

Dear Vice-Chancellor,

cc: Dr Steven Goss (Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Personnel & Equality)

Revd Dr Teresa Morgan (The Assessor)

Mr Keith Zimmerman (Director of Student Administration and Services)

Mr Michael Sibly (Academic Registrar and Secretary of Faculties)

We are writing to you on behalf of the Oxford University Islamic Society to demand the establishment of a prayer room for Muslim students on the main university campus.

As you may be aware, it is a requirement of our faith that we pray five times per day. As many of our members have lectures and research activities in the University buildings in the city centre, it is very time-consuming for them to go back to their accommodation or to the mosque during the day in order to pray. As a result, many find themselves rushing between lectures or unable to participate in the varied lunchtime seminars, research meetings and speaker events that the University offers and thus the lack of a prayer room is impacting detrimentally on their academic performance. Furthermore, the Islamic Society currently has no facility for holding educational events or a central (and safe) location for congregational prayer in the evenings.

Almost every other University in the UK has a designated student prayer room (please see list on pages 4-5 and examples of other university prayer rooms on pages 6-9) and we know from our experience that this is a factor which both domestic and international applicants consider when applying. Indeed, the lack of a prayer room reflects extremely badly on the University and threatens both its reputation in the international academic community and its ability to attract students of the highest potential.

The following is an extract from the University's Equality and Diversity Mission Statement:

"The University of Oxford aims to provide an inclusive environment which promotes equality, values, diversity and maintains a working, learning and social environment in which the rights and dignity of all its staff and students are respected to assist them in reaching their full potential. The University will work to remove any barriers which might deter people of the highest potential and ability from applying to Oxford, either as staff or students". <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/missionstatement/integratedequalitypolicy/> (accessed 18/09/2011)

We believe that having a student prayer room is essential to achieving the objectives of:

- 1) assisting students to reach their "full potential" in both their spiritual and academic life
- 2) removing "any barriers which might deter people of the highest potential and ability from applying to Oxford, either as staff or students".

In this proposal we include:

- A petition from current students demanding a prayer room
- Accounts from current and former students highlighting the need for a prayer room
- Examples of prayer rooms from other universities

The following are examples of activities which the prayer room would be used for:

- Five daily congregational prayers
- Quran and educational study groups
- Interfaith discussions
- Daily evening prayers during the month of Ramadan

There are no other locations in Oxford suitable for the above activities and thus a new prayer room is needed. The Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies facility on George Street closes at 5pm daily and thus the morning, sunset and evening congregational prayers cannot be performed there (and in the summer months nor can the late afternoon prayer). There are no proper facilities for ablution (a compulsory pre-requisite to our prayers) within the centre, and due to security restrictions we are unable to access the facility in the evenings and do not have the freedom to arrange events such as study circles and multi-faith groups, one of the key objectives of the proposed student prayer room. With the relocation of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies to its new location in Marston (www.oxcis.ac.uk/aboutnewbuilding.html), the future of the George Street facility and the limited opportunities it does afford remain unclear, adding greater urgency to our request. The new mosque in Marston is itself at least 25-30 minutes walk from the main university buildings in the city centre.

We would like the prayer room to be:

- accessible 24 hours a day via swipe card access to enable all congregational prayers to be performed there (as happens at several other universities including Cambridge)
- large enough to hold 30-40 students
- equipped with a facility to enable ablution such as a large basin, and nearby, accessible toilet facilities.

The Oxford University Islamic Society would be responsible for cleaning the room.

A recent survey which formed part of a national initiative by the Equality Challenge Unit (www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/religion-and-belief-staff-and-students-in-he) confirms that the vast majority of higher education institutions provide facilities for worship and that Muslim students are the group most likely to use these. This confirms the findings of our own petition (page 13-19: currently 49 signatures with >20 more expected with the new intake of students in October) and qualitative review of opinions from members of the Oxford University Islamic Society (pages 10-12) that action must be taken to fulfil the University's commitment towards tolerance of religion and the promotion of student welfare, thus bringing it into line with other institutions.

Following discussion with the University of Oxford Department of Equality and Diversity, we understand that the Oxford University Islamic Society has requested a prayer room for Muslim students on several occasions over the past 4 years. However, no action has been taken by the University.

We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

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On behalf of the Oxford University Islamic Society

List of UK Universities that have a prayer room for Muslim students

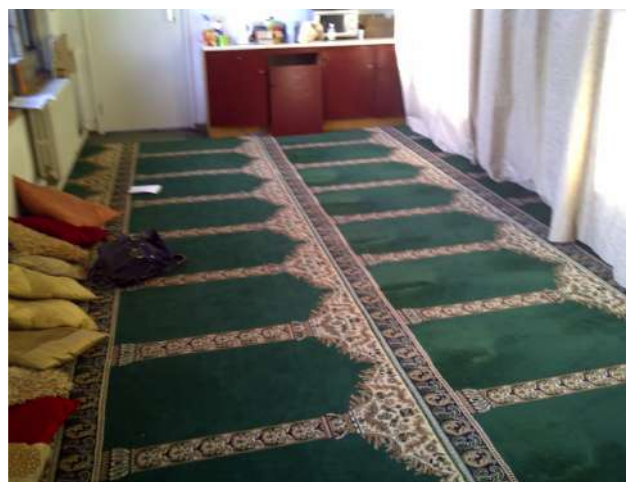
- University of Aberdeen
- University of Abertay Dundee
- Anglia Ruskin University
- University of the Arts London
- Aston University
- University of Bath
- Bath Spa University
- University of Birmingham
- University of Bolton
- Bournemouth University
- University of Bradford
- University of Brighton
- University of Bristol
- Brunel University
- University of Cambridge
- Cardiff University
- University of Central Lancashire
- City University London
- Coventry University
- Cranfield University
- De Montfort University
- University of Dundee
- Durham University
- University of East London
- University of Essex (*multifaith facility, not specific for Muslims*)
- University of Exeter
- University of Glamorgan
- University of Glasgow (*only a multifaith room*)
- University of Greenwich
- Glyndŵr University
- Heriot-Watt University
- University of Hertfordshire
- University of Huddersfield
- University of Hull
- Imperial College London
- Keele University
- University of Kent
- Kingston University
- Lancaster University
- University of Leeds
- Leeds Metropolitan University
- University of Leicester
- University of Liverpool
- Liverpool Hope University

- Liverpool John Moores University
- University of London
 - Goldsmith, University of London (*multifaith facility*)
 - Heythrop College
 - King's College London
 - London School of Economics and Political Science
 - Queen Mary, University of London
 - Royal Holloway, University of London
 - St George's, University of London
 - School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)
 - School of Pharmacy, University of London
 - University College London (UCL)
- London Metropolitan University
- Loughborough University
- University of Manchester
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Middlesex University
- Newcastle University
- Northumbria University
- University of Nottingham
- Nottingham Trent University
- Oxford Brookes University
- University of Portsmouth
- University of Reading
- The Robert Gordon University
- Roehampton University
- Royal College of Art
- University of Salford
- University of Southampton
- Staffordshire University
- University of Stirling
- University of Strathclyde
- University of Surrey
- University of Sussex
- Swansea University
- University of Teesside
- Thames Valley University (*part of the "world faith" room*)
- University of Wales
- University of Warwick (*currently being built*)
- University of Westminster
- University of the West of England
- University of Winchester
- University of Wolverhampton
- University of York

Birmingham University Prayer Room

"As a Muslim it is an integral part of my faith to observe five daily ritual prayers at their set times, regardless of whether I am at home or elsewhere. Having an Islamic prayer room within the university premises is a great relief and, albeit a privilege, a necessity for me. This opportunity allows me to skip the dilemma between choosing to rush home between lectures or scour the campus for a suitably clean and inconspicuous spot to pray. The prayer room also serves as an excellent venue for study circles and relaxation. Without it I would be all over the place..."

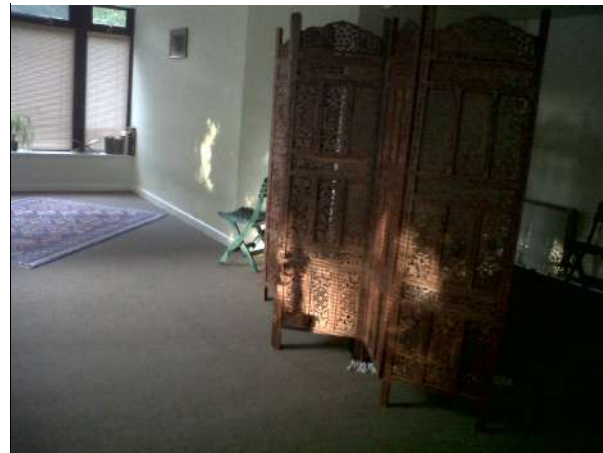
"Having a prayer room at University has made life much easier for many Muslim students... During the Winter months in particular having a prayer room is invaluable, as the majority of prayers fall between 1pm-6pm meaning that all prayers need to be performed during the working day. During Ramadan the prayer room serves as a place for Muslim students to come together and break their fast. Without it University life would be much harder for Muslim students as prayer is such an integral part of our daily lives."



The Birmingham University prayer room was established in 1987 and is located in the student union building on the main university campus.

Cambridge University Prayer Room

“Coming to Cambridge, after having spent all my life in a Muslim country with prayer facilities available at extreme ease everywhere, one thing I dreaded the most was not having a suitable place to pray in close vicinity. Thankfully, I was lucky to have my department near the main student prayer area here in Cambridge. Not only was I able to pray in peace, without disturbing anyone or putting them at any inconvenience or unease, but I also got the chance to meet other fellow Muslims and maintain a healthy social contact. The prayer area for me was not just a place to pray, but a place of comfort where I could go any time to study, meet other people, and participate in different events held by the ISoc [Islamic Society] like reading circles, zikr [prayer] sessions, general talks, etc. I feel extremely lucky to come here to study at Cambridge and be able to maintain my spiritual life, alongside obtaining top-quality education.”



The prayer room was established in 2004 and is located in the heart of the University on the Sidgwick site (the region of the campus containing Faculties including Law, History, Languages and Economics). Activation of a student’s university card allows 24 hour access. Adjacent to the prayer hall are a male and female toilet and facilities for ablution.

Liverpool University Prayer Room

“The prayer room is housed in a building adjoining the Students’ Guild and is very accessible to all students (e.g. 5 minutes away from lecture halls, library, hospital etc) so it’s very easy to use during various times of the day to offer prayers without compromising on lectures and classes. It’s also useful for Friday prayers and during Ramadan for breaking fasts in the evenings.”

“Having a prayer room on campus is a necessity for Muslim students, as when lectures are close together it ensures we don’t miss our compulsory daily prayers. As well as this, it provides a place for spiritual contemplation and congregational gatherings.”

“The prayer room enables sisters to meet other Muslim friends; it is also convenient for those who are not living close to the university and who would otherwise not have access to wudu [ablution] facilities. It is also a quiet and friendly atmosphere for students to pray Jumuah [friday] prayers.”



Imperial College London Prayer Room (located in Kensington)



Manchester University Prayer Rooms (one located in the North Campus and one in the South Campus)



Statements from current and former students at Oxford University highlighting the urgent need for a prayer room

“Throughout my undergraduate studies, the lack of a prayer room was very disorientating for me. I joined the university during the month of Ramadan. Ramadan, a challenging and stressful time of year usually spent in the comfort of one’s own community and household, was now potentially a very isolating experience. After asking students at the freshers’ fair where the prayer room was (in the hope that I could go along and meet some other Muslim students), I was surprised to hear that Oxford didn’t have one. Not having a prayer room, for me, meant no focal point of my social community, nowhere to practice my faith with fellow believers, nowhere to congregate to meet new people and get my bearings in this new city, and nowhere to seek the company of fellow Muslim students during the difficult transition to university life.

6 years later, and my experience of studying medicine at Oxford is punctuated by having to offer my prayers in between library shelves (much to the surprise of my fellow students, and my embarrassment – “Yes, I’m ok. I’m just praying!”), in the university parks, in corners of college quads, in empty seminar rooms, in the back of a lecture theatre, in changing rooms, and in the dressing cubicles of shops. Not only is it quite humiliating to have to pray in such pockets, but also introduces a level of stress and pragmatic organisation into my day that can often be impossible to successfully execute, particularly in the winter months when the days are short, and the midday and afternoon prayers fall within a four-hour window.

I must give credit where credit is due: the Social Sciences Library is the only library that I have come across that offers a facility/space for students to pray in. Despite being a medical student, I was forced to study in a humanities library for 6 years due to this reason (which, as you can imagine, is sub-optimal), considering the lack of appropriate educational resources for my course.

I sincerely hope that Oxford will bring itself into line with the vast majority of universities in the UK, and provide a communal space for its Muslim students. I am still hopeful that future students will not have to endure the annoyance and disruption experienced whilst simply trying to engage with their faith. During a time when it has become increasingly difficult, even unfashionable, to publically be a Muslim student on campus, a prayer room would provide a much-needed retreat.”

“I’m a second year PPE student at Brasenose College. I live in Saudi Arabia and Leicester - both places are renowned for being well populated with Mosques to go to when prayer time comes around - and for me in my first year it was an incredible shock to find out that Oxford University didn't even have a prayer room. For the first term I really struggled to come to terms with this enormous shift in my life. This is as the very fabric of the Muslim faith is based around prayer - with it taking place at 5 times during the day and with all community events being either based in or coordinated through a central location such as the local

mosque. This is completely lacking in Oxford and communication amongst the Muslim community is curtailed because of this. This would not be so much of an issue if the local mosques were close by and Muslim students could integrate with those communities, but because those communities are a twenty minute bike ride away - making the trip impractical five times a day - this is not possible in Oxford.

I have visited Leicester University where they have a thriving mosque within the university campus. I also visited the LSE prayer room. Both prayer rooms are well managed and looked after by the Islamic Society. They are used like any prayer room in a busy university is - for prayers, Friday congregations, and as a meeting point for the Muslim community.”

“When I first came to Oxford, I was surprised by the absence of a prayer room for Muslim students - especially since my old school was able to provide such a basic facility. The closest thing the university provides to a prayer room is in the Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies, but since this is only open during working hours, only three-out-of-five prayers can be fulfilled in winter and one-out-of-five in the summer. Outside of these hours, fulfilling one's daily prayers becomes problematic in central Oxford. The options are: a. to walk/cycle long distances to the local mosques in Cowley (which isn't particularly useful during exam season) or b. find an isolated area in the library (which is very rarely the case). Being a preclinical medic, with a very contact-intensive course, I frequently turn up to afternoon lectures sweating and having had no lunch, as a result of the absence of an easily accessible prayer room.”

“I'm a third year biochemistry student from the Queen's College. My lectures, usually, take place in the Physiology, Anatomy and Genetics building between 9.00 am and 12.00 pm. For most of the academic year these hours coincide with the Midday (Dhuhr) prayer, and, since my accommodation is a 20 minute walk from the science area, I pray in as undisturbed a corner as possible in the Radcliffe Science Library. I have my practical sessions in the Zoology building between 11.00 am and 5.00 pm, these hours coincide with both the Dhuhr and late Afternoon (Asr) prayer. In this building I, usually, pray in an empty lab-room, the next-door copy machine room (when empty), or next to rarely used staircases and elevators. As for my tutorials, the hours and places for these frequently change, so I plan my time to be able to pray either in a library (the College or Radcliffe Science Library) or my room. Life at the University without prayer facilities is awkward, and installing these would provide students with a safe and convenient environment to practice an important tenet of their faith.

“Studying clinical medicine I spend most of my weekdays at the Headington hospitals. Fortunately, there are several chapel/prayer rooms complete with prayer mats, scarves and even a copy of the Quran. I have found this to be a very valuable resource! Whilst coping with the demands of 9-5 medicine I can easily slip away to the prayer room to make sure I don’t miss out on the obligatory prayers. My first 3 years were spent at Cambridge which does not have a prayer room on its medical sciences site and both the fraught trips back to my room during breaks and lectures/prayers missed make me grateful for the resource I have at the hospital. Cambridge does have a prayer room on its arts faculty site which they use for meetings/recitals/circles/terawih prayers and much more. I believe a prayer room in central Oxford, if adequately located and maintained, would be well used and a priceless amenity for Muslim students in Oxford.”

"The prayer spaces at the University of Michigan, where I was an undergraduate, were vital to me as a practising Muslim and busy student. Reflection rooms were located in several of the campus’s most important buildings, and were open at all hours for use by students. These reflection rooms gave me the freedom to study at campus buildings, rather than at home, as I could easily find a space to pray when I needed to.

While at Oxford, however, finding a good place to pray was substantially more difficult. There were few good places, either in college, or in University buildings. I know my experience would have benefited from an easily accessible, central prayer room.

At a University that houses several chapels, I think it is time that a prayer room be built to reflect the increasing diversity in the Oxford student body. I believe that accommodating the religious needs of students is as important as accommodating their intellectual and social needs--a prayer room would go a long way in doing so for the growing Muslim population on campus"