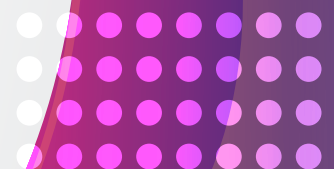


# **Transitions: *British Muslims between undergraduate and PGT studies***

**Amira Samatar, Zain Sardar  
and The Aziz Foundation**

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**The Aziz Foundation** was established in 2015 by the Aziz family, and is inspired by the values and teachings of Islam to support the most disadvantaged communities in Britain. It offers Masters scholarships to British Muslims, enabling them, in partnership with UK universities, to progress in their career and make meaningful contributions to our society.

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## Foreword by Dr Muna Abdi

Over the past two decades we have seen a growing number of research projects conducted to explore the ways in which Muslims in the UK are subjected to racial and religious discrimination in social and educational spaces.

The inhibiting effect of structural injustices on Muslim students is evidently becoming more acutely exposed, brought to light by academic research teams and by HE practitioners working on behalf of sector wide bodies. However, in *Transitions*, we get the perspective of Muslim scholarship candidates facilitated through the Aziz Foundation – an educational charity and scholarship provider with one foot in the sector and one foot out, and with extensive access to British Muslim communities.

This is an important contribution to this literature shedding light on the lived experience of British Muslim students on university campuses. Amira Samatar and Zain Sardar apply a critical lens with which to explore the complex experiences of Muslim students in HE, with a particular focus on their transition into postgraduate studies. Their analysis captures the nuanced intersectional identities of Muslim students, highlighting the ways in which economic and racial systemic barriers shape their experiences and negotiation of HE spaces.

Despite the university being presented as a haven of progressive thinking, evidence in recent years would suggest that the University is, in actuality, an incubator of racial and faith-based discrimination. This raises important questions about the capacity of universities to support Muslim students and the measures students themselves are impelled to take to thrive in a space that does not always welcome them.

The powerful accounts presented here reveals the lived realities that statistical data on student representation fails to capture. Though the numbers of Muslim students continuing onto postgraduate studies are slowly increasing, we must still ensure that sufficient attention is paid to their experiences. It is not enough to invite students into a space if the space itself remains unchanged. This report not only brings these pertinent issues into focus but is also an urgent call to action.



## Testimonial by Maisha Islam

Transitions represents a cornerstone in embedding Muslim students further into the UK Higher Education (HE) policy landscape by rightly shedding a light on the long-standing inequalities now being uncovered in national data sets. This report importantly contributes to a growing body of literature which seeks to better understand intersectional disadvantages experienced by minoritised individuals, particularly at the 'broken bridge' of postgraduate taught (PGT) study. In centring the experiences of Muslim students, it is disheartening (yet regrettably unsurprising) to read that many of the inequities faced at undergraduate level resurface at the PGT level. However, in understanding the 'layers of identity' our Muslim students possess and consulting with sector experts, the report clearly articulates a strong set of recommendations which I would urge every institution to consider. In doing so, we can ensure a level of parity between different religious groups in HE to ensure we utilise and harness the talent, ambition and hopes of Muslim students passionate to succeed. At this time of renewed commitment to race and intersectional equity, we are reminded that this work requires intentional care for and partnership with our Muslim students and staff in the sector.

# Introduction

Within higher education (HE) differential learning experiences and outcomes for Black, Asian, and racially minoritised students have long tainted progressive achievements within the sector, evidenced through the greatest disparity in the degree-awarding gap being marked by ethnicity (OfS, 2020 & Cotton et al, 2016). Disparities in the awarding of a 'good degree' classification - synonymous with a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2:1 - between UK domiciled students of colour and white students currently stands at 15% in favour of the latter according to Advance HE (2020). Additionally, when these disparities are disaggregated between ethnicities, Black African-Caribbean students experience the largest gap in degree outcomes, with a difference of 22 percentage points in 2018-2019 (OfS, 2020b). Indeed, the prevalence of the degree-awarding gap within the sector has issued a wakeup call to university senior leadership teams - especially those with diverse student populations - to tackle persistent issues of racial inequities. Impetus has also been provided by the sector regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), which has set institutions the task of completely closing the degree-awarding gap by 2038.

In practice, institutional responses to eliminating the awarding gap have varied, but two common spheres of action seem to centre on shoring up reporting mechanisms on racial harassment (the focus of a 2020 Universities UK report and its associated recommendations) and increasing access and participation opportunities for those (as recorded by the Nous Group in their analysis of Access and Participation Plans) seen to be held back by 'intersectionalities of disadvantage' (2020). These are, needless to say, conjoined streams of work that urgently need to spur on a transformation of institutional culture and practice.

These thorny challenges are perceived by the Aziz Foundation and by the co-authors of this report through the lens of British Muslim students' experiences and the unique positionalities and spaces they occupy within HE. In many respects they can be seen as an exemplar of the type of constituency at the sharp end of the 'intersectionalities of disadvantage', with many carrying the double penalty of being discriminated against due to their faith, in addition to their ethnicity, and - to put it more precisely - the complex intersectional interaction between the two. It seems that the British Muslim identity offers

a target for the othering tropes still endemic in HE and which continue to circulate and reproduce themselves within an enabling climate of institutionalised Islamophobia (Akel, 2021).

This report centrally and unapologetically focuses on the experiences of UK domiciled British Muslim students in isolation. We argue that higher education institutions (HEIs) need to address the hidden intersectional dynamic between ethnicity and faith which so determines the British Muslim identity in the UK. It is only, after all, by de-homogenising 'BAME' communities - and grappling with the complexities inherent to the discrete identities of diverse student cohorts - that we can start to heighten the impact of targeted interventions designed to efface inequities within institutional structures.

Some further action will be needed to advance the collective endeavour of creating a more equitable sector, including mounting widening participation initiatives to bridge the social mobility fault-line now firmly entrenched between the undergraduate and postgraduate taught (PGT) level. The lack of Black and racially minoritised doctoral students and academics is, thankfully, starting

to gain greater attention from regulatory quarters, but the experiences of diverse communities at the 'broken bridge' of PGT remains, to a great extent, neglected. And, in fact, widening participation programmes designed to increase social mobility at this level constitute a veritable terra incognita in the HE policy topography. While we know that more Black, minoritised and Muslim students are entering HE overall, the lack of targeted interventions at the PGT level is sustaining a fissured pipeline between academia and industry. In a competitive labour market in which British Muslims are at a structural disadvantage, we know how critical the PGT level is in acting as a site of empowerment and preparedness for professional life.

In this report, the intent of Aziz Scholarship candidates to progress onto PGT studies speak for themselves. We hear of their aspirations, the significance they attach to PGT study, and their student experience at the undergraduate level. We confidently assert that far from being the object of research - and despite being treated as objects of suspicion - British Muslim students are agents of change and are at the forefront of transforming university campuses and co-developing a truly inclusive learning environment for all minoritised staff and students.



# Ethos (Our Work)

The authors' intentions for this report are to amplify the voices of the Muslim students who shared their experience, and to provide a critical discussion with key stakeholders in the sector. This report was completed in a collaborative spirit, with the aspiration of influencing progressive institutional and organisational change across the HE sector. Overall, the ethos behind this report aligns with the core values of the Aziz Foundation: to bridge existing inequality gaps for British Muslims across society, with particular focus on improving progression to postgraduate studies.

## This report aims to:

- Centre the lived experiences, perspectives and testimonies of British Muslim students, highlighting the structural barriers and institutional challenges with which they are confronted;
  - Reveal how societal inequalities besetting British Muslim communities manifest themselves within HE settings;
  - Explore the expectations and importance that Muslim students attach to postgraduate study and the extent to which these are realised;
  - Consider the policies, initiatives and support schemes that institutions can implement in order to better the experiences of Muslim students and push forward widening access agendas.
- Foreground a unique dynamic – the intersectionality between faith and ethnicity as experienced by Muslim students;
  - Strengthen the academic pipeline at the PGT level for British Muslims.

## Terminology

Considering this report's focus on Muslim students at university, it is imperative to clarify the language and terminology that will be used to describe their experiences. This report will refrain from using the acronyms 'BAME/BME' (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) - unless in direct reference to literature - in recognition of its veiling of the various disparities between minoritised ethnic groups. Although several bodies including, the OfS (2020) and National Union of Students (NUS & UUK, 2019) have recognised the limitations of using homogenising terms such as these, little change in removing its dominant implementation across the sector has been achieved. Therefore, this report will contribute to the growing pool of literature which seeks to progressively shift away from problematic and reductive language, rhetoric and discourses.

## Intersectionality

This report acknowledges the intersectional identities held by Muslim students' and affirms the multitude of ways these are

## The wider aims of the report are to:

- Support and hold HEIs accountable in creating more equitable and inclusive learning environments for British Muslim students and other marginalised groups;
- Tackle the degree awarding gap, which disproportionately but not exclusively affects British Muslim students and significantly impacts their graduate destinations;

embodied through their lived experiences. In alignment with the spirit of this report, centring intersectional perspectives is critical to dissociating from the homogenising assessments often ascribed to marginalised communities.

The concept of intersectionality is rooted in the intellectual lineage of critical race theory (CRT) and has been founded and nurtured through Black female scholarship (see Crenshaw [1991; 2013], Collins [2016] and Ladson-Billings [1998; 2005]). The term which originated in Crenshaw's seminal paper (1991) has traversed several disciplines and is fundamental to CRT's exploration of the inter-centricity of race and racism, along with other positionings that amplify societal inequities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In short, intersectionality refers to how race 'interacts' with other social markers, including class, gender, religion, disability and sexuality and how these compound and transform experiences of oppression (Gillborn, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991).

The absence of a critical intersectional lens in exploring the experiences of Muslim students, and Muslim communities more widely, has led to a monolithic view of the realities of all Muslims in the UK. One manifestation of this presents itself through the assumption that all British Muslims are of South-Asian heritage and therefore often results in the overlooking and excluding of British Muslims of other ethnicities (Amer, 2015). The significance of recognising the intersectionality of Muslims students is especially pertinent considering the global reawakening to systemic and insidious anti-Black racism in 2020 (Lewis, 2020; Moncrieffe, 2020). Therefore, space must be made to explore the unique intersectional experiences of Muslim students, including experiences of anti-Blackness encountered within HE (see Madriaga, 2018) and Muslim circles more broadly.

# Literature Review and Context

## Religious and Racial Inequalities in Higher Education

The problems encountered by Muslim students manifests themselves most evidently in the degree-awarding gap, with research from Advance HE (2020b) laying out the scale of the problem. The starkness of the awarding gap is widely evidenced by many sources in addition to Advance HE, including the OfS (2020) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2020).

The degree-awarding gap refers to disparities in the awarding of a 'good degree' classification, synonymous with a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2:1 at the undergraduate level, with the greatest gap marked by ethnicity. Advance HE's seminal 2020 report analysed for the first time the data on the religion and belief of student cohorts, which HEIs are now obliged to submit to HESA. The report's conclusion sums up the issue at hand: *'[What is] Particularly striking is the under attainment of Muslim students compared to the general student population'*.

In more specific terms, the report found that only 18% of Muslim students achieved a 1<sup>st</sup> class degree classification at the undergraduate level, compared to 30% of those from non-faith backgrounds. Moreover, less than two thirds of Muslim students graduated with a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2:1 overall. Coupled with this, Muslims are the smallest faith grouping as a percentage at Russell Group institutions, despite Muslims being well represented in HE at both undergraduate and PGT levels.

In its granularity in specifying those disadvantaged through the awarding gap by faith affiliation, Advance HE refines the foundational data initially analysed by the

NUS and UUK (2019) in their report which first laid out the scale of the problem in respect to the degree awarding gap. The NUS-UUK report also lends further weight to the urgency with which university leaderships need to take strong action to close the awarding gap. And, indeed, this has become a regulatory imperative as the OfS has set the ambitious goal for the sector to completely eliminate the awarding gap by 2038. This is, of course, a goal which will need to be achieved in partnership with Third Sector and community organisations that work closely with, and therefore understand, various ethnic minority communities.

## The British Muslim Student Experience

Considering the degree-awarding gap, what is critical here to the Muslim student experience is comprehending the intersectionality between ethnicity and faith, as both of these need to be thought together. We already know that Muslims strongly identify with their faith (it is core to their identity) and that this is important to their sense of belonging (Islam, 2021). We should also consider the double penalty (Stevenson, 2017; Bhopal, 2014) that Muslim students face: first, due to their ethnicity, as by and large they are from minoritised communities; and, second due to the misconceptions or lack of religious literacy surrounding Islamic practices, whether it is displaying outward markers such as wearing the hijab or making use of university facilities, like the need to seek a prayer room to complete obligatory prayers.

Intersectionality is a common theme in the joint report, *The Experience of Muslim students in 2017/18*, published in 2018 and co-authored by the then NUS Black Students' Officer and NUS Women's Officer. It details the lack of

trust British Muslim students still place in university structures. A national survey of 500 Muslim students found that this distrust stems both from the lack of confidence in the reporting mechanisms that tackle hate crimes and racist incidents, and the chilling effect of extended state surveillance in the HE Sector through Prevent, a key plank of the UK government's counterterrorism strategy (NUS, 2018). Put otherwise, there is significant trust deficit in institutional responses to safeguarding and responding to the claims of Muslim students. Consequently, the reporting duty placed on universities to report suspicious activity through Prevent is seen as a major inhibitor for Muslims students participating in student societies, SU governance and democracy (Qureshi, 2020).

These findings were corroborated in a recent report by Professor Alison Scott-Bauman *Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: perceptions and challenges*. The report draws on the evidence of 2,022 national survey respondents, from 132 universities. It finds that Muslim students are seen as 'objects of suspicion', and that university management and teaching staff are not always cognisant of the gendered experience of Muslims on campus. It further states that there is 'clear evidence of unconscious bias, casual racism and explicit discrimination' (Guest et al, 2020, p.5). As a result, the majority of respondents see the instituting of anti-discrimination measures as more important than upholding completely unfettered freedom of expression. This is, no doubt, to counteract the influence of Prevent, which is perceived as amplifying the 'effect of sustaining negative stereotypes and disabling the mechanisms universities have for subjecting...stereotypes to critical scrutiny' (Ibid, p.6).

## Structural factors for Muslim students within HE

British Muslims feel entirely invisible in HE environments, stemming from an institutional failure to recognise their identity. Moreover, there is a feeling that the institutional setting of the modern university does not fully incorporate Muslim student needs, with not enough being done to create a sufficiently inclusive learning environment. This is a key finding from the Bridge Institute, which has conducted pioneering analysis into this key research area. Prior to the publication of the landmark Advance HE report (2020b) which utilised data on students' religion and belief for the first time, Abida Malik and Emily Wykes suggested that 'policymakers must reflect on the significance of religion' within the context of 'institutional bias in the HE sector'. They situated the emergence of an 'empowering Islamic identity' amongst Muslim students in HE within the wider discourse of racial equality. We should consider this in light of a recent review of Access and Participation plans by the Nous Group, which has shown that 'intersectionality' is now a watchword amongst HEIs in respect to widening access, but as of yet the religion/race intersection has gone largely unstated.

One of the central concerns raised by the report is the lack of Shariah compliant student finance, which signifies a by no means minor accessibility issue for Muslim progression in HE. Young Muslims are increasingly taking a principled approach to avoiding interest bearing loans as they perceive it to be in conflict with religious sensibilities. Government sanctioned alternatives have been given the green light in theory (having been recommended in numerous government reviews, of which the Augar report was the latest iteration) and yet their introduction has been repeatedly kicked into the long grass.

In relation to the wider experiences of minority communities, Leading Routes' report, *The Broken Pipeline* (Williams, Bath, Arday and Lewis, 2019), offers a critical appraisal of the barriers facing Black students at the postgraduate research level and the issues limiting the production of Black academics and particularly Black Caribbean doctoral students. Notable factors pointed to for this are the lack of diversity of recruitment panels charged with the responsibility of hiring academic staff; the reoccurring toxicity of the supervisor-supervisee relationship due to a lack of cultural understanding; and the need to ring-fence funding opportunities for Black PhD students, particularly considering the woefully derisory numbers of Black doctoral students awarded research council funding.

### **Broken Pipeline: the reality Muslim students face beyond first-degrees**

Beyond postgraduate studies, British Muslims are confronted with an array of inhibiting challenges. Foremost amongst these, is the lack of 'social' or navigational capital borne by British Muslims within the labour market, something which greatly stymies career trajectories and stifles progression into senior leadership roles.

Foregrounding the multiple, coalescing penalties experienced by Muslim women in the labour market, Suriya Bi's report *Empowered Employment: Unlocking the Workplace for Muslim Women* is an important contribution to the literature exploring the lived experiences of marginalised communities within professional settings. The findings show that despite a high level of competency and skills amongst Muslim women across different ethnic communities, a lack of confidence and access to career advice is still widely reported as a principal concern by respondents themselves (Bi, 2020). Furthermore, Islamophobia within the

workplace is not an uncommon phenomenon, placing the burden on Muslim women to confront their employers on issues of insidious anti-Muslim racism. This works in tandem with workplace mechanisms such as social events that revolve around alcohol consumption, effectively excluding Muslim women. The report emphasises the significance of mentoring services, networking sessions and paid internships as much needed interventions in addressing the imbalance of opportunity, particularly where deployed in a targeted manner.

The evidence presented by Suriyah Bi is compelling and builds on the key findings of the Social Mobility Commission – with the latter supported by separate research by the ONS and the House of Common's Women and Equalities Committee – that ongoing discrimination directed at Muslim women is a major contributing factor in reducing the likelihood of this demographic being offered managerial and professional roles (Social Mobility Commission, 2017). Indeed, more generally, only 16% of Muslims appear to hold 'higher administrative and professional occupations' compared to the national average of 30% of the population.

Overall, the society-wide gain that would result from greater inclusion of British Muslims not just in the labour market, but in public life, is far from being realised. The Report by the Citizen's Commission, *The Missing Muslims: Report by the Citizen's Commission on Islam, Participation and Public Life*, counts the costs of this talent drain. It states that 'Anti-Muslim prejudice, and a lack of action against those perpetrating or condoning hatred, is a notable obstacle to... participation' (Citizen's Commission, 2017). What makes this even more problematic is the high level of educational and professional aspirations held by young Muslims. These are precluded from being fully actualised,

due to a blockage in the education to career pipeline that stops the translation of these aspirations into concrete career opportunities and involvement in civic spaces. Evidence of this is provided by the Ipsos MORI report commissioned by the Aziz Foundation, *A review of survey research on Muslims in Britain*, which found that the aspirations of young Muslims were high, with 56% of Muslim children thinking it 'very likely' they would go to university, compared to 38% of non-Muslim children (Ipsos MORI, 2017). In spite of this, 'employment disadvantages, and discrimination', as well as unfair media reporting of British Muslim communities (Centre for Media Monitoring, 2019) continue to act as an unwelcome hindrance to meaningful participation.

# Our Research

Throughout the Aziz Foundation's scholarship application process, students were asked to complete a survey either pre- or post-interview to explore their previous experiences of university, their aspirations for pursuing postgraduate studies and any potential barriers they faced. The surveys were completed anonymously, and it was made clear to candidates that they would be considered separately from the application and have no bearing on its outcome. This was to reduce, as far as possible, any potential influence that may inadvertently shape the respondent's views.

The purpose of these surveys were to gain insight into the specific needs of Muslims students in order to better support them through the work of the Aziz Foundation. A total of 400 scholarship candidates were interviewed during the 2019-20 application round, from amongst whom there were 140 survey respondents. The survey provided a combination of quantitative and qualitative data; however, the findings of this research focus particularly on the latter, centering the testimony and lived experiences of Muslim students.

## Our Findings

This section will explore some of the themes which arose from the survey responses. This will then be followed by a synthesis of the roundtable discussion with key stakeholders and will conclude with recommendations.

To begin, our findings show that almost 65% of respondents felt inhibited from pursuing postgraduate studies as a result of their racialised experiences as Muslim students at university. Upon further analysis, the most common themes that emerged from the survey responses were related to issues of:

- **Representation**
- **Experiences of Discrimination**
- **Financial Pressures**
- **Post-Masters Expectations**

## Representation

The lack of diversity in academic staff was a dominant theme conveyed by many respondents. For our scholarship candidates, role modelling and being able to project themselves into future academic and professional roles was key to encouraging and inspiring them to achieve within their respective fields. Observations like the following were common in students' responses:

*"Throughout the three years of my degree I have not been taught by a Muslim female lecturer or professor. For someone who aspires to do this in the future, this lack of representation can be a major inhibitor."*

This was echoed by another candidate, who stated:

*"The representation of Muslims in higher education, particularly visibly Black Muslim women, like myself is rare. Therefore, it's hard to envision yourself in these places too."*

The previous statements underline how rarely Muslim women are able to see themselves represented across academia. The damaging impacts of a lack of representation are far ranging and as outlined, can even result a deep sense of unbelonging and therefore withdrawal from HE altogether (Samatar et al, 2021). There is also the concern expressed by one scholarship candidate that representation

in academia is paramount in shaping research agendas, guiding and providing support to those conducting postgraduate research, particularly in sensitive areas to do with race and religion. As the candidate put it:

*“Representation in postgraduate degrees of professors and academic staff – [is] more important at [the] postgraduate stage as specialised research into a specific topic shapes the majority of the postgraduate degree.”*

Overall, research indicates an acute under-representation of academic and professional services staff from African, Asian and minoritised backgrounds, with the most significant disparities existing in the under-representation of Black (African-Caribbean) academic staff across the sector (NUS & UUK, 2019). By way of illustration, figures drawn from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2020) show that only 140 academic staff at professorial level identified as Black, equating to less than 1% of the entire professoriate (Adams, 2020).

These alarming numbers indicate the extent to which students of colour will rarely have access to staff from similar backgrounds in HE. It is clearly evident that a lack of representation across all facets of academia will continue to exacerbate exclusion and, ultimately, limit opportunities for Muslim students and other marginalised student groups.

Indeed, the lack of visible Muslim academics and senior managers in university settings can undermine the confidence of some Muslim students:

*“Many academics at my university were supportive in the right way. However, some staff did make derogatory comments towards Muslims, particularly those in higher positions of power i.e., Director of Admissions, and*

*coordinator of student ambassadors. There was also a ‘white-male’ led culture which had the ability to make you feel isolated at times [...] and unsure of yourself.”*

What is being foregrounded here are the issues around organisational and institutional cultures in HE, which can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation from the academy. Additionally, scholarship candidates also discussed the lack of representation they experienced in relation to their course curriculum and student cohort composition:

*“The course I studied, which was English, was very ethnocentric (white, middle class) and there were few (about 8) Muslims in total on the course and overall, less BME students. This made it harder to relate my experiences in seminar because I felt judged and uncomfortable sometimes, especially if the topic was about religion and/or sensitive issues such as colonialism, terrorism etc.”*

Eurocentric course content restricts the ways in which Muslim students not only relate to the material but also engage in learning environments with their peers. In the above quote, it appears opportunities for engagement with the course material is also limited due to a lack of diversity amongst the composition of student cohorts. This plays a role in restricting the potential development of peer networks that can mutually support one another in critiquing the narrowness of university curricula. More generally, although numerous campaigns to broaden and decolonise curricula have gained momentum, many students still feel lack of significant progress in this area (Moncrieffe, 2020; Arday, 2018).

## **Experiences of Discrimination**

Many of those surveyed felt the burden was on them to assume responsibility for



actively challenging the discrimination they directly faced or encountered. One respondent in particular highlighted how organised petitioning and campaigning were central to his identity and belonging as a Muslim student:

*“At first, there was no Jummah’ [Friday] prayers at the university but after substantial lobbying, we were able to secure the main hall.”*

Whilst this candidate actively lobbied his institution to create a more inclusive environment on campus, other respondents revealed instances where they began to internalise the trauma experienced as a result of anti-Muslim racism. For example, one student shared this insight:

*“Often we’d be viewed as inferior or made to feel marginalised at times which was tough to adapt to at first but eventually you become accustomed to it which is sad.”*

These painful realities are not exclusive to Muslim students and are often experienced by other minoritised communities who feel that the trauma of being racialised within the academy has become all too normalised (Arday, 2018; NUS & UUK, 2019).

Our findings reveal that a number of Muslim final year undergraduate students felt that their universities considered them to be too demanding, and in response they were met with begrudging responses to calls for greater inclusion. This appears to be rooted in a resentment of having to accommodate to Muslim students’ needs, and is affirmed by one student who makes the point that:

*“Though the student support system was suitable whilst I was at university, there was no support or real understanding of British Muslim student’s experiences, we often asked for more prayer rooms or halal food options on campus, and this was not supported as there was already a*

*Chaplain’s centre available or they didn’t want spend the extra money on catering [...] they had an answer for everything.’*

The notion that Muslim students are somewhat excessive in their demands leads to entrenched forms of stigmatisation and demonisation of Muslims as innately burdensome. The result is that Muslim students are left with few options but to accept the status quo. This sentiment strongly resonates with the concept of ‘satisfied settling’ outlined by Islam and Mercer-Mapstone (2021).

There are occasions in which respondents narrate their experiences of overt harassment, with being treated with suspicious regard on campus as one of the most commonly cited responses. This is particularly revealing in one episode shared by a Black male Muslim student:

*“There was one instance of security stopping someone from praying in a quiet corner of a building. After [a] backlash, [the university’s] security [staff] received sensitivity training for religions and cultures. Most recently I was followed around and spied on by security and I was told it was because I didn’t look like a student. They thought I was a phone thief. Harassment with regards to race and religion isn’t uncommon from staff, the beard, the skin [...] it’s all connected.”*

What is expressed in this contribution is a deep comprehension of the intersectional nature of identity amongst Muslim students. In this case, being Black, male and Muslim is a combination instantly seen as threatening on campus and antithetical to what a ‘student’ is supposed to be. The over-policing and securitisation of Muslim students in educational spaces has long been recognised as problematic and unethical (see Akel, 2021; Guest, 2019; NUS, 2018), however little has so far been done within HE to address the issue.

## Financial Pressures

Respondents also cited financial pressures as a major source of concern in relation to continuing onto postgraduate studies. It is evident that a lack of Shariah-compliant student finance options is obstructing Muslim students, many of whom assume a principled position in respect to taking out interest-bearing loans. This does create cases of financial exclusion, with one student asserting that:

*“To pursue my undergraduate studies, I had to take out loans from [the] student finance company. This is something I struggled with especially after the government changed repayment methods and we now pay interest on our loans which conflicts with my religious beliefs. Although there are postgraduate loans available, I do not consider this a viable option for me, so the cost of post graduate courses is a factor which potentially prohibits me from pursuing my studies if I am unable to obtain funding.”*

These are enduring concerns that haunt British Muslim students - many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds and are the first-generation in their families to enter HE. Financial barriers such as these place a strain on the progression of Muslim students into postgraduate studies and further along the academic pipeline. This is apparent in the following comment:

*“Though I have a full-time job now, I also help with finances at home and so, this wage alone would not allow me to pursue further education to allow me to reach my aspirations of becoming an academic lecturer in Islamic Anthropology without taking a loan out.”*

Financial pressures from limited student loan options and familial responsibilities constrain aspirations in respect to pursuing higher degrees. The issue of student fees at the

postgraduate level has often been presented as a binary issue since the introduction of government loans, however, seldom does research or relevant literature take into account some of the nuances around funding options for Muslim students. This has created a vacuum in understanding the experiences of Muslims students and the problematic matter of appropriate student finance options.

## Post-Masters Expectations

The post-masters' expectations of respondents suggest that they hold high educational and professional aspirations. However, students' also expressed awareness of a number of challenges experienced in accessing professional industries and employment as a result of their identities:

*“I feel there is a lot of unconscious bias and obstacles against British Muslims, especially in the creative industries.... Self-esteem is also a massive issue. It is hard to be confident and feel as though you belong in spaces when aspects such as financial hardship can hold you back. However, I'm striving to overcome these feelings and progress as far as I can.”*

In this case, the respondent calls out the unconscious bias she believes subsists in the creative industries against Muslims and draws attention to the consequent knock-on effects upon self-esteem. Similarly, another female Muslim student indicates her anxieties around job opportunities and career progression beyond her education:

*“Being a South Asian female can feel like an obstacle and means I will have to work even harder than the average Joe to get to a senior position even though I'm more qualified - I feel like the narratives and stereotypes surrounding these layers of my identity may affect my job opportunities. I know it is possible, but it is also daunting to know that sometime these factors will stunt any career progression.”*

Nonetheless, some students channeled a sense of optimism into the competitive edge with which a master's degree will furnish them with in a difficult jobs market, with one candidate observing:

*"I also think minority groups tend to be overlooked in the recruitment process because there is an automatic rejection when it comes to 'ethnic-sounding' names on CVs. But I am hopeful that a master's degree will grant me a foot in the door that may have once been closed to me, and I am willing to work hard in order to succeed."*

The respondent clearly acknowledges the discrimination experienced by job applicants from minoritised backgrounds that bear ethnic sounding names. However, the hope is that gaining a postgraduate qualification will be able to increase the chances of obtaining successful employment.

To conclude our findings, it is important to reiterate the need to take heed of the testimonies and lived experiences of the British Muslims surveyed. These range from final year undergraduate students to experienced professionals hoping to make the step up into a senior management role. In response, we urge universities to adopt policy frameworks and establish tailored widening participation and access schemes at the PGT level to better harness the potential of these cohorts. To this end, and in the concluding section of this report, we offer a number of recommendations, interventions and policy proposals that we believe will assist in shaping a truly inclusive environment for British Muslim students.

# Roundtable Discussion:

The authors of this report, Dr Zain Sardar and Amira Samatar, would like to acknowledge and thank the participants of the roundtable: **Professor Paul Wakeling** (Sociologist of Education and Head of the Education Department, University of York), **Dr Fatima Rajina** (Legacy in Action Researcher at the Stephen Lawrence Research Centre, De Montfort University) and **Ilyas Nagdee** (former NUS Black Student's Officer and independent researcher) for their time, intellectual generosity, and contributions to a fruitful and engaging dialogue. The roundtable discussion centred the findings of this report as well as broader issues related to widening access for Muslim students at the PGT level.

## The discussion was structured around four main questions:

- 1) *How do we ensure that widening participation schemes at the PGT level take into account the intersectionalities of disadvantage, particularly between faith and ethnicity?*
- 2) *Many of our scholarship candidates have commented on the lingering Eurocentric elements of the university curriculum across disciplines. How important is it to decolonise the curriculum for a more inclusive and representative learning environment?*
- 3) *Beyond platitudes, what do you think universities can do to better address issues of discrimination and anti-Muslim racism in their institutions? How important is it that other universities follow London Metropolitan University's lead in investing in research with its Muslim students and staff as a starting point in the process of de-institutionalising Islamophobia?*
- 4) *In your view, what do think should be done to help close the Muslim degree-awarding gap and improve retention at the PGT level and beyond? Of the four key themes from the report's findings (representation, experiences of discrimination, financial pressures, and post-masters' expectations), which do you believe the sector can begin addressing immediately and in what ways?*

## Discussion summary:

- To inform widening participation programmes and ensure they factor in the unique intersectionality of disadvantage experienced by British Muslim communities, more data needs to be captured in respect to faith affiliation. Muslims ought to be considered as a 'disadvantaged group' in APPs, but this can only happen on a sector wide scale – according to the OfS – if more years of data on British Muslims are collated. Regardless, more granular data can be collected by universities themselves at the institutional level.
- There needs to be an equalisation of the pathways between post-92 institutions – where the majority of Muslims study – and Russell Group institutions, where the majority of financial support lies. There is a significant wealth disparity here, yet this pipeline is critical for British Muslim students who are already at a disadvantage even before they commence PGT studies due to the effects of the awarding gap.
- Institutions need to put embarrassment aside and potential damage to institutional reputation to create structured plans to investigate the specific challenges facing British Muslims within the institutional

context, in a similar way to London Metropolitan University's report on Islamophobia.

- There is clear tension between the co-option and commodification of 'decolonising the curriculum' initiatives as a university branding exercise - as well as an excuse to curb academic freedoms - on the one hand, and the imperative to increase the visibility needed to showcase the vital EDI work and activism of grassroots student campaigners on the other. There is a need for a renewed, collaborative approach between staff and students on this - to move beyond the exhausted framing of decolonisation which is now being pushed from above - in order to legitimise it as a collective project once again.
- The partnerships model that is being pioneered by the Aziz Foundation needs to be replicated to leverage funding and grants with conditionality that enhance the learning environment for British Muslim students. This is especially important in the context of institutions desperate to qualify for Race Equality Charter status.
- The government have previously committed themselves to an alternative, interest-free student finance system, as proposed in the Augur Review of HE funding. Concerted lobbying should continue to apply pressure to the government so it implements what it has promised.
- In considering the structural Islamophobia prevalence in HE, we should not lose sight of the overt physical and verbal abuse and harassment that takes place on university campuses. Universities can immediately firm up their policies, strengthening reporting mechanisms ensuring faith competent student services.

# Recommendations: from the findings and roundtable discussion

## For the wider sector and stakeholders:

- For HEIs to adopt the working definition of Islamophobia, as developed by the Runnymede Trust and modified by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims. Universities must start leading the agenda on this, in order to initiate the process of building trust between British Muslim students and the HE Sector, addressing the issues around the securitisation of Muslim students.
- Parity of esteem and financial resources between pre-entry widening participation and postgraduate widening participation, with the latter taken as seriously as if the regulatory obligation had already been extended. Access and in-course support schemes built around Postgraduate Support Scheme (PSS) funding arrangements trialled by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and, latterly, by the OfS, need to continue to be evaluated for impact and potentially scaled up.
- HEIs to be proactive in incorporating 'British Muslim students' as a disadvantaged group in Access and Participation Plans (APPs), with targets set relating to participation, retention and attainment.
- The 'broken pipeline' at the PGT level to be bridged with appropriate funding opportunities, along the lines of the PSS scheme run at a host of institutions and through ring-fencing of scholarships as a form of positive action.

## Our Response and Reaffirming Our Commitment

### The Aziz Foundation will:

- Continue to support its preferred partner institutions in creating an inclusive learning environment for British Muslim students, including in assisting in co-developing widening participation and outreach schemes to British Muslim communities.
- Commit to developing its internship and mentoring schemes, to provide career advancement opportunities for Muslim students post-masters.
- Lead on convening a National Access and Participation Network or Partnerships Network for Muslim learners, with the involvement of a consortium of partner institutions, as well as allied academics, students, practitioners and professional services staff. This will monitor the progression and impact of widening participation schemes and EDI interventions on British Muslims across the sector.

**Additionally, the Aziz Foundation has made the strategic decision to restrict its scholarships from 2021 to its preferred partners. Partner institutions have met the necessary requirements set out by the Aziz Foundation. These new partnerships will enable the Aziz Foundation to:**

- Undertake greater work instigating institutional change at HE providers, co-creating an inclusive learning environment for British Muslim students.

- Play its part in encouraging policy change, such as adoption of the working definition of Islamophobia, and pushing for parity of esteem and financial resources between undergraduate and postgraduate widening participation.
- Campaign more effectively in the instituting of schemes and outreach programmes that benefit British Muslim students and racialised communities more broadly.

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