

SCHOOL UNIFORM: GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS

This guidance is the outcome of a UCL Community Engaged Learning project. It has been produced through dialogue between educators: staff and students at UCL Institute of Education from MA programmes and Initial Teacher Education, and the School of Sexuality Education.

It is a working document that will be revised in response to feedback, which we welcome. Please contact info@schoolofsexed.org to provide feedback and comments.

“When I was at school, a Muslim student was asked to remove their headscarf because it was 'causing a stir'.”

“When I was at school, I was told off for having a coloured bra on.”

“When I was at school, I would be catcalled in my uniform on my walk home.”

“When I was growing up, I wasn't allowed to have a moustache due to school policy. A teacher gave me a razor and I had to go and shave it off in the middle of the day.”

“When I was at school, we were told to adjust our skirt lengths because they were distracting the male teachers.”

“At my current school, students aren't allowed to have a buzz cut. Why?”

“On my placement, I watched a teacher spend 15 minutes making his whole class line up, so he could inspect their uniform. All that time could have been given to teaching, learning and building positive relationships instead.”

- Participants in the Community Engaged Learning Project, UCL IoE, 2021.

Introduction

Over the past academic year and in the wake of Black Lives Matter and Everyone's Invited, many UK schools have been reflecting on their policies, procedures and curriculum in relation to equity, inclusion and safeguarding. However, one key component of developing socially just, welcoming and diverse school cultures, tackling sexual violence, promoting LGBTQIA+ and human rights is often overlooked by schools: school uniform policy and its implementation.

When it comes to uniform, there are two key elements to consider: 1) the rules themselves and 2) how these rules are implemented, the practices that enact the rules.

This document outlines how governors, senior leaders and class teachers might consider both aspects in a way that centres childrens' rights and well-being.

This document contains:

- A summary of key concepts and legislation relevant to school uniform;
- Guidance for senior leaders on designing and reviewing your uniform policy;
- Guidance for class teachers on navigating and/or managing school uniform.

An intersectional approach

In this guidance we are taking an intersectional approach. Intersectionality was pioneered by Black feminists to challenge erasures of both race and class struggles. Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw - Black feminist legal scholars - developed intersectionality to understand and challenge legal rulings that disadvantaged women of colour.

With school uniform, we need to consider how different experiences of oppression and discrimination compound. For example, a non-binary young person of colour could be affected by both binary and racist aspects of a uniform policy at once.

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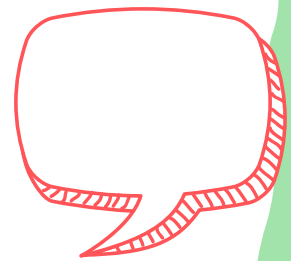
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Is uniform really an 'equaliser'?

An argument given for school uniform is that it makes everyone equal. But the following pages will illustrate how, in many ways, uniform policies can create and exacerbate inequalities.

Here are just a few examples provided by student teachers and MA students at UCL IoE (2021):

"Generally, shirts are thicker than conventional cheap blouses, so less can be seen through them. Those wearing blouses are more likely to be told off or slut-shamed for being able to see what's underneath."



"I went to school in Shanghai. Each school had a different style uniform, and there would be a comparison between schools - "your uniform is better/uglier than mine". And private schools had a uniform, but public schools you often wore your own clothes. This all created a hierarchy between schools when in public."

"My parents couldn't afford a new shirt for me so I had to wear my sister's old ones. You can imagine how I got bullied for wearing a 'girl's' blouse instead of a boy's."

"When I was at school, the prefect system and badges created a clear hierarchy."

"Try calculating the cost of uniform from different schools, especially schools in the same area but serving different communities. It's clear to see how some require specialist items and suppliers in a way that could be prohibitive for poorer families"

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Advice for leadership when reviewing and implementing your uniform policy:

1) Ensure inclusivity and equality are at the heart of your uniform policy.

In line with the [Equality Act 2010](#) and wider ethical obligations to young people, a uniform policy must not directly or indirectly discriminate, or reinforce double standards or inequities. This includes inclusivity with regard to: gender, gender reassignment, sexuality, disability, religion or belief, race and ethnicity.

Gender (1)

Uniform policies should not reproduce the gender binary, i.e. there should not be a particular set of clothes and rules for girls and another for boys. Uniforms should avoid embedding assumptions about 'proper' gendered behaviour - as is the case, for instance, with pencil skirts that prevent running and free movement, unlike trousers.

It's important to think about any binaries which emerge in practice. For example, if the policy states that skirts or trousers can be worn by anyone, but you notice a pattern which reproduces gender binaries in the choices students make, consider why this might be.

Could the options be broadened, for example, by ensuring that there are a range of trouser options so that people with different body shapes and sizes can feel comfortable in trousers? The trends and cultures which policies produce are at least as important as the rules they enforce.

(1) See Stonewall, Glossary of Terms, 'gender identity':
<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/faqs-and-glossary/glossary-terms>

Tackling rape culture and misogyny: what's the link to school uniforms?

All staff should be trained to ensure they do not enforce the uniform policy in ways which are sexist, misogynistic or victim-blaming. Uniform rules must not be explained to girls in terms of “modesty”, “decency”, “preventing distraction” to boys or male members of staff, still less “preventing sexual assault”.

Such justifications are highly problematic, because they suggest that it is girls' responsibility to dress in a certain way to avoid being looked at inappropriately or experiencing unwanted behaviour. This removes the responsibility from the perpetrator of inappropriate behaviour and that they are not accountable for their actions. It suggests that men and boys are unable to control their behaviour. It also sends a harmful message that it's okay to harass someone/ behave inappropriately if they look a certain way.

Reprimanding a young person for their uniform using sexist language such as “slutty” is unacceptable and harmful. Equally, assessing the length of skirts with tape measures, sticks, or making students kneel on the floor are practices of surveillance and control that impact girls more than boys and can thus be seen as discriminatory and stigmatising, as well as legitimising excessive scrutiny of girls' bodies and perpetuating rape myths.

“We had a deputy head who repeatedly called girls “slutty” and “prostitutes”. Looking back, I think she really didn't like girls at all.” - Student teacher, 2021.

The connection between uniform policy and sexual violence is not made clear in the latest Ofsted recommendations or the DfE's advice on [peer-on-peer abuse](#) (2021). However, in order to be compliant with the recommendations in these documents, in particular taking “a whole school approach” which “reinforce[s] a culture where sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are not tolerated”, the role of uniform must be seriously considered.

Race

Schools must - legally and ethically - ensure that their uniform policy or the enforcement is not implicitly or explicitly racist. For example, uniform policies that state students must have “natural hair”, or must not have “extreme haircuts” or “non-traditional hairstyles” or hair that “blocks the view of other students” are often loaded with racist connotations, i.e. equate “acceptable” or “professional” hair with whiteness, and affect some groups more than others.

Race, religion and culture intersect here, as is the case, for instance, with dreadlocks. In 2018 [a Rastafarian schoolboy won an indirect discrimination case](#) against a school that isolated him because of his dreadlocks. For more information about race-based hair discrimination, please see the [Halo Collective](#). Everyday Racism also has a useful [resources page](#).

“In my school, the uniform policy was more strictly enforced among black students in a predominantly white school.” - Student teacher, 2021.

“At my school we had to wear black/navy or 'skin colour' tights - a Black peer was told that she had to remove and change her tights because hers were brown - the colour of her skin.” - Student teacher, 2021.

**Further reading: ‘Ruby Williams: No child with afro hair should suffer like me’:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-45521094>**

Religion or culture

Accommodate choices linked to faith, for example, by ensuring students are allowed to wear a hijab. Again, failure to do so may be in breach of the Equality Act 2010. If such clothing choices affect other aspects of your uniform policy, for example the visibility of your school badge, ensure you provide an accessible and appropriate solution. Students, parents and carers should never be made to feel like their faith or culture is a problem or inconvenience to the school, and should not be responsible for aligning their cultural or religious practices with the school's uniform policy.

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“On reviewing various schools’ uniform policies, I found a policy which was inclusive of the pupil demographic (majority Muslim). It included Muslim clothing with school logo to ensure that the culture and religion is being respected.” - MA Student, UCL, 2021.

“I came across a school uniform policy which stated that pupils are not allowed to wear henna, and pupils who come in with henna on their hands will have to wear gloves. Henna is an important part of many people’s culture and religion - this is another example of a discriminatory uniform policy.” - MA student, UCL, 2021.

Young people with SEND

Consider whether your uniform policy might discriminate against or stigmatise students with special educational needs, disabilities or neurodiversity. This might happen in different ways: for instance, if your uniform policy exempts some students from rules (e.g. about wearing blazers at all times) due to SEND, then the exemption itself is stigmatising, marking those students as different. Equally, some students may have unusually extreme reactions to aspects of school uniforms, such as the feel of certain fabrics.

If a policy can accommodate such diverse students without making special exemptions, it should be better able to accommodate all students.

“My nephew is very susceptible to sensory things. He HATES wearing trousers so wears school shorts year round. He’s been told off many times by teachers. He also only wears shorts for PE and has been banned from doing PE in winter because of it, even though he’s happy to do it in shorts.” - Student teacher, 2021.

Other factors to consider

Socioeconomic status

COVID-19 has drawn attention to the material factors that can affect young people's access to and experiences of education. The cost of school uniform, particularly for families with more than one child and / or at different schools, can be financially challenging. Families may especially struggle to afford more than one pair of shoes. Requiring them to spend money on the kind of shoes that their children would never wear outside of school, or on named costly brands, may be unjust and unfair.

If relevant to your policy, be sure to justify the reasons for mandating parents/carers purchase specific items from more expensive retailers. If you struggle to outline a clear justification then that stipulation could be removed. Remember to take other equality considerations into account here too. For instance, if only one type of item (e.g. a skirt but not trousers) is required to be bought from a specialist supplier, this affects those who choose to wear skirts more than those who don't.

If a student is wearing the 'incorrect' uniform, schools should first consider why this may be the case, and engage in a conversation with the student in the first instance, rather than sanctioning. Their well-being and presence at school should be prioritised.

Rules should not assume a white, middle-class norm and implicitly criticise families from other socio-economic groups for their clothing or style choices. Avoid language about clothing or appearance being 'scruffy', 'messy', 'professional dress' or 'respectable' – these terms are subjective and loaded with classed assumptions.

Best-practice use of pupil premium funding includes consulting with a child on how this money is spent. For some, support sourcing suitable clothing could have a transformative effect on a child's day-to-day school experience.

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“We talked about the way that 'workwear' type uniforms are preparing people for a certain type of workforce. Why are we assuming people will work in an office?”- MA Student, UCL, 2021.

Body diversity

Many uniforms are not designed with different body types in mind, so can be uncomfortable for young people who don't fit a standardised shape or size. For example, those with bigger breasts or larger bodies in general can be reprimanded for breaches of school uniform more often than others. This form of scrutiny also risks compounding body image issues.

It's important for teachers and senior leaders to distinguish enforcing uniform policy and policing student bodies. The latter is never acceptable, and if a policy necessitates it (e.g. because it expects all students to wear specifically shaped shirts which don't fit some bodies properly), then the issue lies with the details of that policy.

Remember also that young people often grow very fast. A skirt or trousers that are the regulation length one month may not be a few months later, but constantly replacing them may be unaffordable. Equally, students may choose to adjust the regulated clothing to ensure their physical and emotional comfort. Making assumptions about their motivations for adjusting clothing - for example, assuming that girls shorten shirts to “attract attention” - is problematic.

Moreover, puberty often results in feelings of self-consciousness and even shame. It is essential that these feelings are not exacerbated by unnecessary rules and regulations, for example commenting on the visibility of bra straps (a child could have recently bought their first proper bra and already be hyper-aware of their body and new item of clothing). Overall, educators must remember that all bodies are different, including the way and rates at which puberty changes the body, and the diverse way in which young people experience these changes. Offering choice and flexibility embraces this diversity.

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“In my adolescence even the male teachers would constantly draw attention to what was seen as the large ‘package’ at the front of my trousers and joke about it.” Student teacher, 2021.

Environment

If you change school uniform design too frequently, you create additional costs for families and contribute to the problem of “fast fashion” that is environmentally irresponsible. Consider:

- Do you have a policy to donate and recycle?
- Are your uniforms made of artificial micro-fibres that have been shown to wash into the sea and pollute the oceans with plastic?
- Could you swap to all-cotton shirts?

Socioeconomic and environmental aspects intersect. For instance, supermarkets may sell all-cotton shirts cheaper than ones with school logos. An iron-on school logo could be provided instead of a complete shirt with a logo from specialist providers.

Take a look at [Smarter Uniforms](#), a second-hand uniform shop.

Young people are also increasingly environmentally aware. Many are also concerned about global inequalities and solidarity and might be curious about the low paid women's labour that generally goes into making uniform items. Does your uniform policy allow them to make 'ethical' choices?

“At my current school, the uniform policy says students must wear leather shoes. An increasing number of young people today are vegan, don't wear animal products or want to make environmentally conscious choices - their right to do so is undermined by this policy. What's more, leather shoes are often more expensive.” Student teacher, 2021.

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Advice for leadership when reviewing and implementing your uniform policy (continued):

2) Community consultation and student voice.

We recommend consulting students, parents and carers when reviewing or designing a uniform policy. This process should enable those consulted to submit feedback or ideas anonymously, owing to the sensitive nature of subjects such as the cost of uniform, experiences of discrimination or matters relating to gender identity. However, leadership should also ensure that a representative sample of the school community has been consulted.

Consider how your school could take a creative approach to consulting with students on uniforms, including through the curriculum (see Section 5 below).

Uniform policies and procedures should be regularly reviewed to ensure they reflect the ever-changing needs of the school community. The policy itself should provide information about the review date and process.

3) Centre student well-being.

Schools sometimes appear to identify uniform as part of discipline and behaviour policy. We recommend instead locating uniform as part of the student well-being agenda to create a shift in perceptions of its purpose and role. For instance, does the way uniform is policed make certain students repeatedly feel alienated and like they don't belong?

“At my current school where I'm a trainee teacher, girls are asked to remove their acrylic nails then and there, or go home.” - Student teacher, 2021.

3) Centre student wellbeing - cont.

If a uniform is enforced, it should be done in a way that is a conversation rather than a sanction. The uniform itself should be comfortable and practical and used in ways that promote student self-regulation. For example, students should be able to remove layers when the weather is hot and add layers when it is cold, without having to seek staff permission first. Policies which enforce constant wearing of blazers or shorts, regardless of the temperature, are out-dated and impractical.

Alongside physical comfort and practicality, consider the emotional well-being of your student body. Young people have emerging and changing identities, and expressing this through particular clothing choices can often be beneficial for their well-being. As such, we recommend building flexibility into your uniform policy.

Enforcement of the uniform should not cause harm or hinder student learning, which happens when schools send students home or put them in isolation on the grounds of uniform issues, sometimes even on their very first day of secondary school.

“Since COVID children have come to school in their PE kit on the day they have PE. It’s been really popular - more comfortable, less washing, more practical. Could this be an opportunity for change?” - Student teacher, 2021.

“At my school, there are rules around make-up, but these do not take into account student well-being. For instance, they might want to wear make-up to hide acne. It also seems to be the style of make-up which is policed - for example students are disciplined for wearing false eyelashes but not mascara.” - Student teacher, 2021.

Further reading and useful resources: ‘School Uniform: Dressing Girls to Fail’ (2021). A Report by Let Clothes Be Clothes for the Department for Education.

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4) Provide training for staff on how the uniform policy should be enacted.

Firstly, leadership may wish to consider whether SLT should take responsibility for ensuring adherence to uniform policy. Making class teachers and tutors responsible for enforcing uniform policy could undermine the efforts they are making to build relationships with their students. Men participants in our project also told us that they felt very uncomfortable about expectations that they would police the length of girls' skirts, or witnessing how other men teachers did so.

If all teachers are required to enforce the uniform policy, clear training should be provided on how this should be done. Ideally this would take place at the start of the academic year, e.g. during an autumn INSET. Training should include:

- A clear overview of what the uniform policy is;
- An understanding of equality and diversity, and how this might relate to uniform - e.g. that students may choose to express themselves in different ways and wear certain clothes owing to their faith, family background or culture;
- How uniform interlinks with sexual violence, e.g. through perpetuating myths about links between dress and sexual assault;
- What to do if they are uncertain;
- Prioritising learning over uniform enforcement;
- The difference between policing uniform and policing bodies;
- Pupil premium and what support is available for disadvantaged students around uniform;
- Reflection on unconscious biases in relation to practices around uniform;
- Guidance around use of language which does not shame or blame, and centres student well-being.

Further reading: 'School Uniform Policy in Scottish schools: Control and Consent'. Shanks, R. et al.

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5) Take an educational and cross-curricular approach.

Schools are educational institutions, so school uniform can be more than just a policy. It offers rich and meaningful opportunities to teach across the curriculum about key issues in contemporary society, not least the environment, sustainability, fast fashion, design, fair trade and global inequalities, gendered relations, anti-racism, debt and economics. PSHE, RSE, Textiles, Design and History all have clear connections to these themes.

P.E. kit must not be forgotten as part of a uniform policy - the same principles and approaches outlined in this document must also be applied here.

We welcome case studies from teachers who are taking school uniform as a teaching topic so that we can add them here.

Advice for teachers:

Whether you're an NQT or you've been working at your school for many years, you may have concerns about your schools' uniform policy and how it's enforced, or you might feel uncertain about how you personally enforce the policy. Here are some suggestions for navigating enforcement and championing empowerment:

- Share our guidance for students documents with pupils to ensure they are aware of their rights.
- Be honest when you've got something wrong: model accountability, honesty and learning.
- Try to circulate this literature - share it with other staff members or put it on a noticeboard in your staffroom.
- Read up on your school's uniform policy and ensure you know the content well.
- Be consistent and fair to all students.
- If students try to raise issues about the school uniform, try to offer scaffolding sentence structures so that they are able to articulate how they are feeling. "When you do this - _____ it makes me feel _____"
"Next time, could you _____".

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School uniform - exploratory evaluation questions for Governors and Senior Leaders:

- Is the policy inclusive enough to make everyone feel safe and that they belong in the school, rather than being simply 'tolerated'?
- Could any aspects of your uniform policy be in breach of the Equality Act 2010 and the protected characteristics?
- How do/will you engage with both staff and students in the creation and/or review of your uniform policy?
- When and how will your uniform policy be reviewed?
- If an aspect of your uniform policy cannot be justified, should it be there at all? (For example, if girls are allowed to wear a stud in both ears, but boys can only wear a stud in one.)
- Could a student who is transitioning or non-binary potentially find that your uniform policy contributes to feelings or gender dysphoria?
- Have you received complaints regarding your uniform policy and its enforcement previously? If so, have these been followed up and acted on?
- Is the uniform affordable to all families in your school community?
- Would SLT feel comfortable to wear your school uniform themselves? If not, is it appropriate?
- Does the policy leave any aspects open to discrimination, e.g. through phrases such as "at the member of staff's discretion"?
- Does the policy attempt to stipulate what students can wear outside of school? If so, has leadership considered whether it has a right to enforce this?
- Has the environmental impact of the uniform policy been considered? Has the school considered ways to reuse, recycle or share uniform?
- Which aspects of the uniform could do without logos, enabling families to source them from cheaper suppliers?