

Ramadan Guidance for Staff

This guide has been created by Durham University's Muslim Chaplain (Chaplaincy Network), with inputs from various stakeholders, to provide introductory information on Ramadan and how staff members can support Muslim students and colleagues observing various rituals during this month. Links to relevant internal and external resources are also provided.

It is important to note that these are general guidelines. Interpretations and practices of Ramadan are numerous. Staff are encouraged to ask Muslim students and staff about their individual faith needs, which they have already identified in advance of their enrolment or employment.

1. Islam: The principles of faith

- 1.1 Central to Islamic belief is Oneness of God; Angels; Messengers/Prophets; Divinely revealed scriptures; the Hereafter and Divine Determining. Firm belief in the six pillars of faith requires submission to the five pillars of Islam. These are: The profession of faith, that is, the affirmation of God's Unity and the fact that Mohammad is the final prophet, the five daily prayers, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage to Mecca.
- 1.2 Ramadan is the ninth month of the lunar calendar. Since it is based on the phases of the moon, it falls short of the solar calendar by eleven days, which means it commences approximately eleven days earlier each year. This means that over a long period of time, it passes through all the seasons. Therefore, it is impossible to assign the same dates each year and any plans for Ramadan need to be reviewed and arranged on an annual basis.

2. Background on fasting and how it can potentially affect staff and students

- 2.1 All practising Muslims see it to be an obligation to fast during the month of Ramadan which lasts for around 30 days from one sighting of the crescent moon to the next. In practice, this means abstaining from eating and drinking from dawn until sunset. Depending in which season the month of Ramadan falls, the duration of abstention from food and drink can be very long. The precise dates can be confirmed only after the first sighting of the crescent moon.
- 2.2 Muslims may be exempt from fasting if they have a specific medical condition. Those exempt from fasting are:
 - Menstruating women
 - Prepubescent children
 - Those who are frail and are older adults
 - The acutely unwell
 - Travellers (who journey more than 50 miles)
 - People with mental health problems who are unable to comprehend the purpose of the fast
 - Pregnant and breast-feeding mothers who are concerned that their health or baby's health will in any way be compromised in doing so.
- 2.3 Those upon whom the fast is mandatory, but who are unable to fast for some valid reason, are expected to make up the days they have missed later in the year. So, some Muslim students and staff may be seen to be fasting part of the month of Ramadan, but be still following Islamic guidelines.

2.4 The effect of fasting on an individual varies. In general, because of a long period of abstinence from food and drink, some staff/students may experience slight dehydration, which may cause tiredness, headaches and lack of concentration. Lack of sleep and adjustment to new sleep patterns may also cause fatigue for some people. Other considerations relating to fasting may include the following:

- Lack of concentration may affect students taking exams during this period.
- Depending on length and type of field work, dates for travel may need to be adjusted for some students before or after Ramadan.

3. Other considerations

3.1 Muslim students and staff are encouraged to get together for taraweeh prayers in the [prayer room](#) every evening, after sunset and break their fast. These prayers can last until around midnight. Some Muslim female students may be prevented from attending due to a fear of travelling home at such a late hour.

3.2 Ramadan as well as being a religious observance is also a collective occasion. It is a time for getting together to break the fast and for attending the congregational prayers. This time can be particularly difficult for students living in college, since issues such as meal timings, attendance at early morning lectures and the inability to attend congregational prayers may prove problematic.

4. How can staff and students be supported

4.1 It is advisable that staff (particularly line managers and staff members dealing with students) are aware of the personal and religious sensitivities of their Muslim colleagues/students during this period. Measures that can be taken to support staff/students who are observing Ramadan include:

- **Flexibility:** staff may wish to start work earlier and finish earlier so that they may rest in the afternoon. They may also prefer to take their lunch break at the end of the day, in order to be able to leave earlier if possible. Some staff may request annual leave for a few days in Ramadan, particularly towards the end of the month, in order to celebrate the festival called Eid-al-Fitr. This is a day on which Muslims like to get together for prayers and celebration with the community. Please also refer to [Durham University Inclusion calendar](#) for other Muslim observances.
- **On examinations:** it would be good practice if students are directed to the [guidance for students taking exams during Ramadan](#) and are informed of the opportunity to complete the [Religious Observance Form](#) in relation to potential clashes with examinations.

Due to the logistical challenges of scheduling a large number of examinations involving thousands of students to take place in a limited number of days, it may not be possible to avoid those times/dates. In such circumstances, where it is not possible to take a student request into account, and the student has completed the Religious Observance Form by the published deadline, the student should contact their School or Department for further advice.

- **On timetables and fieldwork:** where possible and applicable, it is advisable that fieldwork take Ramadan, Festival of Eid and other Muslim Festivals into account. Reasonable support and flexibility could be considered for individuals impacted by their

observance during exams. Consideration may also be given with regard to essay deadlines.

Where a student identifies a clash between a religious observance and one of their teaching activities, they are advised to contact their academic department in the first instance, to look into potential solutions.

- **On academic commitments:** PhD students may also require flexibility around supervisory meetings and/or academic commitments.
- **On room sharing:** College accommodation staff may need to consider that as well as getting up in the early hours of the morning for prayer throughout their stay, some Muslims may need to get up even earlier during Ramadan to prepare breakfast; and this may inconvenience both parties sharing a room. The decision lies with the accommodation staff to prioritise in accordance with their needs assessment, room availability and further consultation with the student concerned.
- **On catering:** Catering staff may need to adjust timings and type of food provision for Muslim students during Ramadan. Students are advised to share relevant catering information with their college at application stage but can also raise this later on if difficulties arise.

Internal resources

- Durham University's [guide to major religious observances in the UK](#) (that are likely to impact on learning and working in a Higher Education context)
- Students are advised to complete a [Religious Observance Form](#) each academic year before the stated deadline
- [Guidance for students sitting exams during Ramadan](#)
- [Guidance on staff requests for annual leave for religious reasons](#)
- Academic and teaching staff who would like to request some flexibility around their teaching responsibilities due to religious observance can refer to the [Teaching Availability Request Policy](#)
- [Durham University Inclusion Calendar](#)
- [Places of worship in Durham \(in relation to Islam\)](#)
- [Durham University Islamic Society](#)

External resources

- Muslim Council of Britain: [Ramadan Guidance](#)
- People Management: [HR's Guide to Ramadan](#)
- [Islam the Basics](#) (Turner, 2011)
- [Zakat | Fasting and Zakat \(Alms\), according to the Five Schools of Islamic Law | Al-Islam.org](#)

Dr. Mahshid Turner,
Muslim Chaplain, DU Chaplaincy Network
and Co-Chair, BAME Network (January 2023)