

Amsterdam college sticks to its principles over demands for prayer room

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Islamic students at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences (HvA) are pressuring the faculty to provide a prayer room after the school's "meditation room" was closed. But the school board is insisting that the University is a secular institution and has no obligation to provide space for religious activities.

According to HvA Rector Jet Bussemaker, the university decided to close the meditation room after it was commandeered by Muslim students as a prayer room.

An HvA spokesperson said: "This is not a mosque. The largest mosque in Amsterdam is just a 10 minute walk from here. Anyone who really feels they have to pray can walk to the mosque. The students also walk round the corner to get a cup of coffee or a sandwich."

The protesting students say they are misunderstood. Their spokesperson says they just want a quiet space at school where they can pray.

"We've noticed that fewer people are praying. It's a big problem for the girls, because they're also wearing a headscarf. It's just not practical for them. Actually what we need is a space that we can close off, where we can shut the door so that other people don't keep walking past. Before prayers you have to wash ritually. At the moment we're doing it in the toilet and that's not a problem but people keep walking in and asking what we're doing and that makes everything really uncomfortable."

But the HvA is sticking to its principles and said, "A prayer room will never, ever be provided."

The board says the school is open for everyone and to everyone but "it is not a religious institute. The students should spend more time studying. But students are free to pray wherever they want to."

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