

Building belonging: Developing religiously inclusive cultures for Muslim students in higher education (Summary report)

Maisha Islam



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. Where religion cannot be a homogenised experience, and where the concept of belonging within HE has been documented as a factor directly linked to student success, progression and retention, this report may be able to inform work towards the BAME degree awarding gap.

This report may be of particular interest to institutions with a higher proportion of BAME students, as there is a strong correlation between ethnicity and religion, which often cannot be meaningfully disaggregated. However, 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.

Evidence base:

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 exploratory research project explored the notion of belonging with Muslim students and assessed what the term meant to them.

Phase 2 Exploring the validity of ‘satisfied settling’

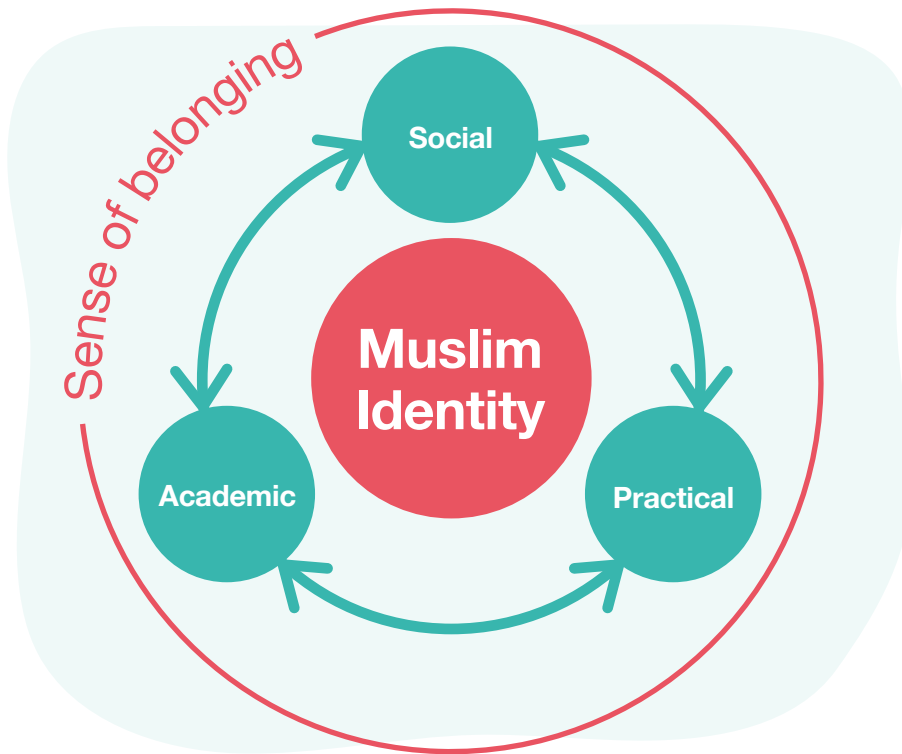
This follow-up research began to explore whether or not Muslim students were ‘settling for less’ in terms of their university experience, and what factors implicated the way in which Muslim students could use their voice.

Collectively, by means of semi-structured interviews, these projects gathered data from three UK universities:

- University of Winchester
- London Metropolitan University
- Newman University

This report condenses the information of the full report (Building Belonging: Developing religiously inclusive cultures for Muslim students in higher education) which collates rich qualitative data representing the views of forty-three Muslim students from these institutions during the years 2018-2019.

Sense of belonging for Muslim students:



Facets of unabridged belonging

Academic, social and practical provisions should be considered collectively to achieving 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 (i.e. a practical provision), students are far less equipped/likely to stay longer on campus to study. 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.

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.

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

Access to a prayer room is one of the most important provisions for Muslim students attending university. This space can also serve a social function by providing students a place to meet and befriend one another.

Washroom facilities

In order to ensure dignity, access to appropriate washrooms with large basins and culturally inclusive toilet facilities should be provided. Where these have not been provided, Muslim students have reported using such unsatisfactory alternative measures as public bathroom sinks.

Halal food

Provision of Halal food is a small yet significant action to encourage a sense of belonging – as one student poignantly stated: ‘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.

Muslim chaplain

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 students navigate as Muslims through university life and pressures.

Academic provisions:

This relates to provisions which can accommodate the needs of Muslim students within learning and teaching environments.

Ramadan exam considerations

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.

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.



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. 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.

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. There are many 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

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.

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.

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. Some Muslim students may also feel more comfortable engaging in gender-specific activities, where Islam limits the contact between females and males.

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.

Minority identity and intersectionality

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. Considering intersectionality, Muslim students may be more likely to commute and belong to BAME backgrounds, influencing how disadvantage is experienced.



Campus bubble ('drink culture')

For Muslim students, there are many ways in which being positioned outside of a 'campus bubble' lead 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.

Climate of (perceived) Islamophobia

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 of perceptions that they may be regarded with suspicion, have negative implications for their academic experience or result in a loss of the existing provisions.



Inadequate feedback mechanisms and unrepresentative spaces

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. Providing spaces and forums, perhaps led by Muslim facilitators/interviewers, can be incredibly powerful in privileging their voices and opinions.

Fostering religiously inclusive environments - Reflections for universities:

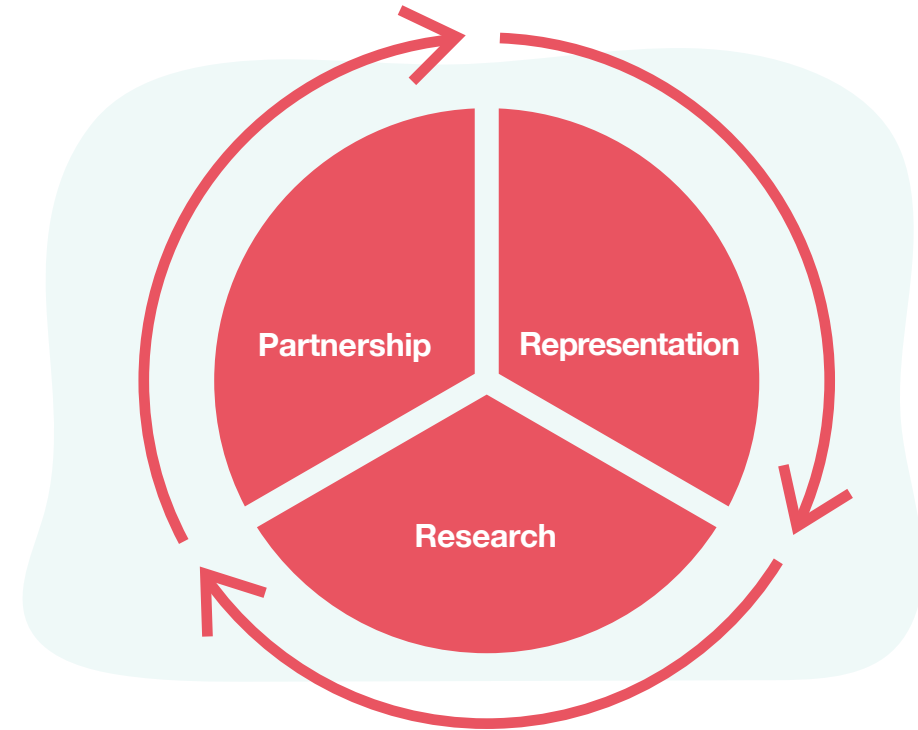
Partnership

Working in partnership with various stakeholders across and outside the institution is integral to ensuring productive ways of working.

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

Representation

Representation can be embodied in many ways – from campus posters to curricula. Universities should make known publicly and proudly the provisions they have put in place for Muslim students. Thus, positive representation ultimately reaffirms to Muslim students that their beliefs and presence are accepted and valued by the institution.



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. Conducting institutionally specific research will ensure that Muslim students are consulted and that enhancement measures are applied appropriately.



Report author contact details: Maisha.Islam@winchester.ac.uk
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