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REPORT

# Muslim Students in UK Higher Education

Issues of Inequality and Inequity

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Institute**

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# MUSLIM STUDENTS IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION: ISSUES OF INEQUALITY AND INEQUITY



## Policy recommendations

- Data should be routinely and robustly collated, by HE institutions, on the access, retention, success and progression into further study or employment, of Muslims students.
- Under representation, performance or outcomes of Muslim students should be disaggregated to determine patterns of specific under attainment, with key performance indicators set by all HEIs to recognise, address and eradicate disparities.
- HE institutions should develop a clear institutional understanding of Islamophobia, in negotiation with all staff and students, recognising how this is understood and experienced by Muslim students (and staff).
- Robust mechanisms for reporting Islamophobia or hate crime should be put in place across all HE institutions; such process should also indicate and report back to students and staff on what action has been taken.
- HE institutions should develop initiatives or programmes which help build the confidence of staff and students to discuss both Islam and Muslim student experiences, and to deal with 'difficult conversations'.
- Religious literacy training should be offered to all staff and to students.
- Exemplary practices in supporting Muslim student academic success, and develop a sense of belonging, should be recognised and rewarded by HE institutions.

# Introduction: Muslim students in UK Higher Education

The data on the number of students in UK Higher Education (HE) who identify as having a religion or a belief is not robust. It is only since the Single Equality Act (2010) that universities have started to systematically collate data on students' religion and this is still imprecise. The Equality Challenge Unit (2011), however, found that just over 9% of the students they surveyed across the four UK countries, stated they were Muslim. The 2011 Census shows that Muslims form 4.8% of the population of England and Wales, although this is a fast growing group and thus the number of university age students may well be higher than average within this overall demographic. Regardless, it is likely that there is an over-representation of Muslim students in UK HE. This would accord with data that evidences a statistical over-representation of students from minority ethnic backgrounds - with 21.8% of the overall student population identifying as BME in UK HE (ECU, 2017). This compares with 86% identifying as 'white' in the 2011 Census and only 14% as BME.

Where Muslim students study is not, however, uniform. Although evidence is scarce, the Elevations Network Trust (2012) found that 60% of minority ethnic students study in the post-1992 sector (the former polytechnics and 'newer' universities) and research into Muslim students studying in HE business schools found that 77% of Muslim students attended post-1992 universities, 4% attended Russell Group institutions and 19% attended other pre-1992 ('older') universities (Dean and Probert, 2011); there were no major differences between male and female Muslim students. Reasons for why Muslim students are over-represented in certain universities may be in part because minority ethnic students are much more likely to live at home than White students. Data from the 2011/12 Student Income and Expenditure Survey (Pollard et al, 2013) showed that 61% of Asian and Asian British students lived at home, compared with 19% of White students. In part this might be because BME students are less well-off than their White peers but they may also chose to do so for both cultural reasons and family pressures. Since only a small number of the Russell group universities are located in cities where there are large Muslim communities (exceptions are those in London, as well as the University of Birmingham) this may well also be shaping where Muslim students choose to study.

However, recent research has shown that some minority ethnic groups appear to be disadvantaged in the

allocation of HE offers compared to those made to White British applicants. Using statistical modelling, research by the Nuffield Foundation (Noden, Shiner and Modood, 2014) found that for average applications, Pakistani students would receive seven additional rejections per 100 compared with comparable applications by white applicants. The authors found no evidence that any apparent biases are stronger in higher status than lower status institutions. Boliver's research (2012, 2016), however, indicates that BME students are also discriminated against at the point of applying to Russell Group universities. Her analysis of more than 151,000 applications to Russell Group institutions between 2010-11 and 2012-13 found that 54.7% of applications submitted by White students resulted in offers, but that the success rates for BME students were considerably lower. Between 2010 and 2012 only 36% of minority ethnic applicants were offered places compared to 55% of White applicants (Boliver, 2012, 2016). Those least likely to receive offers were applicants from Bangladeshi (31%) and Pakistani (30%) backgrounds which have the largest proportion of Muslim students.

Those Muslims who do manage to access HE are also more likely to leave early (Rose-Adams, 2012), are less happy with their teaching (Neves and Hillman, 2016), most likely to be disappointed in their student experience (Neves and Hillman, 2016; HEFCE, 2016) and, overall, do less well than their non-Muslim, White peers in terms of their final degree attainment (Stevenson, 2016). Moreover, although data is not collated in relation to religion, 8.4% of white students received a first or 2:1 compared with 63.4% of BME students, representing a BME degree attainment gap<sup>1</sup> of 15.0 percentage points (ECU, 2017). Since Muslim students are, almost exclusively, also BME students, *ipso facto*, their attainment is significantly below that of White students.

To date, however, little research has been conducted with Muslim students to explore the reasons for their unequal experiences. In order to fill this gap, this report presents collated findings from a data set of interviews with just over 100 Muslim students (including those seeking to access HE, as well as undergraduate and postgraduate students studying across six different universities).

<sup>1</sup> The ethnicity degree attainment gap is calculated: % white first/2:1 class degree - % BME first/2:1.

## The research

The students interviewed participated in a number of research projects as part of wider research into social mobility of young Muslims (Stevenson et al, 2017); the access to, and experiences of, religious students more broadly (Stevenson, 2017, 2013, 2014; Aune and Stevenson, 2017); the experiences of refugees in HE - many of who are Muslim (Stevenson, 2018; Willott. and Stevenson, 2013) as well as research in to the degree attainment of minority ethnic students - again many of whom are Muslim students (Stevenson, 2012a, 2012b).

Included in these interviews were students of Pakistani, Bangladeshi- Middle-Eastern and African heritage; they also includes men and women, Sunni, Shi'a and Ahmediyya Muslims, as well as those who are second or third generation through to newer immigrants living in different parts of the UK. The students were predominantly aged between 18 and 30 and included undergraduates and postgraduates. All the interviews asked very open questions about the students' social and educational experiences on campus. Their accounts were closely read and re-read, both individually and then across the transcripts.

It is important to note here, of course, that Muslims students are not a single homogeneous group; rather the diversity of the Muslim student community is a microcosm of the diversity of Muslims in the UK. The report recognises, therefore, that 'Muslim' is a reductionist term in that it homogenises a highly diverse group into a single category. As a result diversity and intersectionality has been reflected where possible. Of note, all names used in this report are pseudonyms.

## Findings

It is by no means the case that all Muslim students' experiences of higher education are negative ones - in full or even in part. Indeed across the data, there are examples of high levels of satisfaction, enjoyment of higher education, and positive staff-student, or student-student peer relationships. In addition, even for those who described less than positive experiences, many of those interviewed did not see themselves as being marginalised or discriminated against because of their identity as Muslims. Indeed, those who expressed dissatisfaction, or described negative experiences of being in higher education, recounted concerns which are shared by many other (non-Muslim) students - such as those who

live at home whilst studying; part-time or mature learners; those first in family to access higher education; minority ethnic students who are not Muslim; and/or religious students from other, non-Muslim, religious groups. These shared concerns include: issues around commuting times, placements, and timetabling which result in split days with long gaps; juggling work, childcare, home life and study; difficulties in building relationships with other students - especially for part-time or mature students; difficulties in understating academic language or academic mores, in decoding assignments or in understanding assessment requirements; and difficulties in participation in religious festivals or holidays, or in other aspects of religious practice, or feelings of being ridiculed or judged because of religion or belief.

Overall, however, most students expressed some level of concern about their experiences as students which arose from the specific fact that they are Muslim. Across the analysis there were four key areas of concern:

1. Whilst social and ethnic diversity on campus is seen as a cause for 'celebration', religious diversity is largely unrecognised and unacknowledged. This can make Muslim students feel **invisible**, ignored, overlooked, undervalued or disregarded as Muslims.
2. Despite this invisibility Muslim students also feel **highly visible** - as a result of prevailing discourses around the threat faced from Islamic fundamentalism on campus; the implementation of policies arising from HE institutions statutory duty to engage with the government's Prevent agenda; as well as debates around free speech, gender segregation, religious clothing, and/or immigration status.
3. Due to the 'moral panic' around fundamentalism, the lack of institutional and/or individual understanding about Islam or of the needs of religious students, and insufficient religious literacy amongst staff groups and student peers, many Muslim students experience intended or unintended racism or **Islamophobia**. This ranges from casual micro-aggression to overt discrimination, intolerance or even hatred, and is frequently unchecked and unchallenged on campus.
4. The invisibility of religion, alongside the visibility of being Muslim and/or experiences of Islamophobia can threaten Muslim students' sense of **belonging** on campus which may, in turn, affect self-esteem, confidence, or integration, and thus has implications for retention and attainment, and for Muslim students' overall experiences of being a student in UK higher education.

## 1. The invisibility of Muslim students

Islam (along with other religions) is rarely valorised on the UK campus (Stevenson and Aune; Stevenson, 2012, 2013, 2014) since HE institutions are regarded as secular within prevailing academic and governmental discourses. Indeed universities are often self-consciously secular spaces - whilst simultaneously accepting large numbers of Muslim or other religious students, both home and overseas. Moreover, there is a strong academic commitment to the secularity of higher education across much of the sector which means it can be difficult for religious students to engage in conversations around religion.

**There is nowhere to talk about our faith except between us [Muslim friends] like when we go to the prayer room; it's not something that is ever talked about in class and you never ever see anything about Islam around the place [campus] (Majid, Iranian heritage, male, 19, undergraduate).**

This can in part be because religion is regarded by some not as a relational system, but an affiliation category that can (and for many should) be divested or strategically shaped (Stevenson, 2012c) or 'left behind' when students arrive on campus:

**I don't think universities know what to do with religious students. They certainly don't know what to do with Muslim students. I think they would quite like us not to be Muslims but of course they can't say that!... having a prayer room is not enough (Roxana, Pakistani heritage, female, 19, undergraduate).**

The apparent secularity of HE (for a discussion see Gilliat-Ray 2000; Stevenson and Aune, 2017) can also make it difficult for religious students to feel that they are valorised as students because they are religious.

**How can they say 'yes come here we want people of all different faiths and religions and beliefs and we are happy to have you all' but then when you are here it's like there's nothing. So you can be a quiet Muslim, a silent Muslim, but please don't want us to support you being a real Muslim (Imran, Pakistani heritage, male, 18, undergraduate).**

As a result, many staff and students find it uncomfortable to discuss religion - because of a commitment to secularity - or an opposition to religion per se - because of a lack of confidence about how to engage in conversations about religion, and/or because they lack knowledge and



understanding about particularly religions. For these reasons many individuals (and indeed, institutions) elect not to engage in conversations about religion.

For the students this was particularly notable in relation to Islam, which they considered staff and students to be particularly ignorant or ill-informed about - unlike, for example, Christianity:

**They [lecturers] know nothing about Islam... [other than] seen on television or read in the news. That means they think they know things, usually bad, or they think they really know nothing, or not much, or don't know what to say so they say nothing... Ignorance about Islam is a real problem for me (Amira, Pakistani heritage, female, 20, undergraduate).**

More problematically, a number of those interviewed felt that many staff or other students (and indeed the general population) were scared of Muslims, which meant that

they were unwilling to engage in conversations with them, particularly conversations about Islam or Muslims:

**I think that they [staff] are really fearful about Muslims. So because of that they won't talk about Muslims in case they upset them (Mohammed, Black-African heritage, 33, male, postgraduate).**

For the students the fact that Islam, or being Muslim, was never valorised, and mostly unrecognised, was keenly felt. They were critical, for example, of the fact that universities gave out promotional messages which suggested that Muslim students would be welcome on campus whereas the reality was that, once there, their identity as young Muslims was ignored or overlooked:

**It's so annoying. You see all these pictures of students in hijabs when you look at the prospectus or the website. Then you get here and there's no halal food in the restaurant, the prayer room is miles away and there isn't one for women and then when its Ramadan they don't change exams or anything (Roxana, Pakistani heritage, female, 19, undergraduate).**

In addition, data on staff/student religion is not systematically collated by many HEIs and thus Muslim (and other religious) students remain a less easily

identifiable group than those from different socio-economic, gender or ethnic backgrounds - unless they are marked out because, for example, of their clothing. This can make it difficult for Muslim students to feel connected to other Muslims:

**I joined the Islamic Society and we were talking about Muslims students and how we can do more to support them and I suggested we got a list of all the Muslim students and they said 'we can't. We don't know who they are'. So how do we know who we should be contacting? (Jasmin, Pakistani heritage, 23, female, postgraduate).**

The students were also critical of the fact that universities vacillated around issues such as gender segregation, or freedom of speech on campus:

**We wanted to have a debate around freedom of speech as part of [university Islamic Society] but we were told that we couldn't. They didn't seem willing to say why we couldn't, just that we couldn't (Jasmin, Pakistani heritage, 23, female, postgraduate).**

The silencing of discussions around religion, and Islam in particular, meant that Muslim students themselves also felt silenced. At the same time, however, Muslim students are increasingly being rendered highly visible on campus.

## 2. Being visible as a Muslim student

There is evidence to suggest that Muslim (and other religious) students are increasingly facing both discrimination and physical and verbal abuse on campus (Equality Challenge Unit, 2011): indeed the number of Islamophobic attacks on students has risen sharply (National Union of Students, 2012; Equality Challenge Unit, 2011). Many of those interviewed for this research recounted incidents of abuse, primarily verbal abuse, with fewer examples of physical abuse - although a few had been spat on and others had items of clothing ripped:

**I've been called Paki a lot. With the 'go home' stuff shouted. And young boys shouting murderer once after there had been a terror attack (Sara, Pakistani heritage, female, 26, postgraduate).**

At the same time as this growth in religiously-motivated incidences, however, religion on campus has become increasingly problematized around idea of fundamentalism, with ever-increasing guidance being provided to universities on how to tackle possible



extremism and prevent people being drawn into terrorism (the Prevent duty).

**I hate what Prevent has done. It has made all of us who are not White, not Christian, not supposedly 'British enough' feel like we are just not British. Even though we are (Fahad, Pakistani heritage, male, 21, undergraduate).**

The conflating of debates around Islamism with Islam, and of terrorism with being Muslim, however, was keenly felt by a number of those interviewed - particularly young men who felt that they were constantly being seen as a threat.

**Every time you hear about a bomb going off you know you will have to face that the next day; that somehow you are part of the problem (Hassan, male, Pakistani heritage, 22, undergraduate).**

In such ways Muslim students are, therefore, both invisible (as noted above) and highly visible, under surveillance through Prevent, and positioned as potential threats through suspicion.

Muslim students are not of course the only religious group who find the higher education campus to be, at times, a hostile space; however, the Muslim students interviewed here felt that the political climate meant that Muslims were viewed with more suspicion than other groups:

**Every time there is something about 'Muslims' on television I just think 'oh no' because I know that they following day things will be much more difficult (Aisha, female, Pakistani heritage, 20, undergraduate).**

Across the data the negative framing of Islam and Muslims was a cause of great concern for many of those interviewed:

**Each time I walk on to campus I can feel their [security staff] eyes on me. I just look down and keep walking (Parvin, female, Iranian heritage, 22, postgraduate).**

In addition, the students were frustrated that where debates around religion did exist, they were almost wholly negative, relating to fundamentalism, free speech, gender segregation, religious clothing, or immigration status.

**Just because I wear a headscarf it doesn't mean I am an oppressed woman. I am able to make my own choices, chose how to life my life but I am**

**looked at with pity (Fatou, female, Black African-heritage, 27, postgraduate).**

Moreover, although UK Muslims are amongst the most disadvantaged of all groups (Shaw et al, 2016) they are rarely positioned as the victims of disadvantage or discrimination or of experiencing hardship or poverty. Headlines linking Muslim young men to crime or terrorism, or to forced marriage or honour killings, sell newspapers whilst portraying Muslims as being underprivileged does not. This was picked up by some of those interviewed who felt that it made it harder for them to present a positive image of Islam:

**All that stuff about terrorists coming over as bogus refugees and so on...it is just horrible the way the newspapers are talking about refugees (Aisha, female, Pakistani heritage, 20, undergraduate).**

**I blame the media for the ways in which Muslims in Britain are thought about because all you ever hear is the terrible things that Muslims are supposed to have done and you never, ever hear anything positive. The media needs to stop now before it just makes things really, really bad (Amira, female, Pakistani heritage, 20, undergraduate).**

The ways in which Muslims were portrayed in the media, as well as the negative experiences some had on campus resulted in some Muslims seeking to make themselves less visible:

**You end up just not making yourself visible if you can get away with it. Better not to be noticed (Taj, male, Bangladeshi heritage, 21, undergraduate)**

### 3. Experiencing Islamophobia on campus

Islamophobia is a form of intolerance and discrimination motivated by fear, mistrust or hatred of Islam. The Runnymede Trust (2017) define Islamophobia as "anti-Muslim racism", declaring this to be 'any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life' (2017: 7)..

Anti-Muslim sentiment operates on a continuum however, from micro-aggressions to violent offences all of which were experienced by (some of) those interviewed:



It is just the constant sniping, the casual remarks, the comments that people make about 'Muslims' which is uninformed and ignorant. And it is like they think you either don't care or don't hear. But you do (Bibha, female, Bangladeshi heritage, 33, postgraduate).

I got spat at in the street by some children. Just walking along and they spat at me and called me 'f\*cking Paki' (Fahad, Pakistani heritage, male, 21, undergraduate)

Moreover, it can be casual or deliberate, implicit or explicit, subtle or blatant; and can range from intangible dislike to palpable hatred; it also operates at both a covert and an overt level.

It's got worse since I've grown a beard. Lots of name calling and shouting abuse... It makes me so angry because what do they know about me? (Khalid, Pakistani heritage, male, 21, undergraduate).

In a way it is easier to deal with the really outrageous stuff because it is almost easier to ignore. It is the small stuff that matters. Like if people don't make eye contact but then are polite to you because you don't know how to deal with that. They don't like you but they don't want you to know it. (Amira, female, Pakistani heritage, 20, undergraduate).

The most frequently experiences of the students across these projects, however, was the result of a lack of

understanding of both Islam and of Muslims which resulted in stereotyping and discrimination

It is laughable really what people say: that all Muslims are killers, or want to destroy the UK, or oppress women and so on. And even people here who are supposed to be educated can be just so completely stupidly ignorant (Tara female, Iraqi heritage, 30, postgraduate).

I am pretty sure that I don't get asked to speak out in front of the class because there's a feeling that I am a reserved person - because I am a Muslim woman in a headscarf. It's just laughable. Ask anyone who knows me! (Nadia, Black-African heritage, female, 21, undergraduate).

Moreover, a lack of religious literacy means that many staff appear uncomfortable about challenging Islamophobia (and other forms of racism).

So somebody said something stupid about Muslims in class and I looked at the lecturer and she just looked right back and looked so embarrassed because she knew she should say something but she just didn't know what. So in the end she said nothing although afterwards she apologised to me for that (Roxana, Pakistani heritage, female, 19, undergraduate).

As a result Islamophobia and/or anti-Muslim racism was, across the accounts given, both present and pervasive. Moreover, it was rarely checked and frequently unchallenged. It therefore operated as a form of institutional racism

The Prevent agenda - as operated in HEIs - can worsen Islamophobia as it is often enacted by those with little religious literacy or understanding of Islam or Muslim students

**So we were planning an event and we wanted this particular speaker and suddenly there was all this requirement to prove that this person wasn't going to come on to campus and radicalise us all. So there was paperwork and paperwork to fill in but it was all just utter nonsense. I just kept telling them she was a feminist speaker who happened to be Muslim but I got nowhere.... it wouldn't have happened if she'd been a white feminist. I am sure of it (Aisha, Pakistani heritage, female, 18, undergraduate)**

Moreover the collapsing of hate crime incidences into policy around race and ethnicity rather than religion also raised concern as it renders religion invisible in such debates:

**There was a horrible incident when my friend had her hijab pulled at from behind by someone on campus. Really hard, so she almost fell over. Last year it was. And we both went to our lecturer and asked how we told the university about it but they just told us about the way to report racism. But it wasn't about race it was because we are Muslim (Nadia, Black-African heritage, female, 21, undergraduate).**

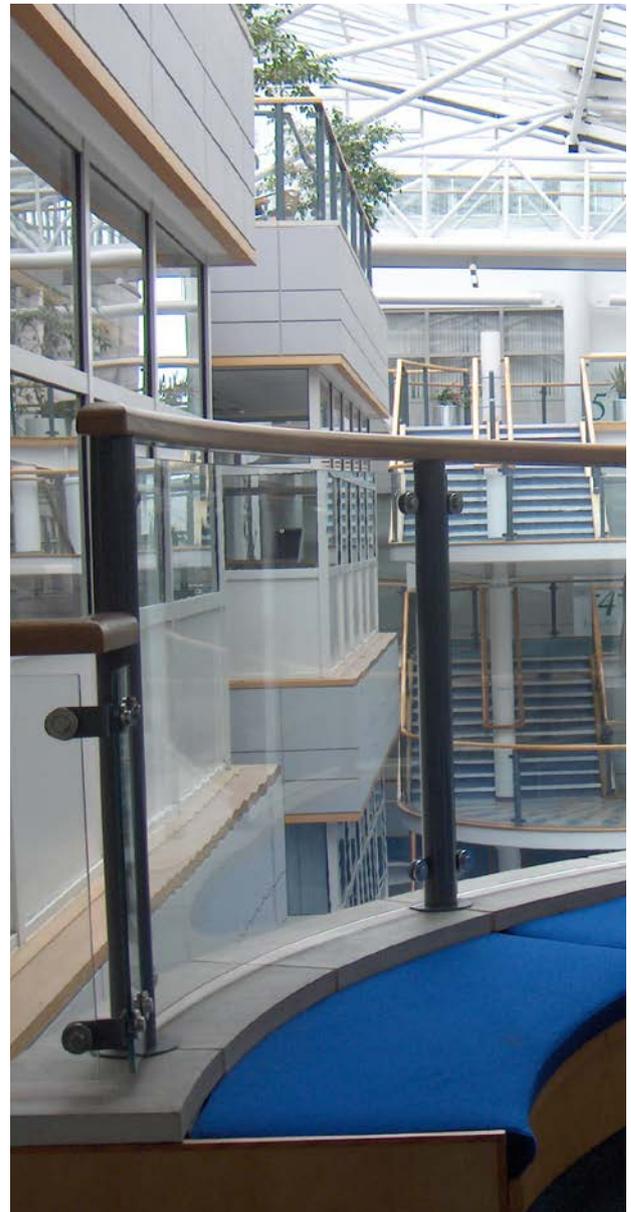
Racism and Islamophobia are experienced differently by different groups; however, female Muslims encountered high levels of Islamophobia in relation to dress; Black Muslims faced racism as well as Islamophobia and so encounter an additional ethnic penalty; while first-generation Muslims faced racism and hostility in relation to their immigrant status.

It is important to note, however, that (most) Muslim students were happy to discuss their religious beliefs and felt that they would have been in a stronger position to challenge Islamophobia if they had been able to engage in thoughtful debates around Islam. For the majority of students, however, this was denied to them, either because of a lack of institutional appetite to engage in such debates or because staff, or other students, feel ill-equipped to do so.

As a result of on-going Islamophobia, however, it is unsurprising that universities can feel like hostile places to Muslim students which can, in turn, shape their sense of belonging on campus.

## 4. Belonging on campus

Belongingness arises from everyday practices and events within specific milieu and can have many meanings for different individuals and at different times and in a variety of contexts. Most meanings include the following: acceptance, support, relatedness, affinity and membership, and they all relate to the level of integration an individual feels to a particular context. In higher education a 'sense of belonging' can be described as 'students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others ...and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual' Goodenow (1993: 25). These complex connections and potentially disconnections may be based on shared beliefs and expectations but result from interactions with other people and their surroundings (May, 2013).



Across the data reported here two key themes arose which shaped students sense of belonging on campus: power relations (staff-student and student-student) and how power is (or can be) used to make Muslim students feel that they don't belong; and the ways in which what is ordinary for many students can be experienced as the extra-ordinary by Muslims.

First, for many of Muslim students interviewed their everyday world of higher education was structured by power relations which can make them feel powerless. This related to their relationships with staff, including academic and non-academic staff, and with students - especially those who had no particular religious affiliation or who were critical of religion in general.

**So like every time I walk on campus I get stopped by security because I am wearing a headscarf but my friends don't because they are not - it makes me feel horrible (Shakira, female, British Pakistani, 19, undergraduate).**

**It is like open season sometimes. Have a go at a Muslim day. It is so depressing (Taj, male, Bangladeshi heritage, 21, undergraduate)**

**I have friends who are Sikh and Christian on my course and they never say anything much about the fact that I am Muslim or about Islam in general. But there are others who make a big point of criticising religion and you know what they are thinking: 'and Muslims are the worst of all' (Faisal, male, 22, undergraduate)**

Second, the data shows that the 'everyday' world of higher education can be experienced as problematic for Muslims, and what is ordinary for many can be experienced as extra-ordinary. So, for example, some of those interviewed felt that even quite straight-forward comments, or activities, were viewed with suspicion:

**We are not terrorists just because we have political views (Mustafa, male, Black African, 29, postgraduate).**

**I am not a bomber; I just have a rucksack (Raj, Indian heritage, male, 19, undergraduate).**

For many of the students interviewed it is clear that they were engaged in a constant process of pushing back against the boundaries that others were drawing round them. The attempts to belong were not, however, singular. Rather they were engaged in a constant process of developing multiple belongings. However, misconceptions and stereotypical assumptions about Islam or assumptions

made about gender expectations made it difficult for Muslims to engage in meaningful interactions with non-Muslims and/or to integrate effectively.

**Every time I go in to the classroom, if I am early, I sit down and wait and you can guarantee that most people will sit anywhere but next to me. And if we have to do group work I know that people will team up with me because they have to. I think it is mainly because they think I am just passive Muslim woman who cannot speak for herself. I used to fight against it but now I don't bother (Leila, female, Iranian heritage, 21, undergraduate).**

The ways in which Muslim students are overlooked or disregarded in institutional policy-making or practice was a cause of particular frustration.

**I don't want to feel different. I am Pakistani but I'm also British and I want to fit in. I wish people would just accept me for who I am, look past my skin colour, see the real me. I wish people would stop seeing the barriers (Imran, Pakistani heritage, male, 18, undergraduate).**

Although the students' accounts focussed on the micro and the local – for example recounting a single interaction with another student or staff member, or describing a relatively small-scale event such as where they sat in the classroom – these events carried significant, collaborative, weight.

For many Muslims, therefore, the relationship between the (apparent) secularity of the higher education campus and being Muslim was an uneasy one. As a result some Muslim students turned their backs on their own institution, electing to socialise elsewhere including avoiding the HE campus completely other than for lectures.

**Like I've just given up now and do all my socialising though X University. They have got a massive Islamic Society, with loads going on all the time. (Aisha, Pakistani heritage, female, 18, undergraduate)**

**I just socialise now with the friends I have where I live. I am from a large family and there is a close community and it just feels more accepting to be with them (Zara, Sudanese, female, 20, undergraduate).**

This has profound implications for the students' identity, sense of self, self-esteem and, importantly, their (in) equitable student experience.

It is important to make clear, however, that Muslim students such as these are not passive. Rather for them avoidance can be agentic, offering possibilities for resistance and resilience.

Moreover, other students chose to persist in efforts to engage in conversation with people around Islam, raise concerns about the rights and treatment of Muslim students, or push their institution to make changes which would make the student experience better for Muslims:

**There's no way I am shutting up and letting things pass. I am determined to make the university recognise that we [Muslim students] are here and we are here to stay so they will just have to get used to that! (Jasmin, Pakistani heritage, 23, female, postgraduate).**

## Summary

As referred to at the beginning of this report, many Muslim students experience neither discrimination or prejudice, or outright Islamophobia- or they do not offer accounts of doing so - and, as a result, do not struggle to develop a sense of belonging on campus.

Other students faced ignorance, prejudice or discrimination but challenged these where they encountered them. For others, however, incidences of Islamophobia or racism, institutional failure to recognise Muslim identity, support isolated minority students or promote peer integration affected their confidence. Micro-aggressions in particular impacted on their self-esteem, confidence, motivation, and aspiration and resulted in some (on occasion) seeking to hide their Muslim identity, disengaging from the campus, struggling to integrate, and/or feeling demotivated.

For these students therefore their higher education experience was one of inequality and inequality which HE institutions must take significant and sustained steps to redress.

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