University of Exeter | Centre for Social Mobility

Catalysing Institutional Reform:

Creating an inclusive learning environment
for British Muslim students
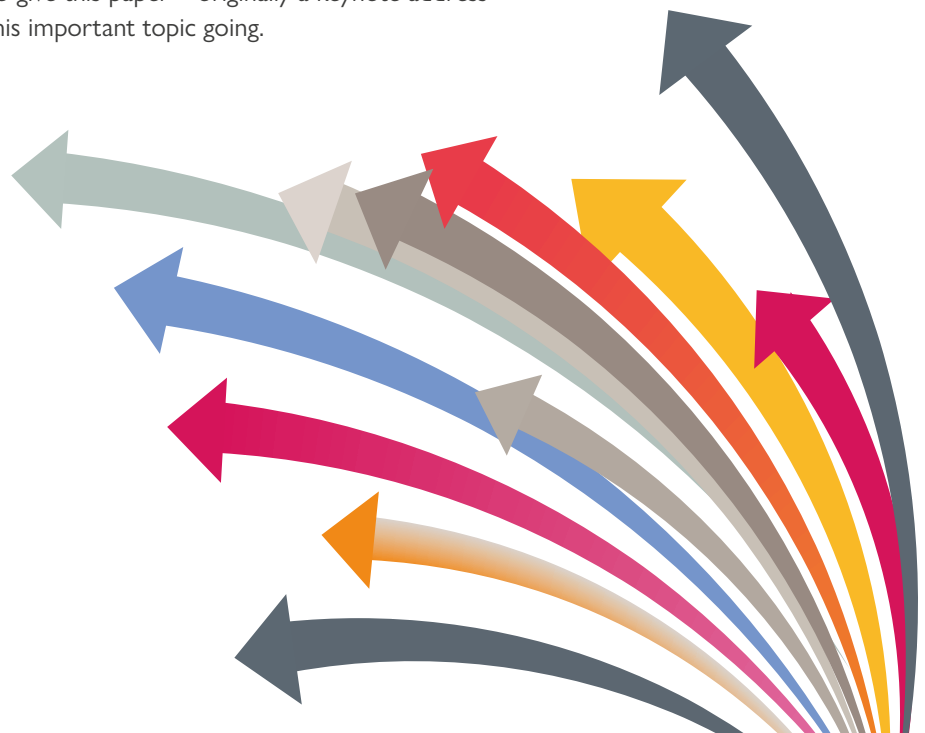
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Overview

Dr Zain Sardar is a Programme Manager at the Aziz Foundation. He manages the Foundation's Preferred Partner scheme, leading on engagement with university partners and higher education stakeholders.

The Aziz Foundation is a family charitable Foundation that offers Masters scholarships to British Muslims, enabling them, in partnership with UK universities, to progress in their career and make meaningful contributions to society.

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

In this paper, my intention is to go beyond the preliminary report that I published in June 2021 [1], to give a sense of how universities can catalyse institutional reform with the aim of creating an inclusive learning environment for British Muslim students.

In my report, *Intersectionality of Race and Religion: Widening Participation and the Experience of British Muslim Students at the PGT Level*, I deployed a methodology of collating and airing the autoethnographies of the Aziz Foundation's scholarship candidates. In many respects, I participated in a careful and necessary listening exercise, platforming the experiences of British Muslim students in transition between undergraduate studies and the PGT level. It was my intention that a strong spirit of testimonial justice should run through the report. However, mobilising lived experiences is really only the start of this critical project. The mission now is to assist institutions in realising what I am calling 'intersectional justice', which ought to bring the operative intersectionality of faith and ethnicity out of the shadows and into the open. This will require concerted action in order for universities to set in train the continual de-institutionalisation of Islamophobia – considered as an ongoing process and permanent campaign – and to weave it into the very fabric of institutional culture.

In which case, a key goal is to translate the recommendations from both the preliminary and the full report [2] into concrete policy actions that can strengthen and extend the reach of the widening participation (WP) agenda in respect to British Muslim students. In this paper, I shall consider each recommendation for action, delineating how these points can help HEIs enable the social mobility of British Muslims and deliver intersectional justice.

With the implementation of the suggested package of measures and interventions put forth here, it is envisaged that this will trigger a shift in the balance of opportunities and navigational capital towards British Muslim students, enabling the equalisation of relations between what is a major community of faith and those from non-faith backgrounds on campus. There is an added impetus here, and this relates to the unique positionality occupied by Muslim students on campus. Muslim students are both objects of research – exhibits held captive by the gaze of the researcher – and also subjects that are made to continuously assess and negotiate their own identities [3] as researchers of their own condition within the academy. In fully engaging with the evaluative powers and lived experience of British Muslim students, institutions can base their interventions on a surer and more efficacious footing.

Let us bear in mind, then, this guiding question: what type of Higher Education Institution can best tackle the unique intersectionalities of disadvantage experienced by British Muslim students? Only in posing this question and exploring the possible answers – and consequently, in practice, assembling and reassembling a learning environment fit for Muslims to thrive in – can we move towards engendering genuinely inclusive universities.

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[1] Sardar, Z., *Intersectionality of Race and Religion: Widening Participation and the Experience of British Muslim Students at the PGT Level*, Aziz Foundation (June, 2021)

[2] Samatar, A. and Sardar, Z., *Transitions: British Muslims between undergraduate and postgraduate taught studies*, Aziz Foundation (forthcoming)

[3] The race equality practitioner Sofia Akel documented this in her report for London Metropolitan University. See fn. 6

2. Recommendations

The recommendations that have been advanced here are intended to aid institutions in overcoming the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' [4] that reigns in public engagement and policy discourse in relation to British Muslim communities. In other words, there is an urgent need to deal with an implicit understanding – suggestive of a deeply ingrained institutional pathology – that otherises Islam and Muslims within the academy. Indeed, according to recent academic reports common tropes are still prevalent amongst students, academic and professional services staff. [5]

And so let us take a closer look at the underlying evidence base. The sources of the proposed measures I offer here can be traced to the preliminary report that I have mentioned; the full report which is forthcoming; and the proceedings of a roundtable discussion – between Professor Paul Wakeling, Ilyas Nagdee and Fatima Rajina – that was convened by me and the report's co-author to discuss the aforementioned report's findings. I also draw on academic literature and surveys [6], of which there is one I would like to foreground; that is, Sophia Akel's seminal report, *Institutionalised: The rise of Islamophobia in Higher Education.* [7] This report – which I would encourage all HE practitioners to read – supplies a readily adaptable model and methodology for universities to audit the Muslim student experience and which can be applied to their own institutional context.

The recommendations tentatively suggested here can be categorised into three distinct types: firstly, there are those – such as adopting the definition of Islamophobia – that deal with internal institutional policy; secondly, there are interventions, which form part of a toolkit underpinning WP and EDI schemes; and thirdly, there are sector wide proposals, such as the idea of establishing a consortium of institutions invested in the common

purpose of sharing good practice in relation to bettering the experience of British Muslim learners.

The first recommendation I shall now turn to is the matter of adopting the definition of Islamophobia.

A. Definition of Islamophobia

In November of last year, London Metropolitan University became the first HEI to formally adopt the APPG on British Muslims' definition of Islamophobia. The definition states that *"Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness"* [8]. The decision to adopt it was carried with the full support of the institution's senior leadership, heralding the prospect of large-scale institutional reform. It was agreed that the definition would be operationalised across the university, and this would be part and parcel of the greater strategic need to spearhead institutional overhaul. This was a significant first step for the sector as a whole, beginning the process – in keeping with the intention of those academics at the forefront of developing the definition – of popularising and bringing into common currency a concept with the potential to be understood intuitively by the layperson.

Other institutions have also followed suit, if not embedding it on an institution-wide basis as a standalone statement, at least incorporating it within the scope of general Equality and Diversity guidance and policies. Furthermore, other definitions of Islamophobia have been in circulation, and these have found their home in nooks and crannies within the sector (for instance the definition proposed by the prominent scholar of Islamophobia Studies, Chris Allen, and that developed by the Runnymede Trust are notable examples [9]). There is no doubt that this is starting to contribute to the growing

[4] Guest, M., Scott-Baumann, A. et al., *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*, OUP (July 2021), p. 33

[5] See Guest, M. et al., *Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: Perceptions and Challenges*, Durham University, SOAS, Coventry and Lancaster University (2020), p. 28

[6] See Guest, M. et al., *Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: Perceptions and Challenges*, Durham University, SOAS, Coventry and Lancaster University (2020); and Ghani, H. and Nagdee, I., and *The experience of Muslim students in 2017-18*, NUS (18 March 2018)

[7] Akel, S., *Institutionalised: The rise of Islamophobia in Higher Education*, Centre for Equity and Inclusion, London Metropolitan University (January 2021)

[8] All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims, *Islamophobia Defined: The inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia* (November, 2018)

[9] For a handy table comparing the different definitions of Islamophobia please see: Bhatti, T., *Defining Islamophobia: A contemporary understanding of how expressions of Muslimness are targeted*, MCB (March, 2021), p.53

discourse around anti-racism within the higher education sector, recently driven by the Universities UK report on tackling racial harassment [10] and the pressure put upon institutions to adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism by the former Education Secretary.

In light of this conjunction and the government's lukewarm response to the definition of Islamophobia, universities can start leading the way on its adoption – with the APPG's definition commanding the widest consensus. This must be a major part of university leaderships building trust with Muslim students or, in a phrase familiar to the sector, building 'communities of cohesion' on campus.

If we consider the APPG definition, we can appreciate that it is closely modelled on the IHRA definition of Antisemitism, particularly in being pithy and slotting neatly into contemporary discourse around racism, and hence acting – beyond the merely performative – as a galvanising reference point around which students and academic staff can seek empowerment and redress for grievances. Its adoption is a means for institutions to formally acknowledge Islamophobia as an intersectional form of prejudice, as the definition invokes the inner dynamic of racialisation inherent to Islamophobia, as well as its capacity to overlap with forms of hostility directed towards religious observances and other aspects of identity, including gender. Put otherwise, these two poles of Islamophobia – that is racialisation and hostility towards religious practice – are in reality inseparable or intrinsically fused, and I would suggest that the APPG definition reflects this sociological wisdom.

The definition should work in conjunction with practical examples of what may or may not constitute Islamophobia. London Met have incorporated this – that is to say the 'examples of Islamophobia in society' [11] in

tandem with the definition, and this furnishes the sector with a critical reference point deserving of close and careful attention.

To move onto another key reference point for HEIs intending to enshrine policies that can assist in reversing the disadvantage and discrimination facing British Muslim students, we should discuss the role that Access and Participation Plans can play in the EDI and WP space.

B. Access and Participation Plans (APPs)

Through the new regime in WP established by the OfS, mandating as it does the strengthening of the oversight and monitoring of new five-year Access and Participation Plans at the undergraduate level, there emerges an opportunity to acknowledge the unique disadvantage experienced by British Muslim students.

According to a recent Nous Group report commissioned by the regulator [12], exploring ways of tackling the intersectionality of disadvantage experienced by students has become a popular concern across the sector. And in keeping with the spirit of the times, we should also endeavour to draw out the intersectionality of disadvantage affecting British Muslim students. The most marked manner in which this manifests is through the disproportionate impact of the degree awarding gap on these demographics. [13] Indeed, some academic commentators have even spoken of the 'Muslim awarding gap'. [14]

With the wider structural inequalities inhibiting the student outcomes of British Muslims and their access to Russell Group universities – where they still make up the smallest faith group [15] – identifying and recognising

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[10] Universities UK, *Tackling racial harassment in higher education*, Creative Commons (November 2020)

[11] See: https://www.londonmet.ac.uk/about/equity/centre-for-equity-and-inclusion/harassment-hate-crimes-and-sexual-misconduct/tackling-islamophobia/

[12] Nous Group, *Effectiveness in implementation of access and participating plan reform: Part 1*, Office for Students (23 October 2020)

[13] Mcmaster, N.C., *Research Insight: Religion and Belief in UK Higher Education*, Advance HE (17 March, 2020)

[14] See, for example, Gholami, R., *Critical Race Theory and Islamophobia: Challenging inequity in Higher Education, Race, Ethnicity and Education* 24(1) (January 2021)

[15] Ibid, pp. 15-17

Muslims formally as a discrete, disadvantaged group in APPs is already long overdue. As an aside, it is worth pointing out that there needs to be an equalisation of the pathways between post 92 and Russell Group universities, bearing in mind most British Muslims attend the former type of institutions and are still unlikely to progress onto Masters courses at the latter type. [16]

However, to return to the point, the OfS have made it clear that due to the lack of continuous data gathered on student outcomes by faith affiliation – as at least two years' worth of data needs to be collated – we may still be a few years off from the formal recognition of British Muslim disadvantage on a sector wide scale. Nevertheless, it is still possible and, indeed, imperative, for individual universities to recognise the equality gaps stymying the academic progression of Muslim students from the undergraduate to the PGT level. This will involve institutions formally recognising British Muslims as a disadvantaged group within their APPs and identifying the means of removing the fetters on upward social mobility.

It is also worth mentioning at this point the desirability of universities following the lead of London Met and commissioning their own audits of the Muslim student experience. Many institutions are already gathering data for purposes of qualifying for Race Equality kite marks, which is well and good, but I would emphasise the need to audit the distinctive experiences of British Muslims, in recognition of the unique intersectionality I have already invoked. This data gathering exercise would inform the full breadth of WP interventions, and can act as a precursor to identification of this cohort in APPs.

Closely aligned with this question of APPs is the lack of parity between undergraduate and PGT WP, to which we now turn.

C. Extending Widening Participation

Whilst acknowledging that the regulatory obligation for WP only concerns the undergraduate level, there is much that forward looking institutions can do to anticipate the extension of the mandate to the PGT level, whenever this may happen. Taking the broader perspective, we can already see attention now falling on postgraduate access and the student experience, albeit at the doctoral stage. The OfS's recent funding competition, seeking to explore project proposals from institutions and consortiums that could potentially lead to increased access and a reduction in equality gaps for BME students at the PGR level, intimates a certain direction of travel for the WP and EDI agenda as regulatory focus starts to shift.

In this funding context, PGT studies constitutes the 'broken bridge' within the sector, and has so far escaped the attention of both regulators and institutions. Yet, we know the enduring significance of PGT as a means of passage to doctoral studies, and, as importantly, its sui generis value for BME and Muslim students seeking professional progression in a competitive labour market. For universities that care deeply about closing equality gaps, the Masters offer is integral to closing that social mobility fault-line that has opened up here.

However, there has been some work undertaken on this matter, most notably by Professor Paul Wakeling in his evaluation of the Postgraduate Scholarships Scheme (PSS) [17] funded by HEFCE prior to the extension of student finance loans to the PGT level. He cites a whole infrastructure of PGT WP trialled by a small consortium of participating institutions from Sheffield to York, aimed at smoothing the path of BME students at the end of their undergraduate studies. These interventions ranged from information, access and guidance (IAG) webinars aimed at final year undergraduate students, to a buddying system for new PGT students and a postgraduate ambassadors'

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[16] This insightful point was made by Fatima Rajina in the roundtable discussion convened by myself and my co-author to inform the findings of the report, *Transitions: British Muslims between undergraduate and postgraduate studies*, Aziz Foundation (forthcoming)

[17] Wakeling, P., Hancock, S. and Ewart A., *Evaluation of the Postgraduate Support Scheme 2015/16: Report to HEFCE*, University of York (August 2017)

outreach scheme to students contemplating progression onto Masters' programmes. But as fundamental as embedding these schemes are, this needs to be combined with the will to reprioritise, to free up investment in this area, and to shift the narrative of existing WP schemes so as to increase efforts to include PGT students, whose workload and short tenure of study is generally seen to preclude them from involvement in these initiatives. Put simply, WP must be more deliberately and deeply embedded into the culture of the PGT student experience.

Further thought must also be given to the development of BME ambassador or advocates' schemes [18], which conjoin the spheres of WP and EDI into a seamless continuum. These schemes need to draw on the talents of PGT students through means of active recruitment amongst these cohorts and through exploring ways of incentivising them.

D. Preferred Partnership Network

Lastly, let us turn to the proposal to convene a consortium of institutions invested in the mission of widening access for British Muslim PGT students. The background to this is the expansion of the Aziz Foundation's portfolio of partner institutions to 18 and counting over the course of the last year. These partner universities naturally have a stake in creating a more inclusive learning environment that incorporates the needs of British Muslims, and in many respects, they act as a constituency from which a knowledge exchange network can be forged.

The idea is modelled on the work of Graeme Atherton, Director of NEON. In an insightful paper, he presents the case for more widening access interventions for, and outreach work to, Gipsy Roma Traveller (GRT) communities [19] – the most disadvantaged section of UK society. Within the package of recommendations that he advances, he pushes for the establishment of a national GRT Access and Participation Network. The main objective of this body would be to get institutions working together to move the issue of WP for these communities higher up the HE agenda.

This struck me as a proposal that could as effectively be applied to British Muslim learners. And, indeed, now appears to be the perfect time to start pooling the intellectual resources that the Aziz Foundation has at its disposal, drawing together the combined strength of its university partners. A 'partnerships network' would therefore give opportunities for our partner institutions to work together to disseminate good practice, share knowledge on impactful interventions, and incubate research capabilities around impact evaluation. It is also hoped that participating institutions will provide thought leadership and advocacy on the issues affecting the academic progression of British Muslim PGT students.

As we seek to develop this proposal, partners will be solicited to feed into the partnership network's aims and objectives, as well as to give consideration to the form the operating model ought to take. This will provide an enticing opportunity to place – to paraphrase Graeme Atherton – the issues facing British Muslim students higher up the agenda in HE.

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[18] See, for example, Barefoot H.C. and Boons, C. *'Developing a BME Student Advocate Programme'* in Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2019)

[19] Atherton, G. *'More than luck: Enabling access and success in Higher Education for Gypsy, Romany and Traveller (GRT) communities'*, Sir John Cass Foundation (August, 2020)

3. Conclusion

In concluding this address, it is once again incumbent upon me to emphasis the unique intersectionality of faith and ethnicity at play when it comes to evaluating the lived experience of British Muslim students.

In devising WP and EDI schemes that increase access for these communities of faith at the PGT level, it is essential that this operative intersectionality is at the very heart of all these interventions. Individual institutions and their senior leaderships will have a huge part to play in leading the way on this, as has already been seen by the likes of London Met amongst others. These universities can positively transform the sector for British Muslim students, catalysing institutional reform across the HE landscape.

And as part of this process of instigating necessary change, it will be crucial that Islamophobia is challenged where ever it occurs. In a discussion of antisemitism, David Feldman – the director of the Birkbeck Institute for the Study of Antisemitism – explains the workings of anti-Jewish racism through the use of a 'reservoir' analogy. [20] He suggests that antisemitism acts as a reservoir of circulating stereotypes, dehumanising tropes and resonant images that acquire explanatory force due to their easily accessible nature. It also strikes me as an apt analogy to explain some of the workings of Islamophobia, considering the continued reproduction of damaging tropes in the academy. It seems to me then that what we ought to be working towards, in that case, is developing a culture within our institutions that renders this reservoir inaccessible. Moreover, it would involve casting aside the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that seems to inform engagement with Muslim communities on campus.

The package of recommendations that I have set forth – on the internal policy level, the sector wide/meso – or inter-institutional scale, and at the micro-scale of EDI and WP interventions – have as their goal nothing less than the catalysation of wholesale institutional reform. This basket of measures intersects with the pressing socio-economic issues of our times, challenging universities to do more to act as engines of social mobility for those most marginalised in society.

However, the question that I will leave you with, and which is very much intended to further the conversation, is the following:

Can we create a learning environment fit for British Muslims to thrive in, and what more can we do to bring it about?

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[20] Ben, G. and McGeever, B.F. and Feldman, D., *Labour and Antisemitism: a crisis misunderstood*, The Political Quarterly 91 (2), pp. 413-421 (2020)

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