

Building belonging: Developing religiously inclusive cultures for Muslim students in higher education

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Foreword

We are living in extraordinary times. On the one hand, we are living through the greatest peace-time challenge for a generation. And on the other, the pandemic and the killing of George Floyd has led to society being awoken in new ways to the injustices and inequalities that exist everywhere.

Inclusivity is an important part of addressing this. Building understanding of where barriers exist, where people are or feel excluded from the outset is of course key. Across the higher education sector, there are scores of people doing marvellous work to ensure our institutions are welcoming places for all students, whoever they are, whatever their background. We are not a sector that has always got it right, but institutions have for decades been doing more and more to address access to higher education, participation and success for all students.

But inclusivity must go further beyond access and diversity. It is about a deep sense of belonging for all students.

This is such a welcome and timely report. Belonging is always an important aspect of student life. It is something that every higher education institution should be considering and striving towards as part of its student experience work. But it feels even more important now as we look to a likely different, in part distant and potentially disrupted student experience in the wake of the global pandemic. There is strong evidence that a sense of belonging amongst students is directly linked to their success, progression and sticking with higher education.

This report is a really useful guide for institutions wanting to understand the benefits of belonging and putting in place specific, practical ways to enhance belonging for their Muslim students. Whether Muslim students are a large, small or growing part of your institution's current student body, this is a rich resource to guide your work to provide a safe and nurturing environment. But even more so, and why this is such an important report, it will help you have the conversations and bring about change in a way that leads to a renewed institutional culture; one where not only students have a deep sense of belonging, but where the whole institution becomes a richer, more inclusive and ultimately more nurturing place.

Part of the culture change referred to in this report will also have to require new measures of success and a move away from chasing after league table metrics. Some have suggested that these 'rank-seeking' behaviours increase inequalities and hierarchies in higher education institutions (Blackmore, 2018). Now is a time for us to take on challenging ourselves as a sector and as a society far more actively and seriously. At the University of Winchester, where Maisha Islam and I both work, we talk about being committed to: looking within with humility, listening keenly, and acting to effect real change.

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Advance HE continues to be a strong leader and voice within this space. We welcome the role they play and the excellent resources they provide for institutions to set about making real, positive change. This report is another of those excellent resources. I am sure it will have an impact; that it will result in many more students having a greater sense of belonging, whatever their faith, race or background.

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University of Winchester

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Introduction

A considerable body of literature details the inequalities faced by various student groups within higher education (HE), including those from low socio-economic backgrounds (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010), commuting students (Thomas and Jones, 2017), students with mental health difficulties and disabilities (Hughes and Spanner, 2019) and those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds (Akel, 2019).

Whilst this is not, of course, an exhaustive list of the students who face such inequalities, the United Kingdom (UK) HE sector as a whole has begun to take stock of such issues and to work actively to redress some of these inequalities. For example, following the Universities UK and National Union of Students (2019) 'Closing the Gap' report, concerted efforts are being made to reduce the Black, Asian and minority ethnic degree-awarding gap and to consider much more holistic approaches (Tatsi and Darby, 2018; Duhs *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, in line with *Office for Students* requirements, those HE providers charging higher tuition fees must, as an increased level of accountability for the elimination of differential gaps, publish access and participation plans. The HE sector has thus been considering how various student groups are to be supported *throughout* their time at university so that increased access into HE does indeed translate into successful outcomes (Engstrom and Tinto, 2008).

Several reports and resources acknowledging and addressing these inequalities within HE include the University Mental Health Charter from *Student Minds* (Hughes and Spanner, 2019), *The Student Engagement Partnership* (TSEP) study of commuter student engagement (Thomas and Jones, 2017) and an in-depth report exploring the experiences of disabled students from the *Higher Education Academy* (Jacklin *et al.*, 2007). A pertinent aspect of each of these reports and resources is the theme of 'belonging', whereby the overall experience of students and the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging to their institution have significant impact upon their achievement and progression.

Religious students are often neglected in discourse about under-represented groups within HE, with the result that universities may, mistakenly, perceive themselves as secular sites, where religion is considered threatening and institutional policies are inadequate for meeting the needs – and therefore for enhancing the experience – of religious students and, indeed, staff (Aune and Stevenson, 2017). Without having appropriately considered religion and its pluralities, senior leaders face having to deal with complex issues related to the institutional accommodation of many faiths – decidedly uncharted waters, especially when precedence has most often been given to other inclusivity agendas, such as sexual equality (Modood and Calhoun, 2015). As a key marker of their intent to recognise the identities and meet the needs of all individuals and groups, universities must be open to supporting their students' religious identities *and* maintaining that support, particularly because to do so has the potential to

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produce favourable student outcomes and levels of satisfaction (Mayrl and Oeur, 2009; Cole and Ahmadi, 2010; Bowman, Felix and Ortis, 2014).

Focus, context and audience of report

This report aims to act as guidance for universities wishing to consider holistic ways of fostering a sense of belonging in their Muslim students and, as such, hopes to be able to move beyond the notion of faith and religion as something merely requiring slight practical provision to something so properly embedded into institutional philosophy and structure that it will actively transform the institution's culture (Aune, 2015). Where religion cannot be a homogenised experience, this report focuses on the importance of belonging, with specific reference and relevance to Muslim students in HE.

This report may be of particular interest to institutions with a higher proportion of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students, as there is a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion, which often cannot be meaningfully disaggregated – ie students coming from certain Asian backgrounds are also much more likely to identify as Muslim (Strand, 2007). However, using data from the *Higher Education Statistics Agency* (HESA), the number of British Muslims entering HE is likely to be increasing each year (Malik and Wykes, 2018). Institutions – regardless of the make-up of their populations – should take on such recommendations if they are to remain, in their current and future practice, accessible to a diverse range of students.

The importance of belonging

The concept of belonging within HE has been documented as a factor directly linked to student success, progression and retention. A *Paul Hamlyn Foundation*, *HEFCE* (now *Office for Students*), *Higher Education Academy* and *Action for Access* project, which looked at these outcomes in twenty-two HE institutions, reported: “*At the heart of successful retention and success is a strong sense of belonging in HE for all students*” (Thomas, 2012, p.6).

Whilst the project concluded that the academic sphere was the most important site engendering a sense of belonging, definitions of the concept do encompass multiple spheres in which belonging can be nurtured and developed.

In an academic sense, belonging can be understood as being “*accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teacher and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class*” (Goodenow, 1993, p.25). Elsewhere, others discuss the highly emotional core to belonging, where it is equated to ‘being at home’ and therefore involves connecting the self to others (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010; May, 2011). Whilst Strayhorn (2019) also notes how a sense of belonging can lead to positive outcomes and success, he avers that a key dimension of belonging is how it is

influenced by one's identity and thus can be particularly significant for students from marginalised groups.

According to the Young Ahn and Davis (2020) conceptualisation of students' sense of belonging, there are four domains of belonging that student engagement policies in HE must reflect: academic engagement, social engagement, surroundings and personal space, the latter two often being neglected as domains of belonging which take into account students' living/geographical spaces as well as their personal interests and identities. The above literature states that belonging is something that is dynamic and must be nurtured. As a result, universities should aim to foster a sense of belonging in *all* of their students, no matter what their faith, race or circumstances may be.

Where few studies have explored belonging in a variety of social identity groups, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) have found that minoritised students have more complex needs that must be met if they are to feel a sense of belonging. To consider religion may thus help to bring a level of equitability to the concept of belonging – ie allowing Muslim students to enjoy levels of belonging similar to those of their non-Muslim peers.

Muslim students in higher education

It often appears that little is known about the participation, outcomes and on-campus experiences of different religious students within UK HE (Aune and Stevenson, 2017; Codioli McMaster, 2020). However, Stevenson (2013) noted that religious students often face the paradox of being both visible and invisible on UK campuses, feeling overlooked, undefended and disregarded. Though Muslim students can and do have positive experiences in UK HE, Stevenson (2018) reported that others suffer disadvantage, hostility and discrimination – all of which can have a negative impact upon their overall experience, sense of belonging and educational outcomes. Muslim students' experiences, often hostile and prejudicial to them, have been detailed elsewhere as an issue not only within the British context but also internationally (Seggie and Sanford, 2010; Awan, 2012; Possamai *et al.*, 2016).

Regarding Muslim students' outcomes, a comprehensive and pioneering report from Advance HE (Codioli McMaster, 2020) looked at participation and outcomes of all religious students and found that:

- + Muslim students made up the second largest religious group in HE
 - + Muslim students were much more likely to be studying full time and for their first undergraduate degree
 - + Muslim students were over-represented in Science, Engineering and Technology subjects
 - + Muslim students were more likely to be 'first-in-the-family' university students
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- + less than two thirds of Muslim students graduated with an upper-second or first-class degree.

Importantly, the Advance HE report emphasises that such evidence should be used as a foundation from which further research into this area might be encouraged to spring, in order to inform future work on tackling inequality in the sector. Though the report provides a rich quantitative base, providing an insight into such experiences, the use of qualitative research may illuminate more clearly the experiences and voices behind these figures (Stevenson, 2014). This is especially important in the case of Muslim students, as research focusing on Muslims can often talk *about*, rather than *with*, them (Ahmed, 2015) and is interpreted in ways which could possibly erase their unique voice and experience (Khan, 2013).

Evidence base of report:

This report pulls together the findings of two phases of research looking into Muslim student experience at UK universities.

Phase 1 – Investigating a sense of belonging for Muslim students

This first phase of the project was based solely at the University of Winchester and was highly exploratory, looking at the extent to which Muslim students in this institution felt a sense of belonging to it, including whether or not they felt as if they mattered. Twenty per cent of Winchester's Muslim student population having been interviewed, it was found – in contrast to relevant existing literature – that the vast majority of students felt a sense of belonging to the university, a feeling acquired through positive academic experiences and strong emotional attachments to the campus. However, factors of belonging largely correlated to aspects associated with their 'Muslim identity'. For example, some students considered that, in having access to a Muslim prayer room, their beliefs were being respected by the institution and this provision was enough to make them feel that they belonged.

Though the overwhelming number of testimonies were positive, the research revealed an implicit suggestion that Muslim students, in relation to their religious needs, were 'settling for less' in terms of their overall university experience. This concept was eventually termed 'satisfied settling', an example of which was apparent when some Muslim students appeared to be offering justification for why Halal food was not being provided on campus, even though to have had it would have been of huge practical and emotional benefit to their day-to-day lives as students. Further findings from the first project were reported by Islam, Lowe and Jones (2019), but a second research project was undertaken, specifically to assess the merit of the 'satisfied settling' concept.

Phase 2 – Exploring the validity of ‘satisfied settling’

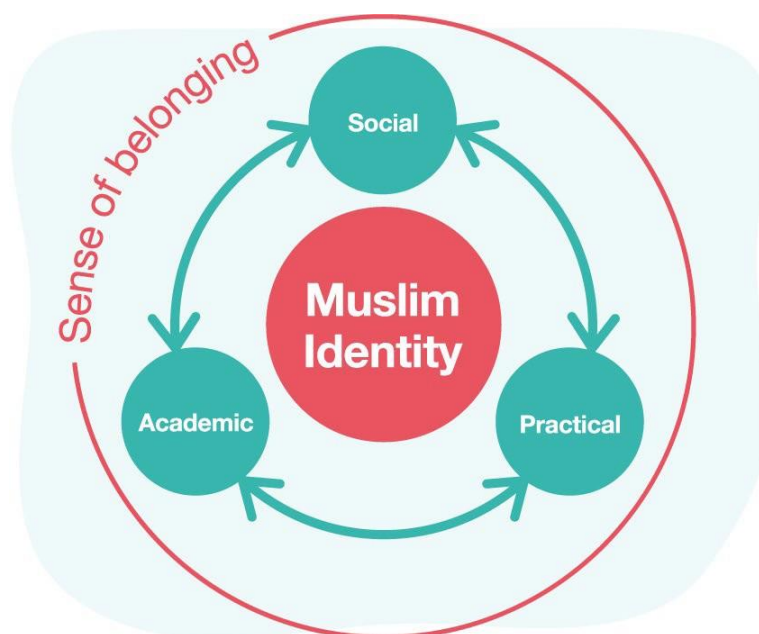
Whilst Phase 1 established some important findings regarding how Muslim students understood and felt a sense of belonging to the University of Winchester, the research acknowledged various limitations, including sample size and the hypothesised concept of ‘satisfied settling’. In Phase 2 of the project, the sense of belonging and the concept of ‘satisfied settling’ were further explored. Widening the scope – by interviewing Muslim students from three institutions (the University of Winchester, London Metropolitan University and Newman University) – enabled the researcher to tap into a larger and more representative Muslim student voice. In a replication of the findings from Phase 1 of the project, it was found that Muslim students felt on the whole that they belonged to their respective institutions, citing the level of support available and accommodations to their Islamic faith. However, there was consensus among respondents that ‘satisfied settling’ was an apt and meaningful concept and that, in some ways, Muslim students were settling for less than the full university experience.

Collectively, by means of semi-structured interviews, these projects gathered data from the three UK universities mentioned and the report therefore collates rich qualitative data representing the views of forty-three Muslim students from these institutions during the years 2018-2019.

As with other sectoral reports, it is hoped that this resource will provide a framework for HE institutions (both within and outside the UK) to support more successfully the needs of a diverse range of Muslim students entering the sector.



Sense of belonging for Muslim students:



Centralising identity

For Muslim students, central to the concept of belonging was correlating this to aspects associated with their Muslim identity: for example, how they had been considered as Muslims; having access to a network of Muslim students and peers; learning about Islam/Islamic influences in the curriculum. Fostering a sense of belonging for Muslim students must therefore encompass and respect this identity. Within the research exercise, many students noted how vital religion was in their lives and a university's willingness to respect and accommodate their faith – or its failure to do so adequately – by making appropriate provisions could affect their overall decision to enrol.

“...if there wasn't a Prayer Room, I don't really know if I would have come in that sense because that would have really affected me...it would definitely have had a big impact in my decision to actually come here.”

Nabiha (2nd year undergraduate, female)

Ensuring a holistic sense of belonging

Academic, social and practical provisions will now be explored as the collective means of achieving, operationally, a holistic level of belonging. It is important to note that all facets are interdependent and that to be deficient in one area may have ramifications for the others, as well as lower the overall level of belonging experienced.

For example, if an institution does not provide readily available Halal food (ie a practical provision), it has been noted that students are far less equipped/likely to stay longer for studying. Additionally, if students feel that their dietary requirements are not catered for, they are, in consequence, excluded from using catering outlets to socialise with their peers. In effect, failure to offer even a small provision may have a negative impact on the academic and social experiences of Muslim students.

“Food is a problem... I know me and my friends, we don't tend to eat at uni because of that, we go into town and grab something which takes time and like stops us from studying and going back to the library...”

Nishat (3rd year undergraduate, female)

Practical provisions:

This section relates to the practical arrangements and facilities Muslim students require from their university in order to provide them with the ability to carry out and accommodate their daily routines.

Prayer room

It has been identified that access to a prayer room is the most important provision for Muslim students attending university, for praying five times a day is a central pillar within Islam. For Muslim students, having a space to pray while at university ensures they are able to carry out spiritual duties and also sustain their wellbeing – prayer is able to provide peace and give students respite:

“Praying is a big thing in our religion, and prayer is a form of meditating...it allows the student to have a little breather...”

Saif (2nd year undergraduate, male)

For some students, simply having access to a prayer room is enough to make them feel a sense of belonging to their university. Additionally, it is commonly accepted that this space serves a social function – as a place to meet and befriend Muslim peers. It is therefore clear that provision of the best possible prayer space will reinforce the students' sense that the institution values their identity, a level of respect they are entitled to.

For consideration:

Is your prayer room well equipped with prayer mats, prayer beads and copies of the Quran?

- + Is your prayer room physically large enough to cater for your Muslim student population?
 - Prayer is often done in congregation and is highly performative. A significant amount of space is therefore required and this is particularly the case for Friday afternoon prayers (*Jumu'ah*).
 - It has also been suggested that these rooms may afford a more private space for Muslim women who wear the face veil (niqab) to be comfortable (eg to eat lunch).
- + Have you considered other necessary requirements including: facilitating gender segregation (eg curtain screens); storage of bags, coats, shoes and rubbish; nearby or integrated washroom facilities?
 - You may also consider other more homely touches, such as mirrors (to fix and style headscarves (hijab), seating options (eg beanbags) or air fresheners.
- + Is your prayer room regularly cleaned and kept tidy?
 - A clean environment is required for prayer so universities should ensure that this space is not neglected or left entirely to students as their responsibility.
- + Is your prayer room well signposted and advertised in marketing materials and at open days?
- + Are there multiple locations where students can access a prayer room?
 - This provision is especially important for universities with different campuses. It will ensure that students neither have to travel significant distances to access a space to pray nor have to pray in unsuitable spaces (eg empty classrooms or library corners).
- + Are you utilising the space to open up a line of communication with your Muslim students?
 - If many Muslim students use these spaces, you can target advertising of opportunities as you would with the entire student population (eg flyers, leaflets and posters).

Halal food

Translated to 'permissible' from Arabic, Halal in this context refers mainly to meat which has been prepared in accordance with Islamic law. Provision of Halal food is a small yet significant action to encourage a sense of belonging – as one student poignantly states: *'home is seen as a place where you can eat what you want'*. If we wish Muslim students to feel at home on campuses, this provision must be made and appropriately advertised.

Making a conscious decision not to provide Halal food on campus may well drive students away from their universities, meaning that they spend less time on campus and more time and money in search of the food they can and want to eat.

For consideration:

- + Are Halal food items clearly labelled, identifiable, kept in stock and restocked regularly?
- + Are you able to provide information about your Halal meat?
 - Within the UK, two separate organisations regulate the Halal food industry – the Halal Food Authority (HFA) and the Halal Monitoring Committee (HMC). Both organisations have different interpretations of the preparation process and so the distinction may be important to some Muslim students.
- + Are you able to provide a variety of Halal meat or integrate Halal meat into the central supply?
 - While Muslim students are unable to eat non-Halal meat, the integration of Halal meat into menus allows all students to have equality of choice in a common, non-segregated provision (ie a non-Muslim student could choose to eat Halal food, even if a Muslim student would not choose to eat non-Halal).
- + Does your city have access to a Halal butcher or other means of sourcing Halal meat?
 - Depending on your locality, supermarkets and butchers may not sell Halal meat. You may wish to consider the possibility of pop-up food stalls brought on to campus to accommodate this. This will save students from having to travel to neighbouring cities and/or having to bulk-buy their Halal food. The collaboration of Bath Student Union and the University of Bath is a good example of how the bringing of Halal meat on to campus may be accomplished.

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Washroom facilities

As mentioned previously, Muslims perform a cleansing ritual (*wudhu*) before prayer – involving washing with water the face, arms, head and feet. In order to ensure dignity, access to appropriate washrooms with large basins and toilet facilities should be provided. Where these have not been provided, Muslim students have reported using such unsatisfactory alternative measures as public bathroom sinks.

For consideration:

- + Are your washroom facilities located close by to prayer rooms?
- + Can you implement inclusive toilet facilities such as a hose or bidet?
 - In Islamic culture (as in many other cultures and countries), using water is the preferred method of toilet hygiene.
- + If you can implement these facilities, can you also run university-wide campaigns to build inter-cultural awareness?

Muslim chaplain

It is not uncommon to find chaplaincy teams that have individuals representing a wide range of faiths. Muslim chaplains take on a pastoral role for providing support and guidance for Muslim students at university; they can often provide students with a source of shared (cultural) understanding as the students navigate as Muslims through university life and pressures.

“There are certain things where you can talk to anyone about, but when it comes to religion, I feel like you have to talk to someone who understands you...”

Rima (3rd year undergraduate, female)

For consideration:

- + If you have a Muslim chaplain who works on a part-time basis, are the hours s/he works in line with the needs of Muslim students and is s/he accessible to them?
- + Is information about your Muslim chaplain widely publicised in marketing, online and physical material?
- + Is it possible to have both a female and male Muslim chaplain to support Muslim students?
 - Some Muslim students may feel more comfortable discussing certain topics with their own gender and so this should be facilitated.
- + Is your Muslim chaplain able to sit on various and relevant university committee groups and structures to ensure that Muslim-related matters are adequately represented?
- + As Muslim chaplains serve in a pastoral role, consider how representative your university counselling services are.
 - Providing a range of Black, Asian and minority ethnic counsellors may work well in supporting Black, Asian and minority ethnic mental health.

Academic provisions:

This relates to provisions which can accommodate the needs of Muslim students within learning and teaching environments. From the research, academic experiences were key to the notion of belonging, especially where social experiences were seen to be lacking.

Ramadan exam considerations

Many Muslim students will observe fasting (from sunrise to sunset) during the entire month of Ramadan. In some years, this month has coincided with exam periods. To accommodate this, universities may wish to consider offering rescheduled exam sittings. Ramadan exam considerations (as implemented at the University of Winchester) allow Muslim students to request moving an afternoon exam to the morning, since both their physical and mental energy are much greater in the morning. Offering some degree of flexibility can ensure that Muslim students are not put at a disadvantage when taking exams.

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“People would be surprised at how much it affects your body when you're not drinking and eating and as the time goes by you do actually become weaker and weaker. So, I think I'd probably perform the best of my ability in the mornings if I was fasting than in the evenings or afternoon.”

Tahani (PhD student, female)

For consideration:

- + Can your exams team organise an appropriate method of implementing Ramadan exam considerations?
 - The University of Winchester has been able to offer this and will alert/email Muslim students to get in touch if they wish to use this provision.
- + Can you consult Muslim students and staff at your institution to decide the best way to move forward?
- + Is it possible that failure to accommodate the needs of all students may contribute to your institution's degree-awarding gaps?
 - As stated, inconsistent sleep patterns, lack of food and water and the additional stress and pressure of taking exams may result in depleted levels of energy and concentration – and therefore poor performance –when Muslim students are sitting exams during Ramadan.

Academic staff representation and support

Relationships with lecturers and staff members reaffirm a level of belonging for the students of any institution; it is therefore important to ensure that staff are approachable and provide support for **all** students regardless of their background:

“I think based on actions and behaviour of everybody whether its peers, whether its lecturers, teachers, admin staff... Whenever people view you, they view me as a Muslim, but they don't view me as anything different...”

Isaac (3rd year undergraduate, male)

However, it is equally important to ensure that there is positive staff representation of diversity too. This reinforces a perception that academia is a place for Muslim students to thrive and succeed. Having more Muslim lecturers, academic mentors and managers, who are understandably more attuned to the lived experiences of Muslim students, can also ensure that any specific problems can be spoken about and addressed comfortably.

“I’ve been [at the university] for 2 years and all of my lecturers have been White, there was one Bengali academic mentor but that was about it. I kind of felt like that there were only White people that are achieving or those from White backgrounds sort of achieving.”

Saif (2nd year undergraduate, male)

For consideration:

- + Can your institution undertake analysis into the recruitment process in order to determine:
 1. How many individuals from Muslim backgrounds apply to roles at the university and;
 2. How many Muslim individuals are successfully appointed?
 - Understanding these figures may demonstrate whether or not implicit biases are influencing this process and suggest what can be done to encourage recruitment of staff from Muslim backgrounds.
- + Even if there is an under-representation of Muslim staff, are there other ways in which this representation can be achieved?
 - Consider inviting external speakers or guest lecturers who come from a Muslim background.
- + Are there ways in which your institution can accommodate the staff and students who adhere to specific types of Muslim dress?
 - Creating an environment where Muslim staff members feel comfortable veiling or wearing Islamic garments (eg burqa or tobe) can reinforce to students that cultural ways of dress are accepted in university settings (should they wish also to dress Islamically).
- + Are there steps to ensure that Muslim members of staff are not over-burdened with pastoral and academic support if they are sought out by Muslim students?

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Course content

Engaging in the classroom with content that speaks to Muslim cultural backgrounds can affirm acceptance of these identities. Integrating diverse religious content into the curriculum may therefore instil in Muslim students a sense of belonging, passion and excitement, as well as provide non-Muslim students with more positive representations of Islam.

“We have this module called ‘Education in the Arab Islamic World’ and for me, it’s just nice to see that kind of representation because when we learn about Philosophy in Education, and someone else pointed this out, it’s all Western White male and you see nothing else. I’ve also never learnt about an Arabic or Muslim scholar or theorist or thinker, so it was very nice to see that. I never knew there were so many!”

Rima (3rd year undergraduate, female)

For consideration:

- + When it comes to validating or re-validating a course, can you include any core or optional modules which centre upon Islam or Muslim experiences, contributions or accomplishments?
 - Though it may not be possible to create new modules, universities should also consider authentic ways to integrate this aspect into existing course programmes and content.
- + Can teaching staff conduct content relating to Islam in a religiously sensitive manner?
 - This would include being able to facilitate discussions should they become heated or inappropriate and being able to ensure that Muslim students present do not feel targeted (eg Muslim students picked on to speak up rather than being allowed to contribute voluntarily to discussions). The environment created in the classroom needs to be conducive of appropriately sensitive and empathetic behaviours.
- + Can you undertake an audit of library books and course material to make sure they appropriately reflect Islamic history and Muslim figures?

Social provisions:

This relates to provisions for Muslim students which will ensure that they are able to participate socially as part of their university experience. Research has identified the ways in which Muslim students are not afforded levels of social participation similar to those of other students, on account of failure to consider certain requirements.

Islamic societies/student networks

Concepts of belonging illustrate how membership of a group is an important facet to consider, especially concerning retention and participation in activities (Harper and Quaye, 2007). For many Muslim students, a structured group like an Islamic society or student network allows students to find a source of shared identity. This is especially important when you are a part of a minority group, since similar experiences, beliefs and values can be better understood. These are usually (though not exclusively) hosted by student unions/guilds/associations.

“You can socialize with other Muslim people facing the same situations as you are... it basically makes you not feel like you're the only Muslim...”

Sana (4th year undergraduate, female)

For consideration:

- + Is it possible for your Islamic society/student network to receive extra support, funding and protection so that its activities and sustainability are guaranteed?
 - Student-led societies and groups can often be fragile, especially those classed as ‘liberation groups’ (ie groups that centre upon a protected characteristic). [Winchester Student Union has been able to mitigate these risks through its Representational Networks scheme.](#)
- + Depending on which organisation your Islamic society/student network sits within, can there be partnership in co-running campaigns related to Islam to highlight societal issues?
 - [Huddersfield Student Union provides a good example of this and has run a number of Black, Asian and minority ethnic campaigns](#) (including: Islamophobia Awareness and World Hijab day).
- + If Islamic societies/student networks can bring together Muslim students at an institution, can you use these groups as ways to target any messaging or assist in representing the Muslim student voice?

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Non-alcoholic and gender-specific spaces

The presence of alcohol can present a barrier to engagement by Muslim students with social activities/social spaces. Consumption of alcohol in Islam is strictly prohibited and, even though Muslim students are not permitted to consume it, its proximity can cause them discomfort by association. Many Muslim students expressed belief that their universities did not provide them with a range of non-alcoholic social events and/or spaces.

“I used to love to play Rounders, and I love the sport and was very competitive...I applied to join a Rounders society but most of their ‘get to know each other’ sessions were all about drinking or going out, so in that kind of sense, I didn’t really feel like I belonged...”

Ayesha (2nd year undergraduate, female)

Furthermore, some Muslim students may prefer to engage in activities in the company of their own gender. As Islam limits the contact between males and females, some students could feel more comfortable taking part in gender-specific activities.

“It sounds very small but something so simple as having an all-female gym class would be so much more practical for me and I’m sure not only Muslim girls would appreciate it but other females as well that don’t necessarily feel confident.”

Zainab (3rd year undergraduate, female)

For consideration:

- + Can any social events be arranged in the afternoon, thus limiting the likelihood of the presence of alcohol?
 - Afternoon events are said to be far more accessible for a range of student groups than events hosted in the evenings.
- + Are there ways you can embed gender-specific activities in your events calendar?
 - This may be appropriate on a fortnightly or monthly basis (eg gym classes available only to those identifying as women)
- + Can your institution consider on-campus halls of residence that are gender-specific?
 - This may be comforting for a range of students and certainly encouraging for Muslim students considering first-year housing options. If this is not possible, you might look to give priority to those religious students who may not be comfortable with co-ed bathrooms.

Culturally inclusive social events and activities

Events that speak to diverse cultural heritages from a range of backgrounds can reinforce the notion that these identities are welcomed, valued and respected on university campuses. Activities that include a broad range of interests would accommodate students from all backgrounds and provide opportunities for them to connect with peers.

“Maybe during Ramadan, if they [the university] could gather with the other Muslims like in my home place...I always feel like there is a need for Muslims to gather during Ramadan, so it would be really nice to do that”

Saraah (Foundation year student, female)

For consideration:

- + Can you audit the activities of your start-of-year welcome week?
 - Consider the timings, nature and marketing of the events and activities so that they may accommodate a wide range of students, including Muslim students.
- + Can student unions/guilds/associations that are conducting activities during freshers' week do the same?
 - Consider the ways you can replicate these opportunities throughout the academic year, so that all have opportunity to take part.
- + Are the social events being run by student unions/guilds/associations and the institution celebratory of Black, Asian and minority ethnic heritages?
 - Think of the way these can be embedded into the events calendar. For example, you may wish to consider hosting a Bollywood film night or Iftar (ie breaking of fast during Ramadan) party.
- + Are you placing equal emphasis on providing quality social events in addition to quality academic opportunities for Muslim students?
 - Social events should be valued as developmental opportunities for students to enhance certain interpersonal skills (eg networking and confidence). The research also identified that Muslim students are more likely to attend events which have academic benefit or speak to their cultural backgrounds eg Islamic lectures.

Building belonging: Developing religiously inclusive cultures for Muslim students in higher education

Maisha Islam



Barriers to engagement and belonging:

Having established the ways in which belonging can be enhanced for Muslim students, it is important to recognise some of the structural barriers they face which impede a sense of enjoyment, prevent engagement or negate a holistic experience that may be afforded to other non-Muslim students.

Acknowledging these barriers enables institutions to take stock of issues and actively work to minimise their effects. In the light of these barriers, it should be made apparent that the onus should not fall on Muslim students to actualise change at their institution.

Minority identity and intersectionality

Whether consciously realised or not, by holding a minority identity, Muslim students may not believe that their various needs and requirements should be catered for. As a result, some Muslim students may feel intimidated, with a lack of empowerment or entitlement over the university space, and therefore simply accept the ways in which they are not catered to and for.

The theory of 'satisfied settling' (Islam *et al.*, 2019) explains this further and considers how Muslim students can even justify to themselves why certain provisions are not provided for them. In addition to holding a minoritised form of identity, Muslim students often hold various other facets of identity. Considering intersectionality, research suggests that Muslim students are more likely to commute and belong to Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, influencing how disadvantage is experienced.

“...it's probably my fault, because I get the bus in and the last bus is always at 7:50pm so, if anything happens after that, I couldn't really go but I guess that's kind of my fault?”

Tahmina (3rd year student, female)

Holding such identities, the research suggests, means that Muslim students are more likely to 'settle for less' in terms of their university experience, for they are accustomed to a life in which they themselves self-accommodate, perhaps by going to restaurants that do not provide Halal options or having previously undertaken GCSE or A-Level exams throughout Ramadan with not a single accommodation of their needs in place. It is thus not surprising that they can carry such low expectations into HE.

“Because I'm so used to always going for the vegetarian option or fish, having halal food in an institution is seen as a luxury. Only because I think we've kind of been deprived of it since childhood, it's kind of built into us that when we're out, we don't eat meat because it's just not available...”

Hanna (2nd year student, female)

Campus bubble ('drink culture')

Often, universities can operate as bubbles which covertly exclude 'non-traditional' students from gaining a full university experience (Lowe, 2019). For Muslim students, the research showed the many ways in which being positioned outside this bubble led to feelings of slight exclusion when not being able to participate in 'traditional' student activities. In the context of religion, this was largely through the pervasiveness of a university 'drink culture' where it seemed impossible to escape the presence of alcohol in social activities and living spaces. For example, though it was found that many Muslim students were also commuters, those students who did live in halls of residence, when it came to their cultural beliefs and values, often struggled with 'fitting in' with more 'traditional' students. This may constitute a barrier when Muslim students make plans for their living arrangements.

"...all they [other students] talked about was boys, going clubbing, drinking, drugs, come here for pre drinks and stuff. When I said I didn't do stuff like that, I was called boring, I was called sad, some actually said to me "what's the point of being a Muslim if you can't have fun?"

Syeda (3rd year student, female)

Climate of (perceived) Islamophobia

While all students, in theory, have the ability to raise concerns or suggest improvements, not all students are equally privileged to use their voice. It is important to be aware that Muslim students in particular bear the brunt of being historically marginalised, in addition to living in Islamophobic climates and environments.

Muslim students who might raise concerns and take forms of action may feel hesitant about doing so because they are aware that such actions may be regarded with suspicion, have negative implications for their academic experience or result in a loss of the existing provisions they access. Though this may not be the case in reality, just holding such perceptions is enough for Muslim students not to make their requirements known.

"I didn't want to make a complaint because I've got more of a chance getting kicked out of the uni, simply because I just felt like they may not listen to me as a brown Muslim student."

Majid (Foundation year student, male)

Inadequate feedback mechanisms and unrepresentative spaces

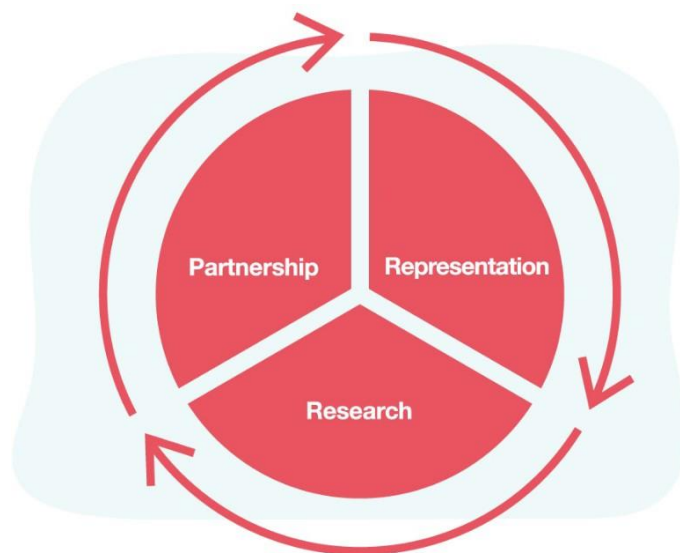
Within this research, Muslim students were grateful for having the opportunity to discuss their university experience and the ways in which it could be enhanced. Students found the experience of being interviewed therapeutic, useful and interesting, especially because they felt that they didn't usually have the opportunity to provide feedback in this way. Having a Muslim interviewer proved especially useful, for students felt more comfortable.

This draws attention to the fact that Muslim students may often be unaware of how, of where or to whom they might offer their feedback, on account of the lack of representative sites and spaces that are attuned to and understanding of cultural beliefs and values.

"I think this interview has been a great. I feel like I've said everything that I wanted to openly with you and, because you are a Muslim as well, you kind of understand what I mean. That makes me more comfortable to speak to you about it."

Jahida (Foundation year student, female)

Fostering religiously inclusive environments – Reflections for universities:



Partnership

Working in partnership with various stakeholders across and outside the institution is integral to ensuring productive ways of working. For example, are there any initiatives or practices on which your university and its union/guild/association can collaborate? For example, the University of Winchester and Winchester Student Union have collaborated to explore [minority student views of learning and teaching through their institutional partnership scheme](#) (Student Fellows Scheme) and have created a variety of student guides designed specifically for under-represented groups.

Student unions/guilds/associations are heavily invested in issues regarding equality and diversity, usually with officers in place who handle such affairs. Look for appropriate ways you can work in partnership together, ultimately to the benefit of the whole student body.

Universities should also recognise that the onus of accommodating Muslim students does not fall on any specific department. Instead, multiple departments need to be involved in key decision-making processes, especially if certain provisions are not in place. For example:

- + consult with your housing team about how housing is allocated to Muslim students, or whether gender-specific dorms can be arranged

- + speak to your catering departments about the possibility of integrating Halal meat into food outlets
- + get in touch with your chaplaincy or student services to discuss bespoke pastoral and counselling services for Muslim students
- + ensure your student recruitment and communications teams are aware of the provisions provided by the institution and union/guild/association so that appropriate marketing and advertising are reaching both existing and prospective students (and their families).

Institutional research

Muslim students are not a homogenous group, nor are their requirements always uniform. Universities should thus undertake research to understand the different needs Muslim students have, which will differ from institution to institution. For example, the provision of Halal food or prayer spaces at a university may seem more urgent where the surrounding city does not cater for this need. However, some students may have the benefit of being situated in cities where they can access Halal food and mosques locally.

Whilst all the basic requirements outlined in this report should be considered, conducting institutionally specific research will ensure that Muslim students are consulted and that enhancement measures are applied appropriately.

Institutions may want to consider:

- + employing the use of Muslim researchers to investigate sense of belonging and how it can be enhanced; this may be done by bringing in external Muslim researchers if the institution is not able to facilitate this naturally from within;
 - + alternatively, partnering research staff at the university with Muslim students to conduct this data collection; if this is the case, ensure that students' time is valued and recognised (eg by payment) as is usually done in institutional staff-student partnership schemes;
 - + the ways in which they may encourage Muslim student engagement (for example, by providing incentives for focus groups or prize draws for taking part).
 - + ensuring that they are conducting research that is religiously sensitive (for example, by offering the choice of a female/male interviewer and emphasising confidentiality).
 - + upon completing such research, highlighting the findings at various university committees and/or groups; institutions may think of other innovative ways to showcase this research to the wider staff body (for example, lunchtime seminars, staff development days or online webinars).
-

Representation

In addition to academic representation, representation can be embodied in many ways. For example, whilst 'widening participation' teams often have targets to increase the number of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students (many of whom may also identify as Muslim), Muslim staff also represent an important part of the fabric of any university. Universities should look to how this may be improved and encouraged, as the visibility of representation can reinforce how such spaces are welcoming of diversity.

Though university marketing material should consider how Muslim representation can be included, it should be applied with caution so that it is not misleading about the proportion of Muslim/ Black, Asian and minority ethnic students present. There is a therefore fine line to be trodden if this type of representation is to be encouraging of diversity, not deceptive.

Positive representation ultimately reaffirms to Muslim students that their beliefs are accepted and valued by the institution. Universities should make known publicly and proudly the provisions they have put in place for Muslim students. To do so in itself negates currently strong and widely prevalent Islamophobic sentiments by showing a high level of solidarity with Muslim students. Something as apparently minor as advertising your range of Halal sandwiches are powerful reminders to Muslim students that your campus welcomes Islamic identities; that your spaces are indeed spaces for Muslim students too.

"I guess if there was more diversity, then it would be much easier to put my ideas forward. But because there is a gap there, I feel that's what makes it hard and intimidating, like is this my place to say this? Am I being too much?"

Annaya (3rd year student, female)



Conclusions

The findings of the research, as exemplified in this report, detail the complex ways in which to nurture a sense of belonging for Muslim students in HE. This is especially the case when, often, religious students' needs and experiences are neglected.

It was demonstrated that sense of belonging encompassed three interdependent areas: the **practical**, **academic** and **social** provisions related to Muslim students which foregrounded their religious identity. Within each area, recommendations are provided to universities, shedding a light to the multiple needs of Muslim students and how they may be fulfilled by their institutions.

Importantly, the report draws attention to the ways in which Muslim students are not privileged in the same ways as their peers to use their voices, owing to various structures within the university setting. Though these may not always be intended by the university, acknowledging these barriers allows institutions to listen, learn and act upon them to allow for more inclusive environments.

In actualising the change we need to see, the merits of working in partnership across the university and with the student union/guild/association are emphasised – with many strong examples of this mentioned within (and definitely outside of) this report. Additionally, the need for institutionally specific research will bring attention to the individual areas a university can seek to improve upon as Muslim students do not represent a monolith.

Finally, the importance of representation, even through the smallest of actions, are powerful in reaffirming to Muslim students the entitlement they hold within the university space.

Ultimately, Muslim students' perspectives in this report are a vocal reminder that, in order properly to serve the *entirety* of their student bodies, higher education institutions need not only to consider the value of the practical implementation approaches suggested here but also to develop genuine empathy with every single student's background, beliefs and personal circumstances and thus with her or his individual challenges in achieving that often elusive sense of belonging.

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