takes place. Its Christian ethos is well known among staff, who speak positively about it. As SU Manager Georgina said, 'the university is quite clear on what their religious values are, but they're very accepting of other faiths'. Students recognise and appreciate this ethos of openness to spirituality and religion. Non-religious student Jack called the university 'very open…I don't think there's any pressure to believe anything'. Some staff said the university was proud of its connection to the Cathedral, but reticent about talking about Christianity specifically. Not all students are aware of the university's Christian ethos. Academic staff do not have to be Christian to work there, and some are non-religious and cautious about the privileging of Christianity. The university has a strong pastoral ethos, and a holistic vision for civic engagement and environmental responsibility. The university considers EDI important and has made most progress in championing LGBTQI and disabled students.

The **Roman Catholic university** (henceforth referred to as Catholic) combines a Catholic ethos with an inclusive approach, supporting and valuing the contributions of all. Its strong sense of community is aided by this ethos, the university's small size, and its architecture, with a wide and open atrium where students can sit, study or talk to each other. The demographics of the large surrounding city help: it attracts a very ethnically and religiously diverse student body, so students often encounter a culturally diverse range of people. It has a large chapel and chaplaincy rooms include a recently developed multifaith room with washing facilities, used by Muslim students for prayer. Its chaplains support a range of religious festivals, including some from outside their religious tradition; this public messaging helps students of all worldviews feel that they belong, and educates the student body about religious diversity. Muslim students are a sizeable minority, although some think the university could do more to fully include BAME students. Smaller religious groups feel included. Jewish student Jamie described the university as 'really openly diverse', its Catholic foundation denoting inclusivity. Minor tensions over lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) issues and contraception reflect the university's attempts to balance Catholic identity with inclusivity.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students completed the first survey during Autumn 2021, when COVID restrictions had recently ended but face coverings were recommended, and the second in Autumn 2022 when there were no restrictions. When asked in Autumn 2021, 'Which of the following statements best describes how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected your living arrangements?', 37% selected 'it hasn't at all', 42% chose 'it's been moderately disruptive or caused occasional inconvenience' and 21% 'It's been very disruptive and caused signfificant inconvenience'. Case study research began in December 2021, when masks briefly became compulsory again, and was completed in March 2023, when restrictions had been over for some time. This shaped the conduct of the research as it was important to adhere to each university's health and safety rules, meaning that interviews were often conducted wearing face coverings or online. It also shaped the findings. The Autumn 2021 survey asked, 'Since you have been at university, how has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced opportunities to build relationships with people from different backgrounds?' This was an open question, so students' responses varied widely, from reporting little or no impact to quite a lot. Impacts were mostly negative, but some were positive or simply indifferent. For example:

It has limited such interaction to planned, online meetings. While I have maintained prior relationships as best as possible using social media platforms, there has been little occasion for spontaneous meetings. Also, most meetings have consisted of brief exchanges, as opposed to the conversation that might be possible over a cup of coffee or tea. This has improved since restrictions have eased.

It has limited interaction, specifically meeting new groups of people. However, whilst at home it gave me the chance to get to know my neighbours better, those from various cultures and backgrounds. COVID opened up a lot of opportunities as well as shut the door on others.

The only problem I can think of is that I met less people, because some people were really scared of COVID-19 and did not attend social events.

The students we interviewed, especially at the first universities we visited (secular and traditional elite), were in a transition period. Additionally, some students we interviewed had been at university during 2020 when universities experienced two lockdowns, closing and re-opening, and had significant amounts of teaching delivered online. In 2020, many students returned home, and others were confined to 'households' in student accommodation or shared houses. This period affected those students who were studying at that time. However, other students, for example first years beginning courses in Autumn 2022, experienced little or no disruption.

3. Students' hopes for interfaith engagement at university are partly fulfilled; most students prefer informal engagement

University offers a multitude of extra-curricular activities beyond the classroom, including volunteering schemes, student societies, opportunities to serve on university committees or in leadership roles, and the informal social activities students pursue on their own time. The extent to which students expect, and engage in, these opportunities depends on the time available to individuals, their interests and values, and the range of activities actually offered at a particular university. Defining 'interfaith' as 'the coming together of people or perspectives rooted in different religious, spiritual, or non-religious beliefs', we asked students to identify what opportunities for interfaith engagement they expect of their university, and what interfaith activities they have engaged in since starting their studies.

Students expect opportunities for interfaith engagement

A sizeable proportion of students expect universities to provide opportunities for interfaith engagement. In our first survey in 2021, we asked 4,401 students about their expectations of university. Two thirds (66%) said it was important (or very important) for universities to be a welcoming environment for people holding a diverse range of perspectives. Almost a half (49%) said the same about opportunities to get to know students of other religious and non-religious perspectives and 42% said the same about opportunities to participate in volunteer work with students of diverse religious and non-religious perspectives. At the other end of the scale, fewer than three in ten students (29%) said the same about chaplaincy services.

% of students saying the following are 'important' or 'very important'

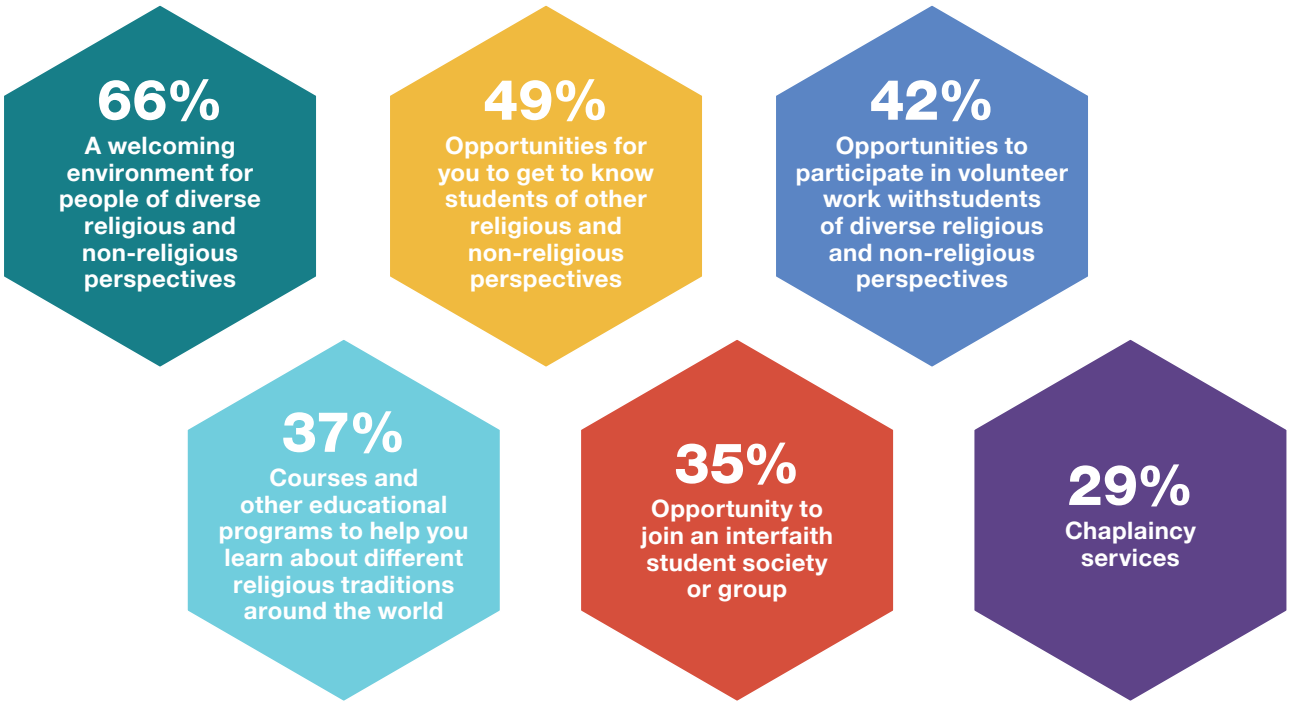


Chart 2: *Proportion of students stating that different opportunities for engagement are 'important' or 'very important'*

Students' expectations are shaped by their pre-existing perspective on religion.

The proportion of students for whom a welcoming environment for people of diverse religious and non-religious perspectives is 'important' or 'very important':

88%	76%	67%	66%	65%	65%	63%	59%
Jewish	Other	Sikh	Hindu	Christian	Non-religious	Buddhist	Muslim

While most students believe universities ought to be welcoming environments for people from a range of religious and non-religious perspectives, this notion is met with varying levels of enthusiasm among students of different faith groups. Most Jewish students (88%) support welcome as important, but only 67% of Sikh students expressed the same. These two religious minorities make up a similar proportion of the student population, so it is interesting that the importance they attach to a universal on-campus welcome differs so markedly. It may relate to the extent to which there is organised student support for these respective faith groups, and how this translates into expectations for faith-based support.

Students do much more interfaith activity on an informal, rather than formal, basis

Students' expectations for interfaith engagement are not fully achieved, as the proportions who actually engage in interfaith activities are lower than the proportions who say it is important. Perhaps the opportunities presented for engagement do not fully meet students' needs. In our second survey in 2022, we asked 4,618 students about their experiences of university.

We distinguish between three forms of interfaith engagement: formal, informal and curricular. As Chart 3 shows, informal or curricular opportunities for interfaith engagement are taken up in much higher numbers than those we class as 'formal'. Student interest in worldview diversity extends well beyond the organised opportunities intended to cater to this experience. The range of activities draws in most students at one time or another; just over a quarter of students had not been involved in any of the activities listed.

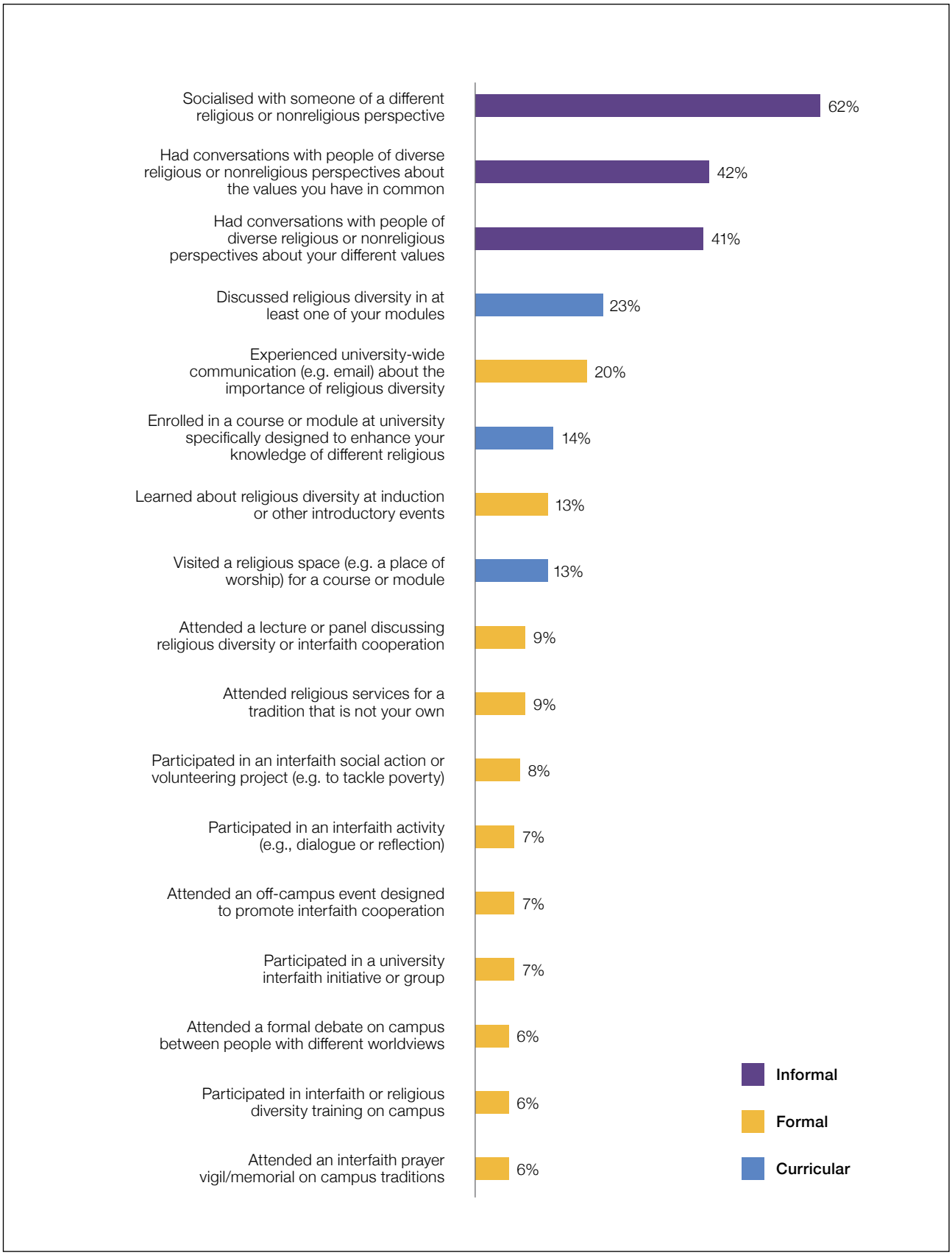


Chart 3: *Proportion of students who have participated in interfaith activities during university*

Formal religious and interfaith activities form a relatively small part of the extra-curricular dimension to university life. About 9% of our students say they attended a religious service of a tradition other than their own and 6% attended a formal debate on campus between people of different worldviews. 9% had attended a lecture or panel discussing religious diversity or interfaith cooperation. 7% had participated in an interfaith initiative or group.

Students of different religious traditions have varying levels of interest in interfaith engagement, and varying interests in different kinds of interfaith activity. Christians are the religious group most likely to enrol on a formal course or module to enhance their knowledge of different religions. By contrast, no Jewish respondents to our survey said they had pursued this opportunity. On the other hand, many formal interfaith activities command much more involvement from Jewish students than any other group (over 40% said they had taken part in interfaith activities, compared to 11% of Christians, 10% of Muslims and 15% of Hindus). A similar pattern is reflected in attending formal debates between individuals representing different worldviews: Jewish students do this much more than their peers. Students who said they had no religion are generally less engaged with formal interfaith activities than students identifying with a religion.

Provision of formal activities also varies by university type. Students from traditional elite universities are more likely than those at secular or Cathedrals Group universities to report engaging in all but two types of formal interfaith activity, and by quite a significant amount. For example, 11% of students from traditional elites have attended a formal debate on campus between people with different worldviews, compared to 6% of students from secular and 3% of students from Cathedrals Group universities. Similarly, 13% of students from traditional elites have participated in interfaith or religious diversity training on campus, compared to 5% of students from secular, and 3% of students from Cathedrals Group universities. This suggests that traditional elite universities have greater capacity to provide these types of opportunities, perhaps because they tend to be more resource rich than other types of institution. It also mirrors their historical association with Christian churches, and in universities like Oxford, Cambridge and Durham, the centrality of chaplains and chapel life in the past has endowed universities with a set of resources often applied to multi-faith initiatives in the present day.

CASE STUDY SNAPSHOT

Formal interfaith engagement

The traditional elite university was the university with the most organised interfaith work. It hosts interfaith panels and lectures, attended mainly by academics; these are intellectual affairs and not necessarily student-friendly. Chaplains run interfaith events more oriented towards students, and we observed a Roman Catholic chaplaincy panel discussion. As hosting such events is a new thing, they are a work-in-progress, and more could be done to include students beyond the Abrahamic faiths and ensure the spaces and times used are suitable for attendees (e.g. not clashing with Muslim prayer times).

The SU had a programme of activities for Interfaith Week. An SU-hosted and well facilitated discussion about faith in everyday life attracted a small, ethnically diverse group of students whose beliefs are rarely represented in the more typical Christian-Jewish-Muslim interfaith settings. Some religious societies have more interaction with certain faiths than others: for example, the Hindu society welcomes Sikhs and Jains (although mostly Hindus attend). Some religious societies have designed and run interfaith activities, including football, visits to the local mosque and synagogue, and dinners. Students we spoke to praised a Jewish Society (JSOC) interfaith Friday night dinner and an Islamic Society (ISOC) interfaith iftar.

One obstacle to student-focused interfaith work was identified by Christian chaplain Helen. She said interfaith work was generally initiated by one religious group rather than developed collectively or by several. 'If it comes from one faith and it's kind of inviting people… It doesn't quite have that kind of ring of authenticity about it'. She was working towards this goal:

> My absolute dream is that we might have a space where somebody from the Christian Union and a devout Muslim and a secular vegan might come together and talk about food, or alcohol … or things like that where…having a… a multiple set of voices talking about it and listening to one another will be incredibly helpful… That's my end game.

The proportion of students engaging in informal interaction across religious and cultural differences is much higher and reflects the culturally diverse constituencies on many university campuses. Of course, co-existence is not the same as active engagement; it is possible for very different religious communities to live alongside one another but without ever interacting in any meaningful way. But our evidence suggests that levels of intentional engagement with those of a different worldview are relatively high, almost two thirds saying they have socialised with someone of a different religious or non-religious perspective since being at university, and over 40% reporting having had conversations with those 'others' about values they have in common and values they do not share. Religious perspective makes a difference here. Although the majority of students of most religions engage in some informal interfaith engagement, the proportions are highest among Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim students. Sikh students appear less engaged, with almost 40% saying they did not engage in any conversations about common or differing values, nor socialise with those of a different worldview. Levels of engagement among Jewish students were especially high, with 89% saying they had socialised with others of a different worldview at university. This may seem unsurprising, given the very small size of the Jewish student population, and yet Sikh students comprise a similar proportion of the total, and the figure for their inter-worldview social engagement is much lower, at 47%. In a recurring pattern, students from traditional elite universities were most likely to report engaging in informal interfaith activity.

Finally, some engagement with religion occurs in academic study. According to the latest HESA figures, in 2021-22 there were 9,185 individuals studying on degree programmes within the field of Theology and Religious Studies, just 0.3% of the total student population. According to our survey, many more are considering religious matters within academic contexts. Almost a quarter (23%) said they had discussed religious diversity in at least one of their modules. 14% had enrolled in a course or module specifically designed to enhance knowledge of different religious traditions. 13% had visited a religious space (e.g. a place of worship) as part of a course or module. This suggests university lecturers are engaging seriously with religion as an object of study beyond the boundaries of the theology and religious studies discipline, and that a much wider range of students are engaging with religion as part of their studies. Levels for all of these measures were higher in traditional elite universities than in secular or Cathedrals Group institutions, reflecting how theology is long established and well-resourced to a much larger degree in the older universities of the UK. The fact that 13% of students had learned about religious diversity as part of their university induction or other introductory events suggests this broader visibility may in part be connected with the foregrounding of EDI.

CASE STUDY SNAPSHOT

Curricular interfaith engagement

Different aspects of academic study affect students' interactions across worldview differences. Course content is important: exploring a variety of worldview perspectives on topics is beneficial. Teaching methods are also important. Maximising discussion between students fosters interaction across difference.

At the traditional elite, Catholic and Anglican universities there was no sense amongst students that discussion of one's own worldview was out of bounds – except if it was seen as an intolerant or overly conservative perspective. As traditional elite student Imogen remarked, 'We are intolerant of people we perceive as being intolerant'. Examples of students feeling uncomfortable with speakers expressing conservative beliefs about gender illustrates a common tension within today's universities, between protecting freedom of speech and protecting vulnerable students from speech that might harm them.

At the secular university students seemed more fearful about talking about their worldview. This reflects the survey finding that this was the university type were students were least likely to have discussed religious diversity in at least one of their modules. Students fear expressing their views in class if they think they are different from the majority, or if they think they will be asked to defend a view they do not feel confident about. Here's Christian sociology student Fiona:

> I wouldn't feel comfortable expressing my religious worldviews in a seminar. I do think it's largely a secular university and I mean Christians... have a bad reputation with secular, left leaning spaces… If I expressed them in a seminar, for example, it would either get shot down… or it would just start a debate that I don't want to be part of.

San, the only hijab-wearing Muslim in her class, felt 'quite hesitant to speak' during discussions about terrorism. She said: 'The media has a lot of impact on it and, you know, there's always because there's so many cases of like racist attacks against Muslims and like ethnic minorities. So I feel like there's that fear that it could happen to you.'

Academics at the Cathedrals Group universities seemed more open to talking about their own identities and beliefs. They thought doing so encouraged students to share theirs. David, a lecturer at the Catholic university, said that teaching 'is about giving [students] the skills, but also…I'm trying to model for them questioning my own beliefs, or my own view of who I am. And help them through that to make it a safe space for them to challenge me so that we can get into that dialogue.' Students seemed more comfortable to talk in settings where open discussion of one's own beliefs was encouraged. John, an atheist studying religious studies at the Anglican university, enjoyed having his views challenged: 'lecturers...will question why I feel the way I feel and why I believe what I believe, but…in a very respectful way…. And then offer a theological counterargument to it. I find it very refreshing and very stimulating'.

Cathedrals Group academics were willing to take risks in exploring difficult topics, for example the Israel-Palestine conflict. This may explain the survey finding that the classroom was the main site for provocative encounters in Cathedrals Group universities. Conversations about worldview continue after class. Zain, a Muslim male student at the Catholic university, said that these conversations 'flood out' of the classroom:

> We'll be sitting there and eating lunch and discussing different topics and different views. Sometimes they can be comfortable or uncomfortable, but as long as they're civil and respectful...that's the important part.

4. Students experience their university differently depending on the character of the institution and their own worldview

In our second survey, we asked 4,618 students how they perceive and experience their university; specifically, how they encounter its 'campus climate' (or atmosphere) with respect to worldview diversity. Students' responses were shaped by their own religious or non-religious worldviews, as well as the type of university they attend.

Perceived religious diversity

Two thirds (67%) of students 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that their university is very religiously diverse, and that they are satisfied with the degree of religious and non-religious diversity at their university. This does, though, vary by religious group.

The proportion of students who said they 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with the statement, 'I am satisfied with the degree of religious and non-religious diversity at this university':

76%	74%	71%	70%	62%	52%	49%	48%
Muslim	Christian	Hindu	Other	Non-religious	Buddhist	Sikh	Jewish

There are clearly important differences between students of different religious traditions, with Buddhist, Jewish and Sikh students markedly less satisfied when it comes to their university's worldview diversity than Christian, Hindu and Muslim students. This may reflect different experiences of minority status, and it is significant that the religious groups with the lowest levels of satisfaction are also the smallest religious minorities. Whatever one's expectations of university as a context of religious diversity, it clearly matters whether one encounters other students from one's own tradition on campus.

Similarly, **two thirds of students 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that their university has religious organisations representing a diverse range of faith traditions (66.9%).** Students varied little in their responses to this statement across religious and non-religious perspective, however students from traditional elite universities were most likely to 'agree' or 'strongly agree' (72%), followed by students from secular (66%) and Cathedrals Group (61%) universities.

CASE STUDY SNAPSHOT

Student societies

Student societies were one arena for interaction in all universities, but inward-looking societies could inhibit interaction with others from different groups. The Anglican university provides examples of both. As Christian (Protestant) student Will said:

> What I've also found with societies which is I think one of the most dangerous things that we're dealing with nowadays in society, is that... you can get trapped very easily [in]... your own bubble.

The SU try to create cross-society interaction by opening their building up to different societies to run activities, such as quizzes, for the whole student body; the SU sabbaticals highlighted the LGTBQI society as an excellent example of this. A minority of students engaged with SU activities, however, partly because many students lived some distance from the university or were mature students with families, and some students were sceptical of whether the SU cross-society activities did much to build relationships across groups, pointing out that certain societies would never collaborate with certain other ones. Will gave an example: 'I've ever really seen for example, the, I don't know, K-Pop society being like oh yes, so today the Conservative Party… we're going to join up with the Conservative Party'. Students pinpointed international-focused events as a good way to bring people of different worldviews together, for example an international food fair where students brought food representing their country and discussed their cultural and religious identities.

Eight in ten students (82%) told us that their university is a welcoming place for 'people of different religious and non-religious perspectives', however proportions vary when we consider each group in turn. Recognising that these proportions may simply mirror demographics on campus, we consider the proportion of students who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that their university is a welcoming place for people from *their own* religious or non-religious group. The differences illustrated in Chart 4 are striking. Students are less likely to agree that their university is a welcoming place for students from their own worldview than the general student perception. This suggests that although **the image of a religiously inclusive campus is successfully communicated among students in general, students are less convinced by their own experience as a member of a particular religious group.**

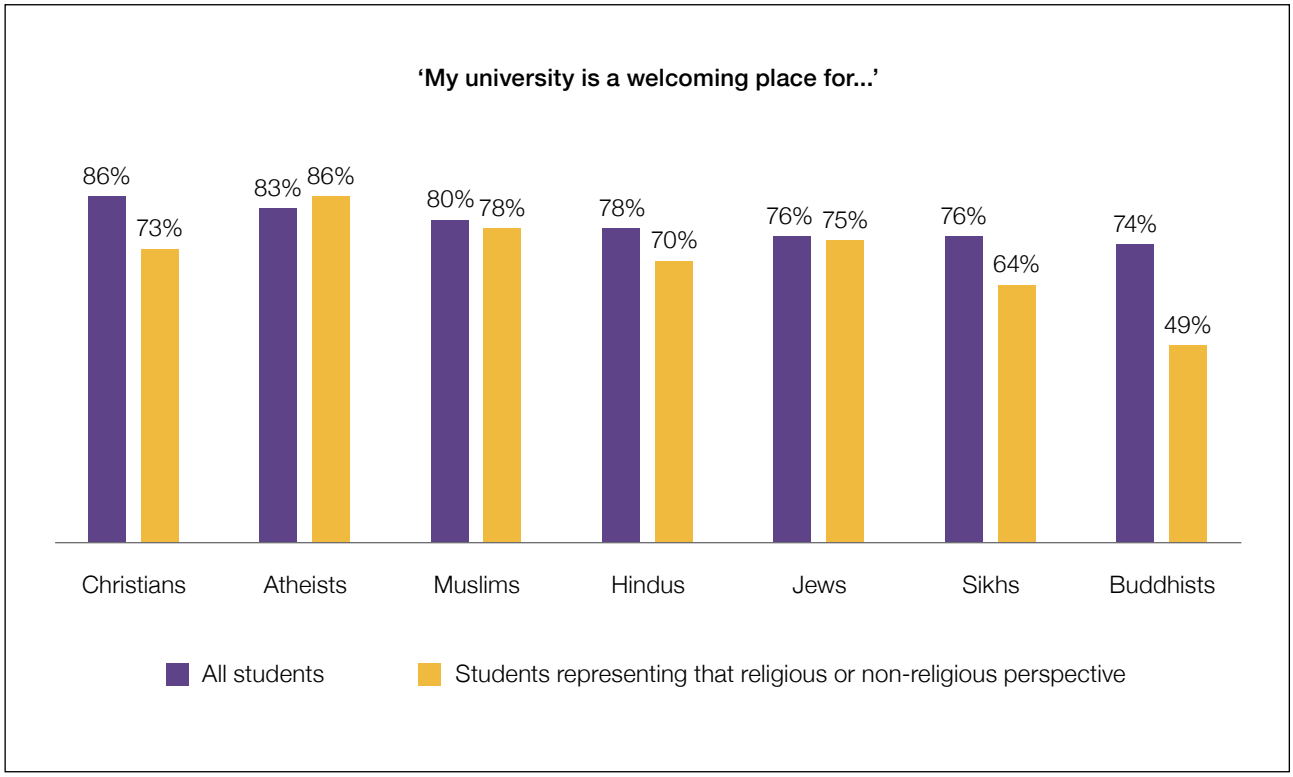


Chart 4: *Proportion of students who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that their university is a welcoming place for students across religious and non-religious perspectives.*

Students from Cathedrals Group universities are least likely to report that their university is a welcoming place for students across religious and non-religious perspectives, compared to students from secular and traditional elite universities, with two exceptions. When it comes to Sikh and Muslim students, traditional elite universities have the lowest proportion of students reporting that their campuses are welcoming places. 72% of traditional elite students report that their university is a welcoming place for Muslim students, compared to 77% at Cathedrals Group universities, and 82% at secular universities. This reflects research that has identified Muslims as a religious minority especially vulnerable to hostility on campus.[12]

Divisions, conflicts and hostility

The type of university students attend makes a difference to perceptions of diversity and division on campus. Students from Cathedrals Group universities are least likely to view their universities as religiously diverse and/or welcoming places for students from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds. However, those same students are also much less likely than students at other types of university to report divisions and conflicts on campus, mistreatment, and personal experience of divisive, discriminatory or hostile interactions.

Across all universities, some conflict among those of different worldviews occurs and students often interact with those who have similar views. A significant minority of students told us that at their university there is a great deal of conflict among people of different religious and non-religious perspectives (17%), that people of different religious and non-religious perspectives quarrel with one another (20%) and that religious and non-religious differences create a sense of division (25%). **Half of students (50%) reported that people at their university interact most often with others of the same worldview.**

CASE STUDY SNAPSHOT

Student segregation

In all the universities, we heard about students segregating themselves into groups with similar others. As student Chris at the Catholic university summarised, 'From what I've seen walking around the campus, sometimes you do get people of certain demographics just hanging out with each other but then you also get people of different religious backgrounds or ethnicities hanging out together.' This mixture of segregation and relationships across difference looked different in different places. For example, at the Anglican university there appear to be issues with integration between groups of students, with some international students who came to university to work hard for a qualification finding it hard to integrate with party-loving students, or black students feeling white students were unfriendly towards them, and Christian societies appeared to be racially segregated, one being frequented mostly by Black students and the other mostly by white students. Yet the Anglican university was the institution where the most positive remarks were made about the integration of and support for LGBTQI and disabled students.

Students from traditional elite universities are much more likely to report division and conflict than students from secular and Cathedrals Group universities. As detailed in Chart 5, this is the case for perceived conflict and division between those of different worldviews, and for a perception of a silo tendency, i.e. for students to spend their times with others of the same religion or non-religious perspective. All patterns appear most likely within traditional elite universities by some margin.

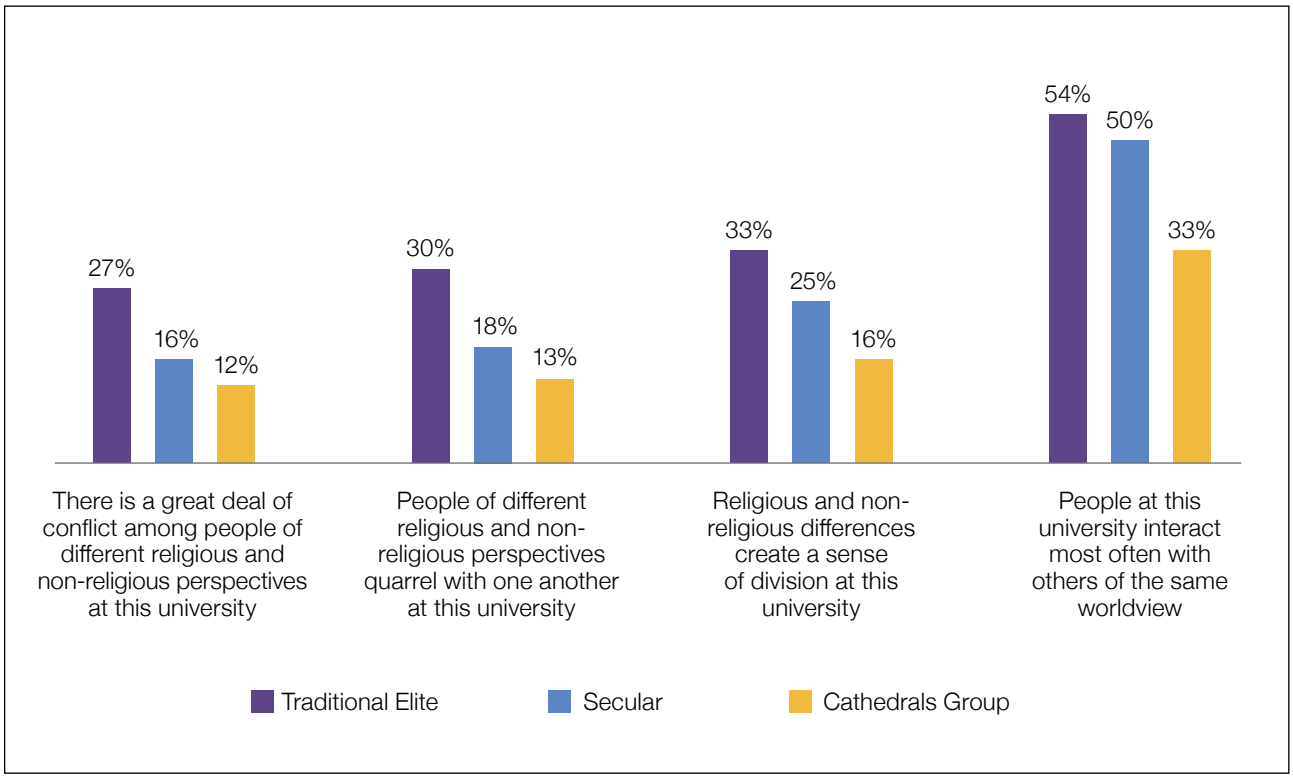


***Chart 5:** Proportion of students who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that there is divisiveness at their university, across university type*

Across all universities, a small but important minority of students report hearing or reading insensitive comments about their worldview from others on campus. Asked if they encounter this hostility from friends or peers, 13% said they did so 'frequently' or 'all the time'. The figure was not dissimilar for academic staff (10%) and for campus staff or administrators (10%), suggesting this hostility is coming from several directions.

Christian and Hindu students are most likely to report reading or hearing insensitive comments from their friends or peers 'frequently' or 'all the time' (23% and 26%, respectively). In contrast, fewer than 5% of students with a Jewish and Sikh background report this (4% and 3%).

The picture is very different when it comes to insensitivity from staff, however. In this case, Jewish students are by far the most likely to report reading or hearing insensitive comments (41%). This figure stands in stark contrast to non-religious students, 4% of whom report the same.

Comparable patterns can be seen in relation to students feeling that they have been mistreated on campus because of their worldview or religion and feeling silenced from sharing their experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Despite only a small minority of students reporting this 'frequently' or 'all the time' (6% and 8%, respectively), stark contrasts can be seen across religious and non-religious perspectives:

Our data suggest there are clusters of students from particular religious perspectives who are especially likely to report feeling mistreated because of their worldview. While the overall figures are relatively low, Jewish, Christian and Sikh students score highest, with Jewish students markedly higher than the other groups. Indeed, the same three groups also score highest for feeling pressured not to report experiences of discrimination.

It is important to note that discrimination can take many forms; religious identity can be a target of discrimination – as with anti-Semitism or Islamophobia – but it can also be used to justify discrimination or prejudice. Chart 6 shows the proportions of students who have ever experienced this kind of discrimination, breaking this into specific forms of discrimination, i.e. discrimination by gender identity, by sexual orientation, or by race or ethnicity. As we can see below, these forms of discrimination can be inspired by religious but also by non-religious perspectives. The higher levels of gender or sexuality-oriented discrimination emerging from religious perspectives is perhaps not surprising, especially given well-documented moral conservatism among some religious groups. Importantly, racial/ethnicity-oriented prejudice is more commonly reported as emerging from *non-religious* perspectives.

The proportion of students who report feeling mistreated on campus because of their worldview or religion 'frequently' or 'all the time':

41%	11%	6%	6%	5%	5%	3%	1%
Jewish	Christian	Sikh	Hindu	Muslim	Buddhist	Non-religious	Other

The proportion of students who report feeling silenced from sharing their experiences of prejudice and discrimination 'frequently' or 'all the time':

15%	13%	9%	9%	7%	7%	6%	4%
Jewish	Christian	Sikh	Muslim	Buddhist	Hindu	Other	Non-religious

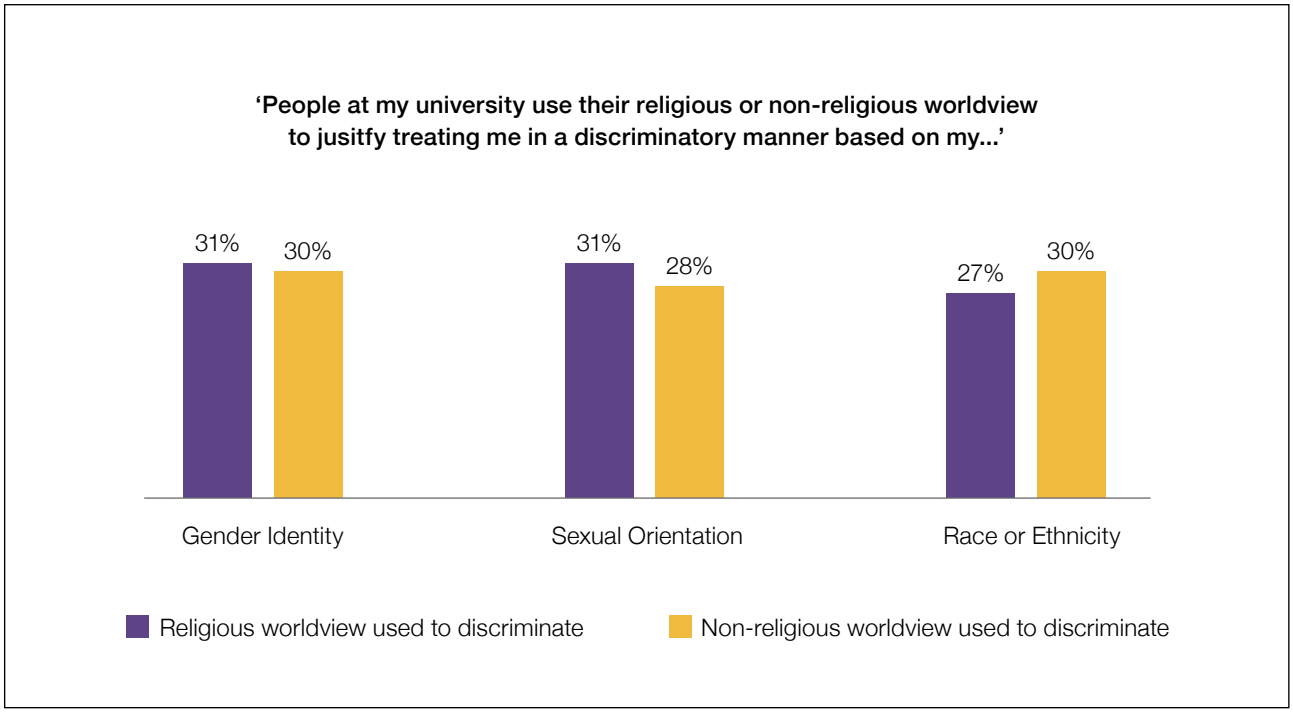


***Chart 6:** Proportion of students who feel that people at university use their religious or non-religious worldview to justify treating them in a discriminatory manner on the basis of different identity characteristics*

We also measured experiences of 'coercion on campus'. If freedom of speech is under threat on university campuses, as some have argued, then we would expect students to feel persistent pressures to withhold, silence or suppress their point of view. Our data suggests this is the experience of a small minority. Around one in ten students reported feeling pressured 'frequently' or 'all the time' on campus to:

a) Change their worldview (7%)
b) Listen to others' perspectives when they didn't want to hear about them (10%)
c) Keep their worldview to themselves (10%)
d) Separate their academic experience from their personal worldview (11%)

Broken down by religious perspective, Christian students appear most likely to feel pressured to change their worldview (14%). Jewish students are most likely to report feeling pressured to listen to others' perspectives when they didn't want to hear about them (31%), keep their worldview to themselves (67%) and separate their academic experience from their personal worldview (63%). In contrast, non-religious and Sikh students are the least likely to report experiencing this kind of coercion.

The data on Jewish students resonates with recent reports of anti-Semitism on UK university campuses. The high proportions of Jewish students reporting negative experiences arising because of their worldview suggests universities have more work to do in ensuring campuses are hospitable places for them. Our data do not reveal the extent to which these responses are informed by experiences of explicit anti-Semitic discrimination, or by behaviour grounded in ignorance rather than intentional and directed hostility. The sensitivities surrounding related geo-political contexts, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, have been highly visible on university campuses in recent years, with impassioned campaigning on either side featuring on some of the most politically fractious campuses in the UK.[13] Because these very public tensions are often concentrated in a small cluster of university campuses – many in religiously diverse London – and Jewish students are disproportionately concentrated in particular universities, the sensitivities surrounding anti-Semitism are much more keenly appreciated on some campuses than others. Finding a way to facilitate a greater awareness of these issues and how they impact the relatively small Jewish student population is a pressing challenge facing universities.

As with reports of division on campus, as Chart 7 shows, it is **students from traditional elite universities who are most likely to have experienced discriminatory, hostile or insensitive interactions during university**. Their reported experiences stand in contrast to those by students from Cathedrals Group universities, who report the fewest instances of negative inter-worldview engagement on campus.

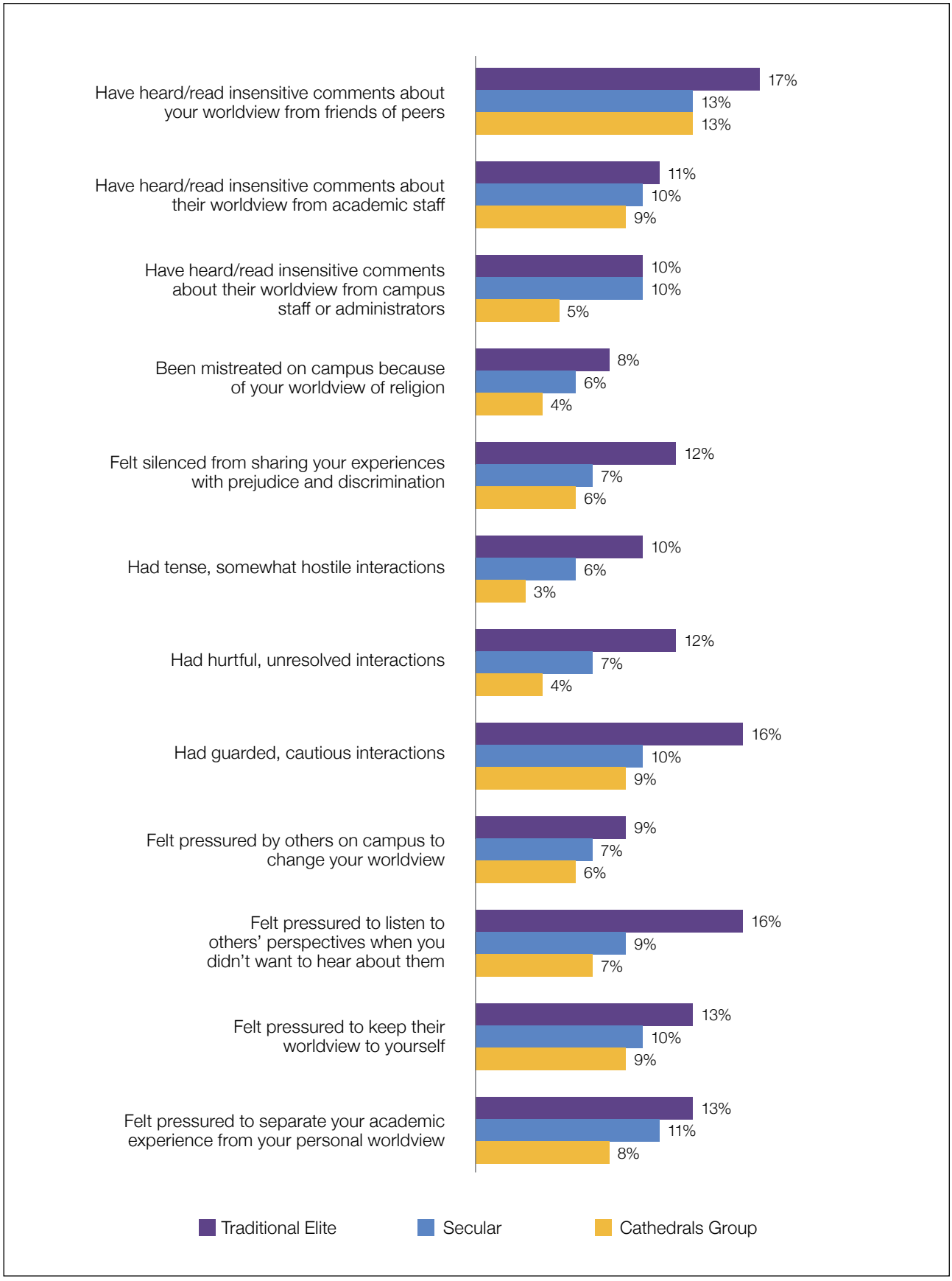


Chart 7: *Proportion of students who reported experiencing discriminatory, hostile or insensitive interactions 'frequently' or 'all the time' across university type*

Safe spaces and provocative encounters

Around seven in ten of our students 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that their university in general (74%), and their classes in particular (69%), are safe places to express their worldview. Similar numbers reported that their university provides a specific place in which they can express their personal worldview (71%).

Students attending secular universities are slightly less likely to agree, however. 74% of students from secular universities 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that their university is a safe place for them to express their worldview, compared to 75% of students from traditional elite universities and 81% from Cathedrals Group universities.

Students are less positive about their universities accommodating their needs when it comes to holidays, festivals or important events related to their religious or non-religious worldview. **Just half of students (53%) 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that lecturers and staff at their universities accommodate their needs related to religious observances.** Once again, students from secular universities were the least likely to agree (52%) compared to those from Cathedrals Group (56%) and traditional elite (58%) universities.

Students' responses also varied across worldview group.

The fact that Sikhs and Buddhists are least likely to feel their needs are recognised and catered for probably reflects their smaller size as a community and more limited visibility on university campuses. Conversely, high levels of accommodation reported by Christian students reflects the longer history of Christian provision within UK universities, especially via chaplaincy.

We also wanted to know how often, if at all, students are having 'provocative encounters' with each other. By this we mean encounters in which students receive critical comments from others that make them question their *own* worldview, and encounters that provoke students to rethink their assumptions about *others'* worldviews, including those with whom they disagree.

Only a minority of students, between one and two in ten, report having such encounters on a frequent basis.

The proportion of students who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with the statement, 'Lecturers and staff at my university accommodate my needs with regard to celebrating holidays and other important observances to my religious or non-religious worldview':

63%	62%	59%	58%	50%	46%	45%	36%
Christian	Muslim	Jewish	Hindu	Other	Non-religious	Sikh	Buddhist

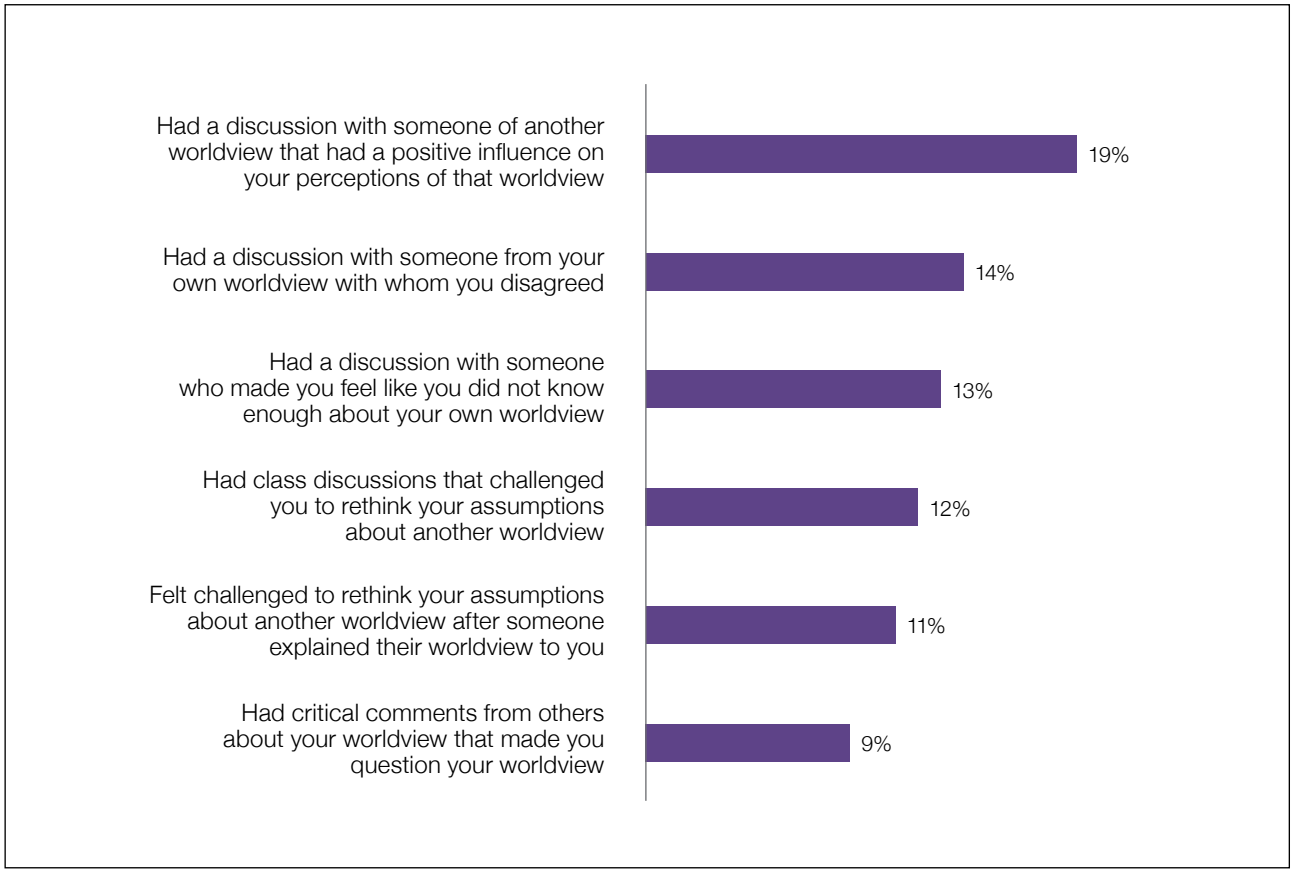


Chart 8: *Proportion of students who reported experiencing provocative encounters 'frequently' or 'all the time'*

As outlined in Chart 8, we asked students who completed our survey about the kinds of discussion they had experienced whilst at university, especially discussions that had had an impact on their thinking. Only 28% of students reported that they have never had such a discussion during university, and just over half (54%) told us they had these discussions 'rarely' or 'occasionally'. The greatest proportion of students who reported having these discussions 'frequently' or 'all the time' attended traditional elite universities (23%) followed by secular (18%) and Cathedrals Group (17%) universities. Students from traditional elite universities were most likely to report engaging in all forms of provocative encounters. Students from Cathedral Groups were least likely to report engaging in all forms of provocative encounter except for having class discussions that challenge students to rethink their assumptions about another worldview; in this case students from secular universities are least likely to report this (11% compared to 15% of Cathedrals Group university students and 16% of traditional elite university students).

The proportion of students who report having discussions 'frequently' or 'all the time' with someone of another worldview that had a positive influence of their perceptions of that worldview:

25%	24%	19%	19%	18%	17%	16%	16%
Jewish	Christian	Other	Hindu	Buddhist	Muslim	Non-religious	Sikh

Percentages are highest among Jewish and Christian students, as well as those attending traditional elite universities, in other words those who reported the highest levels of coercion on campus, as well as various experiences of hostility and insensitivity. Together this indicates the fine line between provocative interactions on campus that can positively influence students' perceptions of a different worldview, and negative inter-worldview interactions that might have less helpful consequences. The use of provocation as a means of learning – however understood – clearly needs careful management, as its consequences are not predictable.

CASE STUDY SNAPSHOT

Safe spaces and provocative encounters

Some students seemed more inclined to build relationships across differences, whether as an extension of a pre-existing comfort with diversity, or as an attempt to embrace new opportunities university had brought them. Other students felt they needed the support of people with similar views and backgrounds; these included students from religious and worldview minority groups and students who were Christian. Often, students did both: they had a 'safe space' of friendship with people of similar worldviews or backgrounds, and a space where they stepped beyond their comfort zones to relate to people different from them.

Muslim student Elif at the secular university had become the Islamic Society's (ISOC) external relations committee member because he wanted to break out of the ISOC 'bubble':

> In your course, you've got people from everywhere and when there is a course gathering, you go to those gatherings and it's like every single corner of the planet is in that gathering. But you know when you've left your course, so 90% of your life, then that 90% of your life you spend with your faith group and you stick with them really, which I'm not too fond of.

He was an ambassador, an interfaith pioneer, reaching out to other religious societies for dialogue and collaboration.

The ISOC were pleased that several CU members decided to come to one of their events and pose questions to the speaker; they interpreted this as an opportunity for dialogue, not an intrusion. Muslim student San said:

> It was really interesting because, at the end, it was a Q and A and it was like a really respectful debate but you could tell like, they were passionate, and, on their side, and we were passionate on our side. So the speaker was like, you know, he kept it quite peaceful and it was just nice to see a debate that wasn't like shouting at each other and throwing insults, it was just like a respectful environment, where each individual was just, you know, talking about their beliefs and their views.

The next day, several Muslim students went to the CU's events week and spent hours debating with them, in turn. These sorts of encounters are good examples of the provocative encounters our survey found are helpful for students. When they happen in spaces where students feel safe with others of their worldview, this is a winning combination.

At the Catholic university, Zainab started the university's Asian society to ensure Asian students felt 'comfort' and 'that sense of home'. The society designed an event for the Holi festival to bring people out of these groups, and observed that since COVID, people were mixing beyond their 'comfort zones' more. She expressed a hope that 'by having events on in university helps...other ethnicities come out and speak to each other because... it just makes the community better.'

5. Students make small but significant gains in interfaith learning and development during one year at university

A key aim of IDEALS UK was to discover how students' attitudes and behaviours *change* during university. We were not simply interested in mapping religion and worldview diversity among students, but in tracing how student perspectives change while they are in the midst of their university experience. Of the 8,019 students who completed our two surveys, 1,000 of these participated in both 2021 and 2022, allowing us to track their interfaith learning and development during one year at university. This section reports on the experiences of these 1,000 students.

Our research understands 'interfaith learning and development' as a measure of attitude and behaviour, comprising multiple sub-measures.

We first measured students' overall pluralism orientation, which we define as **positive engagement with religion and worldview diversity**, using a combination of different scales. The scales represented students' a) perceptions of themselves as global citizens, b) feelings of goodwill towards others of different worldviews, c) appreciation of interreligious commonalities and differences, and d) commitment to interfaith leadership and service.

Across both survey years, just under four in ten students (38% in 2021 and 39% in 2022) were considered 'high scorers' for overall pluralism orientation. Almost all others were 'medium' scorers (61% in both years). Although gains were small, we witnessed significant changes in the ways in which students responded to statements about how they interact with, and ground their own faith and worldview alongside, others of different religious and non-religious perspectives. Our data demonstrate a statistically significant positive change, suggesting universities are environments in which students encounter diversity as a means of personal growth. To take one example, when we ask students whether they are committed to working collaboratively with people of different perspectives to bring about positive changes in society, the proportion agreeing or agreeing strongly increases between the two time points, while the proportion disagreeing declines (see Chart 9).

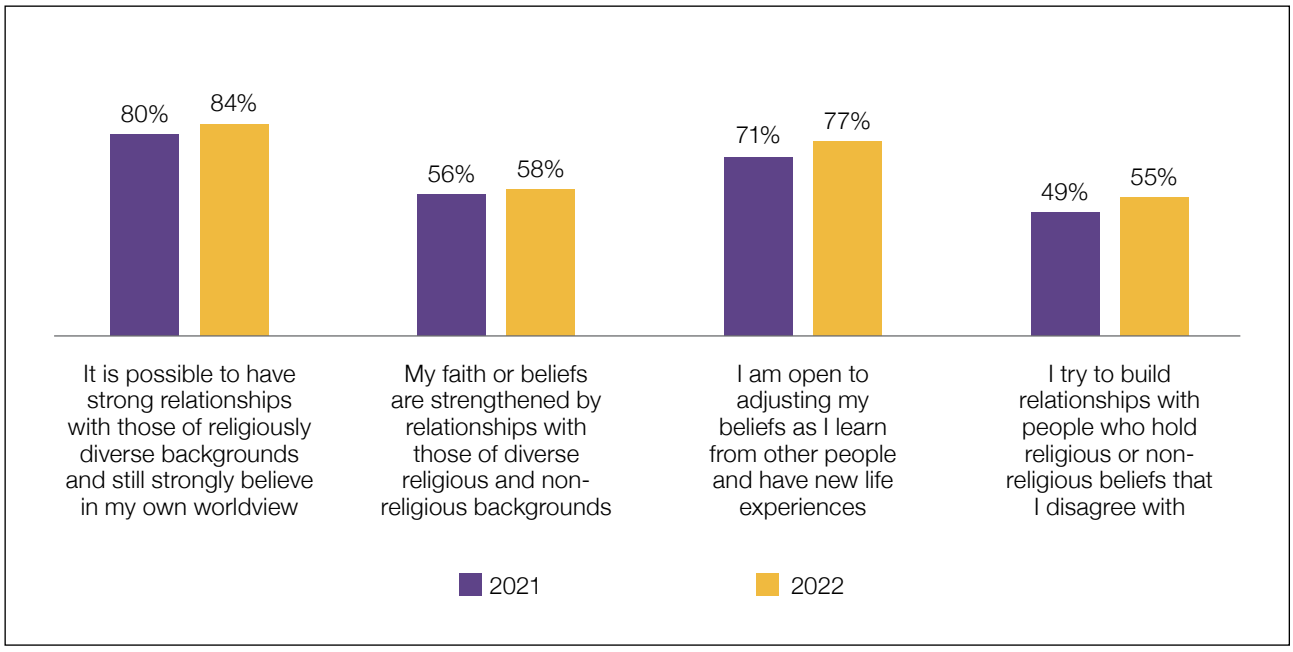


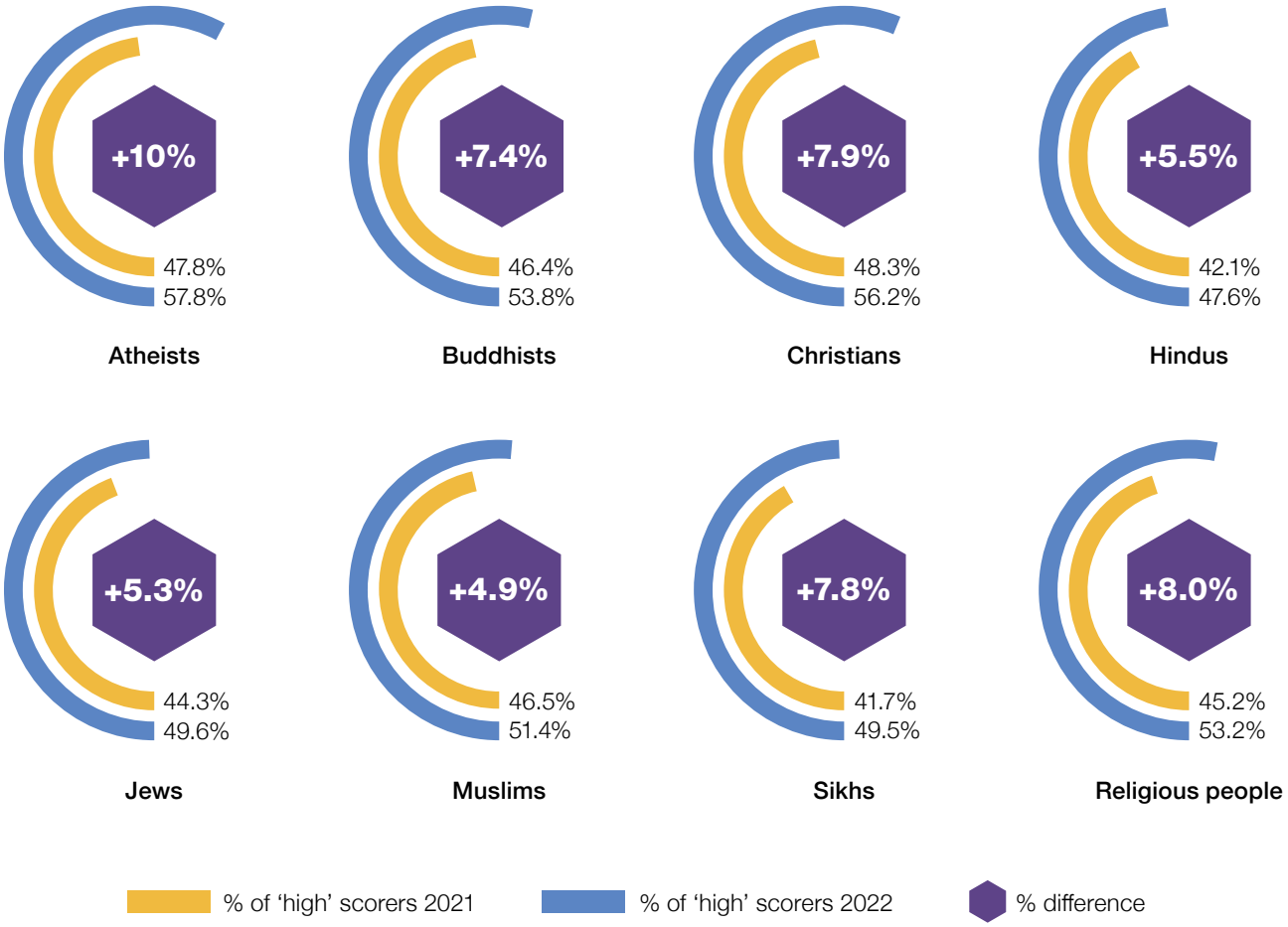
***Chart 9:** Proportion of students who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with various statements about pluralism statements, in 2021 and 2022*

Differences are noticeable across religious perspectives. Muslim students in particular make significant gains across all pluralism outcomes, and start from a higher point. For example, in our first survey, 73% of Muslims students were high scorers for 'goodwill towards others of different worldviews'; this rose to 75% at the end of the year (compared to all students, who averaged at 69% high scorers in 2021 and 72% in 2022).

Secondly, we wanted to know the extent to which students reported an appreciation of different religious and non-religious worldview groups, and whether these levels changed over time. By this measure, **our data show significant gains in students' ability to relate well with *all* religious and worldview groups presented in the research.** Put another way, there is no evidence to suggest students' attitudes towards religious groups of any description become more negative as they progress through their university career.

Our measure of 'appreciative attitudes' consists of students reporting, in general, that people in each respective worldview group a) make positive contributions to society, b) are ethical people, c) are people to whom the student feels a sense of good will, and d) are people with whom the student reports that they have things in common.

Appreciative attitudes towards:



In our first survey, none of the outcomes drew more than half of our students as high scorers. By the following year, however, over half of students scored highly in appreciative attitudes toward all but three groups. The greatest gains in appreciative attitudes are towards atheists, followed by 'religious people' in general, Christians and Sikhs.

There are, however, important variations depending on the religion and worldview group being considered. For example, some students' *intra*-faith appreciation grew; Christians, Muslims and Hindus significantly grew in appreciation towards others within their own worldview group.

We are here identifying correlations, rather than causation. For example, it is difficult to know whether these patterns are driven more by exposure to university life, or by the age of students. According to our regression analyses of this data, year of study was not a significant driver of change, but age was. Further analysis will need to attempt to untangle these variables in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of the experiences that are most important in shaping the changing attitudes and behaviours of this generation of students. What *is* clear is that, across all religious and non-religious identities, students' interfaith development depends on how they perceive, experience and engage in their university environment. IDEALS UK sought to discover how different aspects of university life *influence* changes in students' lives. A number of aspects were found to be significant,[14] and the following sections explore those most influential in directing students' attitude and behaviour change across this year of university.

Formal interfaith engagement forms global citizens

Of all the interfaith activities we explore in the research, students are least likely to report participating in formal activities, such as attending a lecture or panel discussing interfaith cooperation, undertaking religious diversity training, attending religious services for a tradition that is not their own, or learning about religious diversity during a freshers or welcome week event. Rather, students were much more likely to tell us that they had not participated in *any* formal interfaith activities while at university.

> I attended the religious diversity training organised by the school and learned more about religious diversity and also learned more about people with different worldviews in the classroom, which made a big difference to my attitude towards people with different worldviews in the rest of my studies and life.
>
> **Non-religious Communications Studies student, secular university**

That being said, **formal interfaith activities influence growth in key areas, including enhancing students' perception of themselves as global citizens**. Attending a lecture or panel discussing interfaith cooperation, for example, encourages students to think about, and actively work towards, resolving issues of global concern, broadening the reach of their interfaith development beyond the classroom.

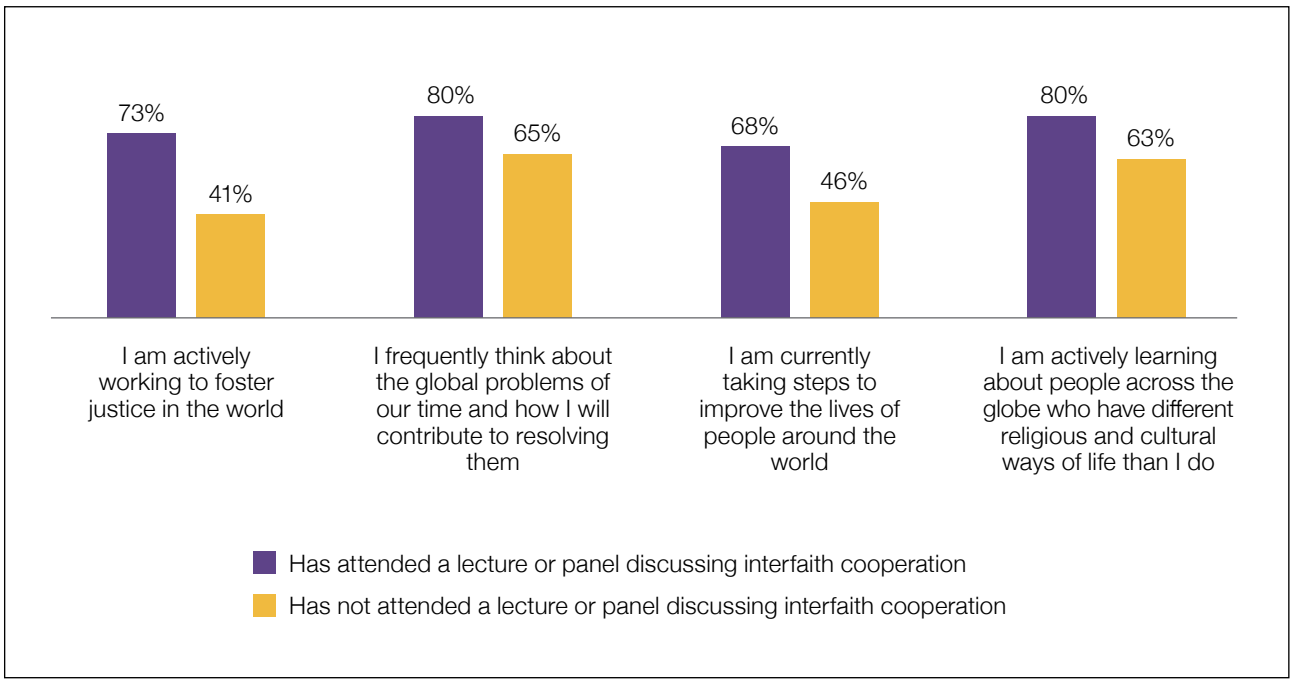


Chart 10: *Proportion of students who 'agree' or ''strongly agree' with statements relating to global citizenship, comparing students who have, and have not, attended a lecture or panel discussing interfaith cooperation*

Moreover, formal interfaith engagement influences growth in students' a) respect, b) admiration and c) goodwill towards others with worldviews different from their own, and fosters the view that cultivating interreligious understanding will make the world a more peaceful place. Students' positive attitudes towards some minority groups on campus – e.g. Muslim and Jewish students – similarly increase as they take part in formal activities, marking them as influential, yet underutilised opportunities for interfaith learning.

Campus climate shapes students' interfaith development

It is not just the activities in which students participate that have a positive influence. **The ways in which students perceive and experience the atmosphere – or *climate* – of their university campus is also important**.

Students who perceive their university environment as religiously diverse and welcoming, tend to feel safe and supported in expressing their own views. They also encounter people who challenge their prior assumptions, and demonstrate growth by constructively engaging with others in ways that bridge religious and secular differences. However, students experience their universities in different ways, and some encounter insensitivity and even pressure to hide or change their worldview. These students *decline* in their interfaith learning and development over time. In other words, building positive relationships across religious and worldview difference is helped by a perception that the campus is indeed diverse, but also requires that such difference is encountered sensitively and within an environment of mutual acceptance.

> Where I grew up was not a very diverse place, everyone had a very similar worldview to my own so coming to uni meant I could interact with a range of interesting, intelligent individuals from lots of different backgrounds with worldviews sometimes differing to my own. Naturally, this led to me learning new things and reconsidering my own perspective.
>
> **Non-religious Business Studies student, secular university**

Students who perceive their campus climate as diverse in its religious and non-religious perspectives demonstrate growth in almost all of the measures of interfaith learning and development explored in this project. As with formal interfaith activities, perceiving the university as diverse increases students' desire to behave as *global* citizens, actively seeking to build a global awareness and to make a positive difference to others around the world. Perceiving the university as diverse also fosters feelings of goodwill towards those of other religious and non-religious worldviews, an appreciation of religious commonalities and differences, and a commitment to interfaith leadership.

What is more, students who perceive their campus as diverse demonstrate growth in appreciation towards atheists, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The same can be said for students who perceive their university to be a welcoming place for students with these religious perspectives.

Having a perceived diverse and welcoming campus makes a difference to the capacity of universities to build attitudes of acceptance, understanding and respect towards those who are different from ourselves.

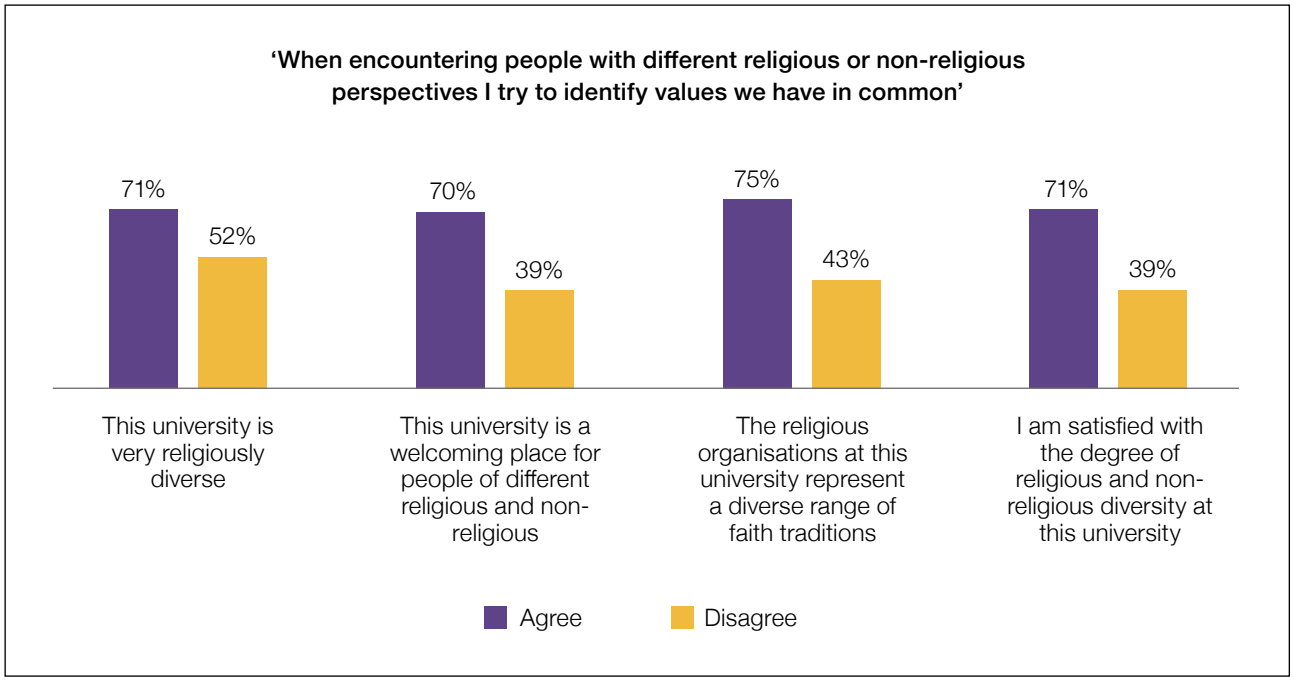


Chart 11: *Proportion of students who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that when encountering people with different religious or non-religious perspectives they try to identify values they have in common, comparing those who agree and disagree with statements relating to perceived diversity on campus*

Diversity can be understood in a variety of ways. Our own focus here is on religious and non-religious diversity. A further dimension is noteworthy: the data measures *perceived* diversity. We are discussing the subjective experience of university life reported by students who completed our survey, not any objective measure of diversity as gauged by, for example, demographic profiling of student populations. Students may perceive their university environment to be diverse, or welcoming of diversity, in this respect, but this does not necessarily relate to a common measure of what this actually means in practical terms. Here is why this is important: our data suggest a *perceived* diversity makes a significant difference to student attitudes, and a positive one at that.

> By being able to surround myself with a more diverse range of people in general at university, it has helped me to realise that everyone, no matter of their religious belief, gender identity, race etc is, for the most part, muddling through and trying their best to be a better version of themselves and find their place in this world. I believe that having that in common is quite comforting and creates a sense of unity.
>
> **Christian (Protestant) Biological Sciences student, Anglican university**

Providing safe spaces for students to express their worldview, and making accommodations for students to observe religious holidays or events, are similarly vital to supporting students' interfaith development. This provision influences students' growth in their willingness to behave as global citizens, their commitment to interfaith leadership and service, and their appreciation towards almost all worldview groups explored in this research.

> Seeing that the university offers multifaith spaces and makes special arrangements for religious matters, I am more confident to express my own individuality, knowing it won't negatively affect my academic experience.
>
> **Christian (Orthodox) Biological Sciences student, secular university**

This is illustrated in Chart 12, which compares student responses to an optimistic statement about the capacity of people to overcome the world's major problems if people of different religious and non-religious perspectives work together. Students are much more likely to agree if they also see their university as accommodating students' religious and non-religious worldview needs. In other words, a campus that is visibly supportive of students with a range of perspectives on religion fosters a positive attitude towards the capacity of human co-operation to enable positive change on a global level.

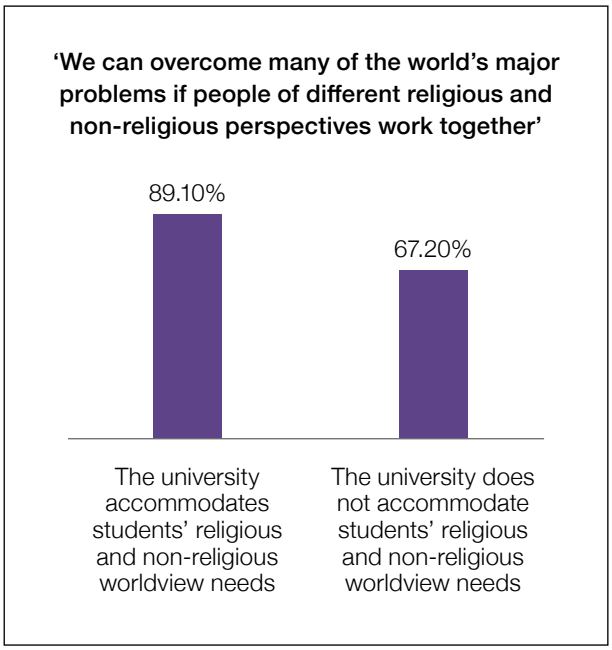


***Chart 12:** Proportion of students who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that we can overcome many of the world's major problems if people of different religious and non-religious perspectives work together, comparing students who report that their university does, and does not, accommodate their worldview needs*

Much in contemporary debate about diversity focuses on the tension between providing 'safe spaces' for the vulnerable, and ensuring universities remain contexts in which robust debate can still take place. Indeed, many would argue that the latter is essential for an experience of higher education. Our data allow us to explore this issue, and reveals that there is indeed value in universities providing safe spaces for students to feel comfortable expressing their personal worldviews. However, there are also positive and meaningful consequences to students interacting with other individuals or perspectives that *challenge* their views or provoke them to question stereotypes. **The greatest value in having such provocative encounters can be seen in students' appreciative attitudes towards others from different religious backgrounds.** Students who reported experiencing such encounters grew in their appreciation that Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and religious people in general a) contribute to society, b) are ethical people, and c) are people who have things in common with the student.

As can be seen in Chart 13, provocative encounters make a significant positive difference to attitudes directed at a range of worldviews. An especially significant impact appears in the case of attitudes towards Muslims. Those with a positive attitude towards Muslims made up just over 70% of students who rarely if ever felt challenged to rethink their worldview after someone explained theirs to them, but almost 95% of those who felt challenged in this way frequently or all the time. Put another way, having a reflexive capacity to review one's own assumptions in the face of worldview difference makes a significant difference to the likelihood of viewing religious groups in a positive way.

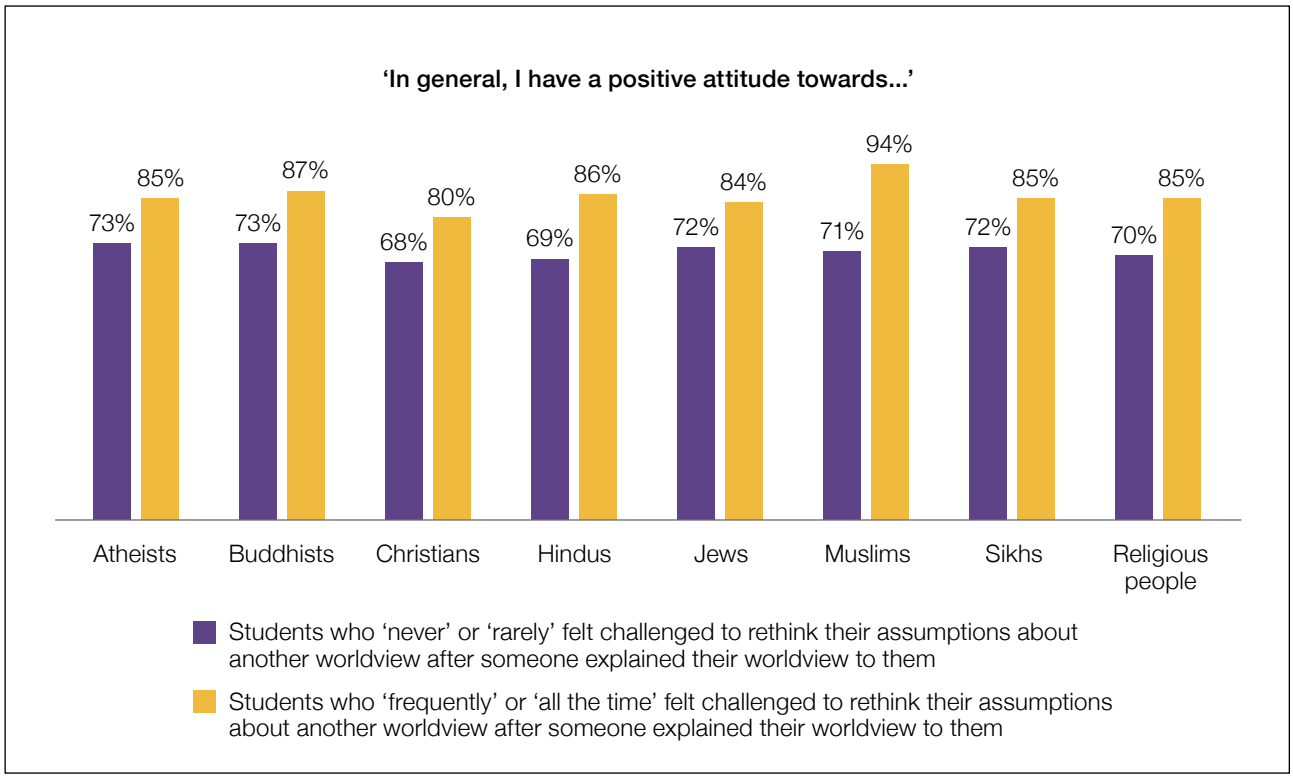


***Chart 13:** Proportion of students who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that, in general, they have a positive attitude towards different worldview groups, comparing students who experienced a provocative encounter 'never' or 'rarely', with those who experienced the encounter 'frequently' or 'all the time'*

Provocative encounters also pave the way to friendship. In our survey, some students told us of their desire to befriend those with whom they disagree:

> I am more inclined to actively make friends with people I disagree with.
>
> **Christian (Roman Catholic) Mathematics student, secular university**

> I feel that university fosters an environment where open discussion about religion is taboo (unless when talking about inclusivity and diversity etc). Therefore people of other worldviews are less likely to be open to civilised conversations and friendly discussions about personal views. I find it difficult to form a relationship with someone who isn't able to talk about the most important aspects of their lives. Even if they disagree with me, I want a friendship to be built on honesty rather than inhibition for fear of conflict.
>
> **Christian (Protestant) Languages student, traditional elite university**

It is unsurprising, then, that students who take part in challenging conversations are more likely than those who do not to report having spoken up in defence of someone with a different religious or non-religious perspective (74% compared to 52%). They are also more likely to have a greater number of close friends that belong to a different religious tradition from their own.

Not all experiences at university lead to growth, however. Some have a demonstrably negative impact on interfaith learning and development outcomes.

The previous section indicated that a minority of students reported experiencing coercion on campus, framed in this research as feeling pressured to change their worldview, listen to others' perspectives when they do not want to hear about them, keep their worldview to themselves, or separate their academic experience from their personal worldview. For this minority, however, **experiences of coercion lead to a decline in their self-authored worldview commitment**, a measure developed in the US-based IDEALS project (upon which this research is based) which represents 'students' ability to make meaning of their own worldview identity in light of others' worldviews'.[15] Self-authored worldview commitment considers the extent to which students have a) thoughtfully considered other religious and nonreligious perspectives before committing to their current worldview b) reconciled competing religious and nonreligious perspectives before committing to their current worldview, c) talked and listened to people with points of view different to their own before committing to their worldview and d) integrated multiple points of view into their existing worldview.

> I've become more open to listening and learning about others' worldviews as I no longer feel intimidated or pressured by their views to change mine in order to find common ground with them.
>
> **Muslim Languages student, traditional elite university**

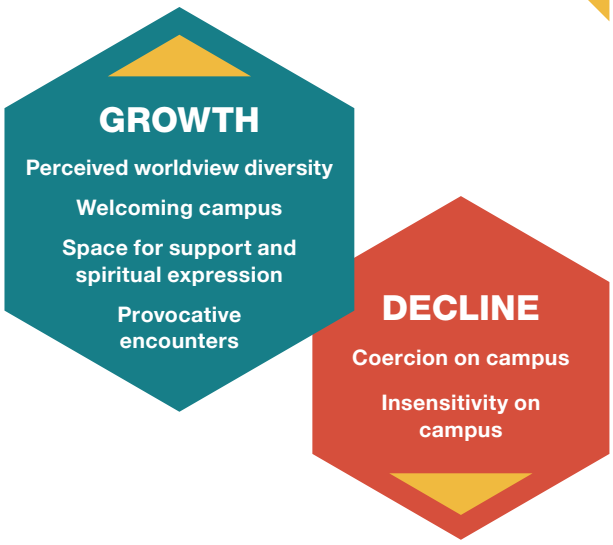
Using the concept of self-authored worldview commitment allows us to measure the extent to which students construct their perspective in thoughtful dialogue with others who see things differently from themselves. So the findings above about the consequences of on-campus coercion are important. They suggest that when an individual finds that others believe their worldview ought to be modified, silenced or policed in some way, that individual's capacity to maintain a reflexive approach to their own identity is impaired. Coercion on campus inhibits students from internally grounding their worldview in relation to perspectives that are different from their own. It is not uncommon in liberal democracies for judgemental attitudes towards minorities to be viewed as morally wrong. Our data suggest such attitudes also have a detrimental impact on the capacity of university campuses to foster critical self-awareness.

Insensitivity on campus has a different kind of negative impact on students' interfaith learning and development. **Students who report hearing or reading insensitive comments about their worldview from peers, academic staff or university/administrative staff,**

report declines in: a) feelings of goodwill towards those with different worldviews and b) perceptions that they have things in common with those with different worldviews.

For example, 89% of students who 'never' or 'rarely' experience insensitivity from academic staff 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that they respect people who have religious or non-religious perspectives that differ from their own. This falls to 80% among those who experience insensitivity from academic staff 'frequently' or 'all the time'.

> Previously I was ignorant of other cultures and beliefs, being at uni has made me want to […] be more sensitive in discussions.
>
> **Non-religious Engineering student, traditional elite university**



We can summarise this constellation of forces – both positive and negative – in this diagram. Interfaith learning and development is positively influenced by a perception of a diverse campus, having space for faith-oriented support and spiritual expression, and with individuals having provocative encounters on campus. By contrast, it is negatively influenced by coercion and insensitivity towards matters of worldview diversity on campus. Universities are critical contexts in which interfaith learning and development is formed, and the climate of the campus plays a crucial part in determining how successful this process is.

Living at university prepares students for a pluralistic society

Students have certain choices when it comes to student accommodation, including university-owned halls of residence, private rental properties, and the increasingly commonplace private student halls.[16] Regardless, they often find themselves thrown together with people who are different, forcing them to try to get on and/or to make friends.

IDEALS UK explored differences in student experiences across types of university. However, **regardless of the type of university students attend, those living at university (away from their family home) reported gains in feelings of goodwill towards others of different worldviews, and appreciation of inter-religious commonalities and differences.** There is a small but significant difference in attitude between those who live exclusively at university and those who do not in relation to the following pluralism statements.

> Since starting university, I have learnt more about certain cultures from living with my flatmates and learning about their values.
>
> **Hindu Business Studies student, secular university**

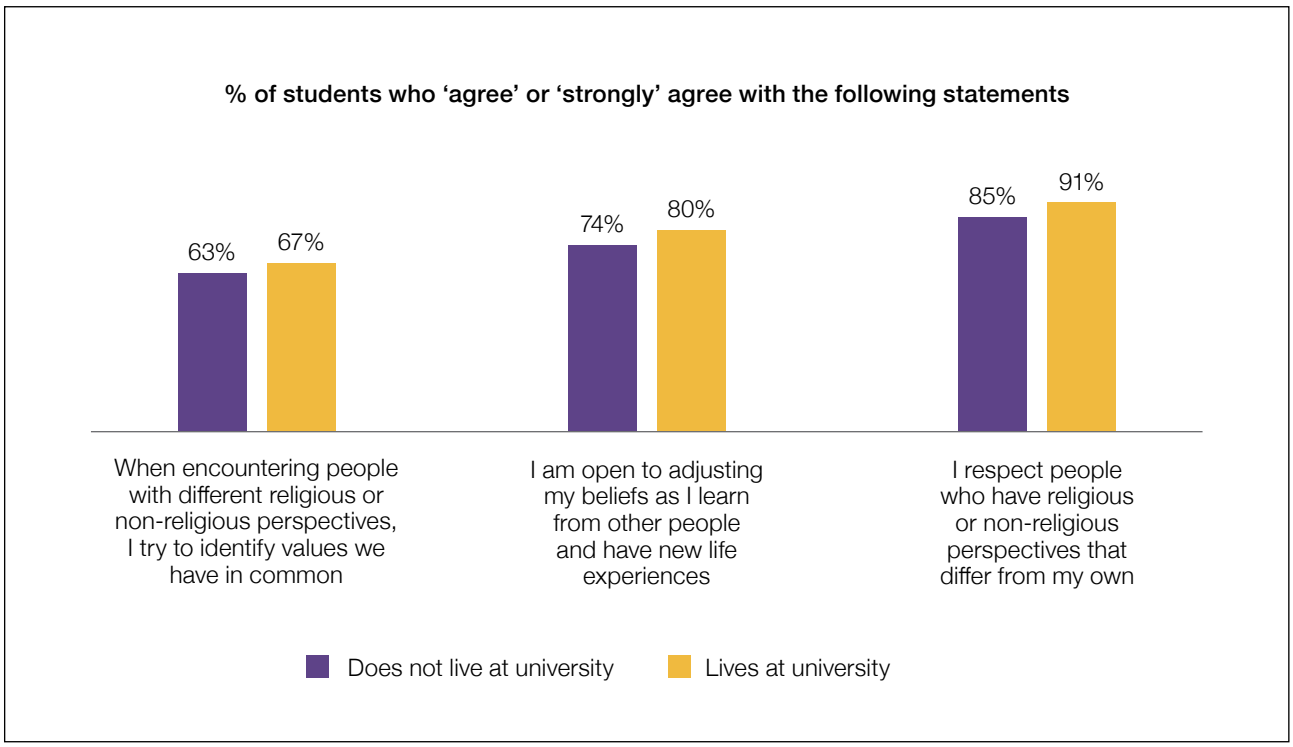
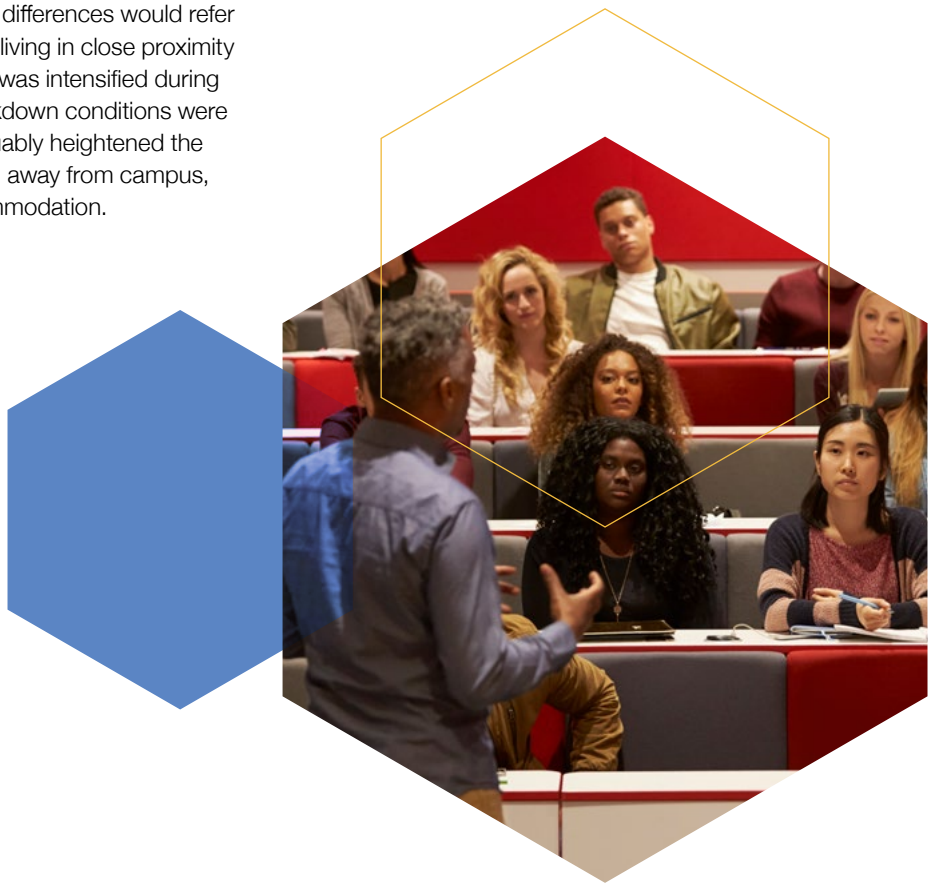


Chart 14: *Proportion of students who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with pluralism statements, comparing students who do and do not live at university*

One possible explanation for these differences would refer to the experience students have of living in close proximity to one another, an experience that was intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic when lockdown conditions were in place. Pandemic conditions arguably heightened the differences between students living away from campus, and those living in university accommodation.



CASE STUDY SNAPSHOT

Accommodation

The traditional elite university offers accommodation in which large numbers of students live in close community, eating and socialising together. This facilitates interaction across differences. As Jewish student Levi said:

> Everyone has to talk to everyone. So even if you were not a particularly tolerant person, or not tolerant of specific views, or whatever it was, you wouldn't really be able to get away with it because there's just so few people [here] that you sort of have to be open to everyone.

Eating together encourages interaction, and chaplain Mark explained that students are deliberately seated with people they do not know to maximise new interactions. Some residences host dinners dedicated to religious or cultural festivals, and while not all cater to religious diets, it appears that improvements have been made in recent years.

Students at Cathedrals Group universities discussed accommodation very little, because many lived at home with their families. One positive experience, also involving food, was discussed by Sikh student Hermione Kaur at the Catholic university who framed student difference in terms of ethnicity rather than religion:

> When I moved in in my first year, I was the only Asian person in my whole flat. All the other students were white. To begin with, I did feel a bit out of place because I was like, 'I'm the only Asian person', but if I could say anything, it's more of a learning curve than anything. It was interesting to get to know them. I actually cooked for them a few times. It's quite interesting sharing my recipes and food. They absolutely enjoyed it.

Food provides a talking point and other students and staff commented on the way food can make students from religious groups feel included; conversely, activities focused on alcohol can exclude religious students or students from some BAME backgrounds.

During COVID-19 student accommodation as a site of social interaction became very important to students, as other social activities ceased. These provided opportunities to build relationships across worldview difference. At the secular university Elif had made close friends with international students from different countries and branches of Christianity and they had united around wanting to socialise without getting drunk. There was a consensus among students interviewed that COVID had hampered building relationships across difference. But some students said there had been an unexpected silver lining, as they had built more close friendships with the students they lived with. Amanda, a Latter Day Saint student from the Anglican university said:

> Those six girls that I was placed with, those were the six worldviews I got to see. Those were the six different views that I got to learn about and experience. I got to know a couple of people who lived above me with some really different views, which was awesome… Something I kind of thought about a lot was my inability to do other things, my inability to go out or whatever did mean that I got to know those six other girls, and meant that we could have conversations, and meant that we could have discussions. It meant that we could watch each other live our lives and that was really interesting.

6. Recommendations

These recommendations are for universities, Students' Unions and religion and worldview-related organisations working with students.

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1) Support and visibly celebrate a wide range of religions and worldviews on campus. These should include worldviews held by smaller groups of students. Use images and language representing diverse worldviews in student-focused communications.

2) Provide support to worldview-related student societies and encourage students from smaller worldview groups to start societies for likeminded students.

3) Identify key individuals in the university and Students' Union to act as interfaith and worldview 'champions', encouraging activities that bring students into dialogue across differences. These individuals could be staff, students, chaplains or academics.

4) Include reference to, and discussion of, a range of religions and worldviews in the curriculum and classroom. Opportunities to do this will vary according to course, subject and expertise. Teaching staff should try to create an environment where students feel safe to discuss and critically analyse their own and others' worldviews and articulate the relevance of worldviews to their study.

5) Allocate student accommodation in a way that balances students' choice and welfare and helping them meet others from different beliefs and backgrounds, recognising that living with other students promotes positive attitudes to those of different worldviews.

6) Provide support for students to engage in worldview exploration as part of the university's welfare and support services provision. Recruit chaplains representing a range of worldviews who will support students both in their own worldview and in learning about others' worldviews.

7) Ensure organised student activities are suitable for students of a range of worldviews. This will include attention to religious and other diets, some alcohol-free social events, and timing of events to avoid major conflicts with religious commitments.

8) Students' Unions should ensure their leadership, membership and activities represent, and are accessible for, those of different worldviews and religions. SUs should appoint a member of staff, or elect a student to a position, with interfaith and inter-worldview engagement as part of their remit. Plan events for a range of dates in the religion and worldview calendar (for example, religious festivals, Holocaust Memorial Day, Interfaith week, International Women's Day). Encourage religion and worldview societies to collaborate or host an event with another society at least once a year.

9) Organise and run a wider variety of interfaith events each year, both formal and informal, adapting the style and content so that they are appealing and accessible to students. These could include discussion groups, prayer or remembrance events, visits to places of worship, debates, panel discussions, volunteering or social events, for example. Prioritise events that enable discussion of students' own beliefs or spirituality.

10) Balance the need for 'safe spaces' for students to feel supported in their own worldviews with opportunities for 'provocative encounters' with others of different views. Ensure that provocative encounters across differences do not spill into insensitivity and/coercion. Students benefit from being challenged to rethink their assumptions, but the interactions should not include insensitive comments or be framed in a way that either party feels pressured to change their worldview or keep it to themselves.

11) Religion and worldview groups at local and national level who work with students should help students to build relationships with other groups.

12) Consider the positive and negative ways in which particular university contexts shape students' ability to build relationships across religion and worldview difference. Given the findings reported above about *traditional elite universities*, these institutions should consider interfaith/inter-worldview engagement beyond simply volume of resources such as chaplains, debates and supporting religious festivals. Fostering a hospitable and healthy interfaith culture demands more than this. *Cathedrals Group* universities should consider how to become places that students see as religiously diverse and welcoming for students from diverse worldview backgrounds. *Secular universities* should consider how to encourage discussion of religion and worldviews (including students' own worldviews) within the classroom, to enhance students' sense of belonging and enable them to build positive relations across difference.

7. Appendices

Appendix 1: Demographic overview of survey respondents

Following ethical approval, our two surveys were administered on behalf of the project team by survey company YouthSight, who used a quota sampling method applied to an existing panel of young adults based across the UK. After collection, the data were 'weighted', or benchmarked against known demographic distributions collated by HESA.

The combination of quota sampling and post-collection weighting mean the data reported here are fairly closely aligned to the known demographic profile of the student population. In our survey sample, distributions by gender, ethnicity and religion, plus student status (undergraduate or postgraduate) all resemble – within an acceptable margin of error – those collected by HESA. The longitudinal sample, while self-selecting insofar as these are students who have agreed to complete both waves, also closely resembles the two main samples in all major respects, suggesting the quota sampling and post-survey weighting have been effective in ensuring a representative cross-section of the student population.

A demographic summary of our two surveys, plus the longitudinal sample drawn from those students who completed both surveys, is provided in the table below.

	Survey 1 (2021-22)	Survey 2 (2022-23)	Longitudinal sample
Number of responses	4,401	4,618	1,000
Respondents by university type	Trad/elite: 15.6% Secular: 81.3% Cath Group: 3.2%	Trad/elite: 14% Secular: 81.3% Cath Group: 4.7%	Trad/elite: 20.4% Secular: 76.8% Cath Group: 2.8%
UK/International students	81.7 / 18.3%	85.9% / 14.1%	85.8% / 14.2%
Full-time/Part-time students	94.5% / 5.5%	95.9% / 4.1%	96.3% / 3.7%
Undergraduate/ Postgraduate status	73% / 27%	70.6% / 28.7%	71.3 / 28.7%
Respondents by subject area	Arts/humanities: 12.8% Social Sciences: 23.9% STEM: 36.1% Medicine & related: 25.8%	Arts/humanities: 14.1% Social Sciences: 20.8% STEM: 40% Medicine & related: 24.1%	Arts/humanities: 14% Social Sciences: 20.4% STEM: 43.1% Medicine & related: 21.3%
Respondents by gender identity	Male: 42.8% Female: 55.7% Other: 1.5%	Male: 42.7% Female: 55.6% Other: 1.7%	Male: 42.7% Female: 56.2% Other: 1.1%
Sexual Orientation	Bisexual: 12.2% Gay: 2.7% Heterosexual: 76.1% Lesbian: 2.2% Queer: 2% Other: 1.4%	Bisexual: 13.1% Gay: 2.6% Heterosexual: 74.3% Lesbian: 1.8% Queer: 2.6% Prefer not to say: 3.2% Other: 2.4%	Bisexual: 11.9% Gay: 4.1% Heterosexual: 72.9% Lesbian: 2.2% Queer: 3.7% Prefer not to say: 3.3% Other: 2%
Respondents by age	18-20: 37.7% 21-24: 28.5% 25+: 33.8%	18-20: 36.6% 21-24: 27.8% 25+: 35.6%	18-20: 36.7% 21-24: 27.8% 25+: 35.6%
Respondents by ethnicity	White: 73.7% Asian: 15.2% Black: 5.5% Mixed: 4.4% Other: 1.2%	White: 73.2% Asian: 15.4% Black: 5.6% Mixed: 4.1% Other: 1.7%	White: 73% Asian: 15.9% Black: 3.9% Mixed: 5.8% Other: 1.4%
Respondents by religion	Non-religious: 48.9% Buddhist: 1.4% Christian: 32.2% Hindu: 2.4% Jewish: 0.4% Muslim: 7.3% Sikh: 0.6 Other: 12.1%	Non-religious: 47.7% Buddhist: 1% Christian: 31.5% Hindu: 2.5% Jewish: 0.6% Muslim: 8% Sikh: 0.7% Other: 8%	Non-religious: 47.8% Buddhist: 0.8% Christian: 31.5% Hindu: 2.5% Jewish: 0.4% Muslim: 8.6% Sikh: 0.7% Other religion: 7.8%

Appendix 2: Case study participants

The table below details the number of interviews, student focus groups and observations conducted in each case study location.

University type	Staff interviews	Student interviews	Focus groups	Observations
Traditional elite	5	11	2	8
Secular	5	10	2	10
Anglican	6	9	1	7
Catholic	5	8	1	4
TOTAL	**21**	**38**	**6**	**29**

8. Notes

1. IDEALS (Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey) was a multi-university study led by Matthew Mayhew and Alyssa Rockenbach at The Ohio State University and North Carolina State University, which aimed to cultivate interfaith learning and development among US-based students. Over 20,000 students participated in the study from 122 US colleges and universities between 2015 and 2019. For more information, see https://www.interfaithamerica.org/research/ideals/.

2. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency), there are approximately 2.8 million individuals studying at UK universities and higher education providers. The most recent figures available are for the 2021-22 academic year. See https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#numbers (accessed 8/6/23).

3. Weller, P. Hooley, T. & Moore, N. (2011) *Religion and Belief in Higher Education: The experiences of staff and students,* Equality Challenge Unit, pp. 76-80

4. Graham. D. & Boyd, J. (2011) *Home and Away: Jewish Journeys towards Independence: Key findings from the 2011 National Jewish Student Survey.* Institute for Jewish Policy Research, pp.49-52

5. Harris, O. & Goldberg, M. (2023) Campus Antisemitism in British 2020-2022, London: Community Security Trust

6. NUS (2012) *No Place for Hate: Hate crimes and incidents in further and higher education: religion or belief,* National Union of Students, pp.14-16

7. Scott-Baumann, A., Guest, M., Naguib, S., Cheruvallil-Contractor, S. & Phoenix, A. (2020) *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain,* Oxford University Press

8. Perfect, S., Ryan, B. & Aune, K. (2019) *Faith and Belief on Campus: Division and Cohesion,* Theos, pp.100-149

9. Sheldon, R. (2016) *Tragic encounters and ordinary ethics: Palestine-Israel in British universities,* Manchester University Press

10. Dorrell, E. (2020) 'The government is serious about winning the culture wars – universities need to be ready', *WonkHE Comment,* 12/10/20, https://wonkhe.com/blogs/government-culture-wars-universities-ready/

11. EDI refers to 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion', an increasingly prominent part of UK university life, with many universities recently establishing administrative and managerial roles dedicated to organisational development according to EDI principles, taking their lead from the language of the Equality Act (2010).

12. Guest, M., with Scott-Baumann, A., Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., Naguib, S., Phoenix, A., Lee, Yenn & Al Baghal, T. (2020) *Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: Perceptions and Challenges.* SOAS, Coventry University, Durham University, and Lancaster University. Available at: https://www.soas.ac.uk/research/re/presenting-islam-campus

13. Sheldon (2016). See note 9.

14. Other aspects of the university experience not discussed in the report, including interfaith friendship and course/discipline, were similarly found to have an influence on students' interfaith learning and development. We look forward to exploring these in more detail in future publications.

15. Selznick, B. S., Mayhew, M. J., Dahl, L. S. and Rockenbach, A. N. (2022) 'Developing Appreciative Attitudes Toward Jews: A Multi-Campus Investigation'. *The Journal of Higher Education* 93(2), pp. 297-325, p.308.

16. According to HESA figures, in 2021-22, 15.9% of individuals studying at UK universities resided in provider-maintained accommodation (e.g. halls of residence); 9.2% lived in private sector halls; 27.4% lived in private rental properties. In addition, 19.7% lived in the property owned by their parent/guardian, and 19.2% lived in a property they own themselves. See https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study (accessed 25/5/23)

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