

**OCTOBER 2018**

**REPORT**

# **British Muslims in UK Higher Education**

**Socio-political, religious  
and policy considerations**

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**Bridge  
Institute**

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to HESA for providing the data for this report. Appreciation is also shown to ONS for the data that enabled the construction of a demographic profile of British Muslims in the UK. Bridge Institute is especially grateful to Professor Tariq Modood for his advice on academic sources of literature, and Dr Kate Legge and her research colleagues at the University of Loughborough for access to their thorough and in-depth case study. We would also like to thank Shenaz Bunglawala for offering her invaluable advice, suggestions and guidance to create specific links to policy. Finally, thanks are expressed to the Aziz Foundation and Penny Appeal.

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ISBN: 978-1-912538-02-7

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# BRITISH MUSLIMS IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION: SOCIO-POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

## Executive Summary

- Previous research indicates there are now significantly more ethnic minorities entering UK universities, yet researchers, Government bodies and policy makers have all acknowledged barriers in accessing data on the religious beliefs of UK university students and how these may influence their experience of Higher Education (HE).
- This report presents Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2012-16 data on the numbers of British Muslims entering HE, when compared to other faith groupings and to the wider UK populous, as well as the impact of gender.
- The first part of the report discusses the political, legislative, and religious contexts to HE study for British Muslim students. It asserts from the literature that religion plays a key factor in motivating students' educational aspirations. From this it makes several recommendations, including the need for more extensive collection and sharing of HE students' (anonymised) identity data, to monitor equality levels.
- The data section, the second part of this report, suggests that, while there has been an increase in the number of British Muslim students in HE, there is a smaller proportion in the esteemed Russell Group universities, and that female British Muslim students are more in number, and more successful in their studies, than male British Muslim students.
- To conclude, some areas of further research are explored.

## Policy recommendations

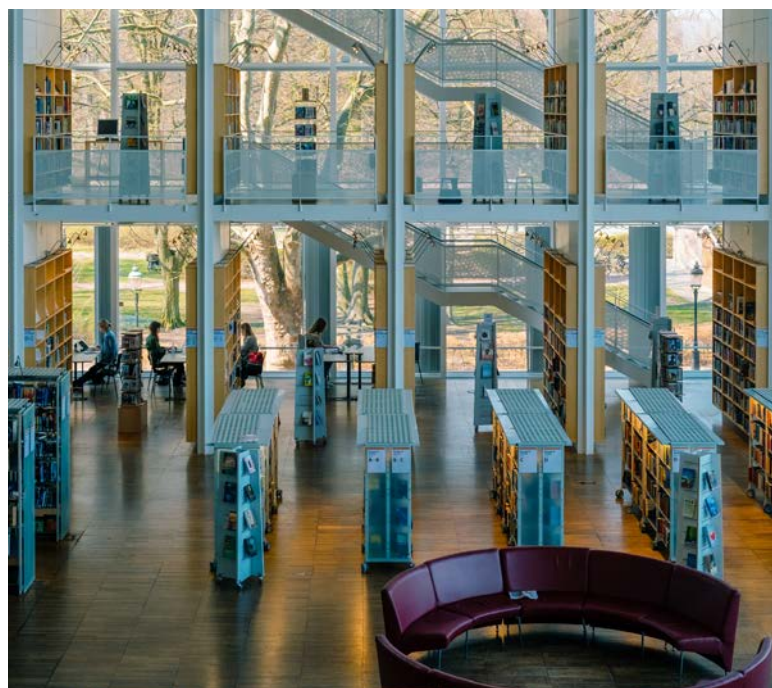
A list of seven recommendations is provided, based on the findings and analyses contained within this report.

1. This report has added to the debates on equality for religious minority students, access to education and the role that universities play in ensuring opportunity for all. Presented HESA data have suggested that the number of British Muslim HE students has increased,

yet this is related to students entering into the 'non-elite' universities. **The Russell Group universities could do more to encourage British Muslims to access them. It is therefore recommended that impact assessments should be compiled in relation to the support given by, and/or required of, elite university establishments to minority students, in line with the Public Sector Equality Duty's role of advancing equality of opportunity for people with protected characteristics (EHRC, 2017).** Additionally, organisations could work in conjunction with university institutions to provide tours for Muslim students intending to pursue HE,

in order to inspire and encourage them to consider universities, which they may feel they cannot access. Policymakers must reflect on the significance of religion and of applying equality legislation, so as to help students to access education and opportunities. We welcome the recent initiative by over a 100 MPs, who have called for reforms in relation to student admissions to include minorities at Oxford and Cambridge (Bulman, 2017).

2. Recent reports - including those commissioned by Labour MP David Lammy (Government, 2017b) on racial bias in England and Wales' criminal justice system, Baroness Ruby MacGregor Smith (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2017) on race in the workplace – suggest that considerable attention is being given to the issue of addressing inequality in various sectors. **We recommend that the HE sector should also be drawn into this wider debate and for it to be considered how 'unconscious bias' training and other recommendations stipulated in the aforementioned reports could be likewise used to address institutional bias in the HE sector.**
3. The HESA data suggest that fewer British Muslim men, than women, are gaining accreditation. Further work is required to understand why this might be, and if this is due to their lack of social, cultural or economic capital. The HESA data also infer that more British Muslims are failing to graduate, than students of other faiths. **Universities should work more collaboratively with the NUS to provide BAME officers within all student unions, and also Muslim chaplain positions for Muslim students facing difficulties.** University leaders should ask whether students find the support and connections they seek (Modood and Calhoun, 2015). This latter point may also aid female Muslim students in facing post-education challenges, such as seeking employment.
4. **The implementation of the Shari'ah compliant 'Takaful' loan scheme may make HE appear more inclusive to British Muslim students, and improve their experiences of HE.** The Bridge Institute calls for the implementation of this scheme by 2019. Furthermore, British Muslim organisations could participate in creating mechanisms to promote awareness of, and educate about, processes to access the government's future Takaful loans.
5. **The government should also seek to support civic initiatives and models, such as those championed by Satif (2016), which is a leading financial loan provider for Muslim students in the UK.**



6. **Greater transparency is needed about British HE statistics, so that equality levels can be better observed and universities be held more accountable for inequalities.** The NUS should promote a mandatory request for universities to publish their data pertaining to students' religion (and more disaggregated data on ethnicity). Students should be encouraged to anonymously disclose information about their identity upon registration each year. Universities should be required to publish detailed admissions data on students' religious identification and other ethnicity markers, gender and socio-economic backgrounds, as reinforced by the Queen's Speech (Government, 2016). Whilst the government's recent Race Disparity Audit and production of the Ethnicity Facts and Figures website (Government, 2017c) is a welcome development, it suffers from the same issue of relying on ethnicity as a category, and omitting religious identification. We therefore ask for the government to include religious identification in its next audit.
7. **This report welcomes and supports the work of the Department for Communities and Local Government on the 'participation and empowerment' of people from all backgrounds.** Bridge Institute looks forward to the implementation of the announced strategies to tackle intolerance, as formed by the 'Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group' (Parliament, 2016). A clear definition of Islamophobia as suggested by the APPG on British Muslims (2018), would help British Muslim students define some of their experiences, whether overt or subtle microaggressions.

# 1. Introduction

Participation in HE continues to rise rapidly (Modood and Calhoun, 2015), and ethnic minorities now represent almost one in six of home undergraduates in England (Modood, 2006). Research about British ethnic minorities suggests that educational attainment is a key motivator in achieving upward social mobility (ibid; Modood and Calhoun, 2015).

Yet research has shown that there are several barriers for ethnic minorities who are seeking access to HE. Boliver (2016:247) suggests that 'despite being more likely than their white British counterparts to enroll in HE generally, British students from black Caribbean, black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic backgrounds continue to be strikingly under-represented in the UK's most prestigious universities'.

Indeed, universities within the UK are categorised by mission groups, in respect of their various outlooks, origins, customs and values. The Russell Group is commonly considered to contain the most esteemed UK universities, followed by the 1994 Group, the University Alliance and Million Plus, which contains those universities which tend to be lower-ranked (Scott, 2013). Guild HE, meanwhile, includes some of the most recently designated universities and university colleges (Guild HE, n.date). Recent research has argued that branding, elitism and inequalities exist within the admissions processes to Russell Group universities in particular (Boliver, 2013; 2016).

Shiner and Modood (2002) argue that students from white ethnic backgrounds are preferred in older university establishments, whereas newer universities prefer to

accept students from minority ethnic backgrounds. They suggest that ethnic minorities are unevenly distributed across subjects and include part-time, full-time and/or mature students (ibid). According to Shiner and Modood's (2002) research, these disparities are seemingly caused by many factors: students' pre-entry attainment levels, educational choices at age 16, subject preferences and geographical distribution and aspirations. Two key factors asserted are socio-economic class and institutional filtering (ibid).

Modood's early research (2006) identified that ethnic minorities are achieving at HE level, although many are less likely to enter prestigious universities: those who do, are more likely to drop out, and if they remain on their course are less likely to get a high grade degree (ibid). This is based on data from 1990 recorded by ethnicity, not religious affiliation, which Modood (2006) argued did not suggest a white/non-white divide in HE access: whilst Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are among the less successful ethnic minority groups (and indeed are disproportionately represented in the less selective institutions and subjects), they are doing much better than their White working-class peers, some of whom are not likely to attend university at all (ibid).

Crawford and Greaves (2015) additionally assert that ethnic minorities and those from the highest socio-economic backgrounds are substantially more likely to go to university than White British pupils from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds, who may live in more deprived areas.

Nonetheless, by most socio-economic measures, British Asian Muslims are amongst the most disadvantaged of the ethnic minorities. For example, over 60% of British Pakistani



and Bangladeshi households are in poverty, compared to 20% of whites – and have the highest proportions of school leavers without any qualifications (Modood, 2006). Whilst some British Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are accessing HE, they are most likely to be in less-resourced institutions (ibid). Modood (2006) asserts, though, that there is a determination by these communities to achieve social mobility through HE.

The term ‘Muslim’ can arguably be applied to those for whom Islam is considered to have significance in their daily lives and where Islam plays the role of master signifier (Nielsen, 1987). It is consequently pertinent to state that ethnicity does not neatly equate to religious affiliation, as shown in Table 1. Indeed, Modood (2006) suggests that a majority of students from a Pakistani or Bangladeshi background may associate with a Muslim religious identity (stating that about two-thirds of British Muslims are of South Asian, mostly Pakistani, origin) but a minority of these students may not. Relatedly, Moosavi (2012) argues that there is currently a rise in White British converts. This report will therefore categorise by faith, rather than ethnicity, for the sake of accuracy.

**Table 1: British Muslim population by Ethnic group, 2011 Census**

Ethnic group	Proportion of Muslim religious group
White British Muslims	2.86%
Other White Muslims	4.93%
Mixed/Multiple Ethnic Muslims	3.79%
Indian Muslims	7.92%
Pakistani Muslims	38.01%
Bangladeshi Muslims	14.87%
Other Asian Muslims	7.48%
Black African, Black Caribbean and Black British Muslims	10.05%
Other ethnic group Muslims	10.73%

(Source: Nomis, 2013)

Furthermore, the 2011 census of England and Wales revealed a dramatic increase in those identifying as Muslim, compared with previous figures. In 2011, after Christians, who constitute 59.3 per cent of the total population of England and Wales, the Muslim religious group is the second most populous (4.8 per cent) (ONS, 2012). ONS (2012) estimates that the Muslim population will rise by another 8.2% by 2030. This identified growth of British Muslim communities provides a foundation to discuss the issues, patterns and trends of British Muslim domicile students within the UK. For Modood and Calhoun (2015), the primary challenge of mainstream inclusion in education concerns the place of religion in

HE, and its implications for HE governance and the duty of care provisions for students and staff.

HE has progressively given importance to gender equality, especially in relation to recruitment, promotion and training for leadership roles, as well as identifying and eliminating forms of sexism in the institutional culture or in the classroom (Reay et al, 2005). The sector has also acknowledged that similar issues arise in relation to racial equality and ethnicity, though these have not been pursued to the same extent (ibid). Consequently, it is time to further promote equality based on ethnicity and on religious identities within educational establishments (Modood and Calhoun, 2015). This is in line with the Equalities Act 2010 (Government, 2015), which includes religion as an equality strand.

The 2011 national census shows that there were 329,694 Muslims in full time education, of whom female Muslim students made up 43 per cent (Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), 2015). Additionally, Ali (2016a) asserts that 24% of the Muslim population (age 16 and above) have a degree-level and above qualification. Significantly, in 2001, 39 per cent of Muslims had no qualifications, but this dropped to 26 per cent in 2011 (MCB, 2015). Stevenson et al’s (2017:3) recent qualitative study has suggested that some Muslim students have ‘inequitable access to high status universities as a result of geographical provision, discrimination at the point of entry, or self-limiting choices reflecting fears of being in a minority’.

Šeta (2016) argues that the economic, gender and educational exclusions faced by Muslims act as inhibiting factors for their progression in British society. Furthermore, post-education employment figures continue to show that Muslims in Britain experience a greater economic disadvantage than any other group in the UK (Parliament, 2016). The rate of unemployment for Muslims is more than double that of the overall population (12.8% compared to 5.4%), 41% of whom are economically inactive, compared to 21.8% of the general population (ibid:5). The reasons behind this are varied and complex. These include: discrimination and Islamophobia, stereotyping, pressure from traditional families, a lack of tailored advice around HE choices, and insufficient role models across education and employment (ibid). Female British Muslims in particular are perceived to have a ‘triple penalty’ in terms of being female<sup>1</sup>, BAME and Muslim (ibid): indeed, 65% of economically inactive Muslims are women (ibid).

<sup>1</sup> Gender, ethnicity, and other identity markers are understood by the authors to be socially constructed, rather than objective measures (for example, see Payne, 2006).

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission's (2016) recent report also outlines a worrying picture of inequalities, in respect of: employment, education, crime, living standards and health-care. They concluded by stating that this widespread inequality risks increasing race tensions (ibid). Despite improving educational attainment, ethnic minority people are still being held back in the job market. Black, Asian and ethnic minority workers with degrees are two and a half times more likely to be unemployed than White workers with degrees (ibid). Furthermore, studies published by the Women and Equalities Committee (2016) suggest those who adhere to the faith of Islam are further penalised. Thus, Modood and Calhoun (2015) argue that alongside other identity markers, such as: race, gender, sexual orientation and disability, religion must be regarded as a diversity issue in the UK. Modood and Calhoun (2015) also state the need to accept and promote Islam as a British religion and, in this way, include British Muslim students and encourage their ambitions - as with any other minority grouping in the UK.

However, much prior research about HE has focused on ethnicity, with a scarcity of data collected about religion. In the following section, this report provides a socio-political context to some of the difficulties for Muslim students in accessing HE. It then goes on to present some HESA data which relate to British Muslims in HE, which are then discussed in relation to extant literature in the following section, before concluding thoughts are provided. The report's main focus is to consider British Muslim students' access to HE. Additionally, includes discussions about their attainment levels, and the role of gender, in relation to Šeta's (2016) suggestion that British Muslim women face a 'double bind' of gender and religious discrimination.

The report also specifically considers the role of Islamic beliefs in relation to British Muslims' experiences of HE. Indeed, Modood (2006) argued that for many young male and female Asians, Islam was seen to encourage educational aspiration and to be a motivating factor to improve oneself and lead a disciplined, responsible life. Modood (2006) suggested that this can be considered to be Islamic capital. Bourdieu's (1972; 1980) concepts of 'habitus', 'capital' and 'fields'<sup>ii</sup> are therefore used in order to theoretically analyse the presented data. 'Habitus' refers to how individuals embody skills and ways of looking at the

world, which they have inherited from unequal objective social structures around them (ibid). Thus, an individual's 'capital' (social, economic or cultural) within a particular institutional 'field' results in a degree of conflict between the field and their habitus (ibid; Marshall and Scott, 2005; Brubaker, 1985).

Bourdieu (1989) investigated the cultural and power dynamics of social fields, and the 'elite world' of education and government in France. By analysing dimensions of culture, lifestyle and status he asserted that the cultural capital of the dominant class advantaged them over other groups in their educational access, attainment and key credentials (ibid). For the purpose of this report, the institutional 'field' is HE. The 'habitus' relates to the experiences of the individual, i.e. British Muslim, BAME (Black, Asian and Ethnic minorities) students, and the 'capital' they acquire based on their experiences. This report considers if British Muslim and BAME students' 'capital' is impacted due to some form of asymmetry between the field (universities) and their 'habitus'.



ii The cultural capital refers to symbols, ideas and tastes, which can be strategically used as a resource in social action (Bourdieu, 1972; 1980). The habitus refers to a disposition to act, think or feel in a particular way (ibid). Economic capital, such as financial resources, can be invested and accumulated, and can be converted into other forms (ibid). For Bourdieu (1980), the distribution of economic and cultural capital is mutually reinforcing. Educational success is based on initial cultural capital and a means through which superior, higher-paying,

occupations can be attained, and the income earned through these jobs may allow successful parents to purchase a private education for their children and so enhance their chances of educational success (Marshall and Scott, 2005). This conversion of one form of capital into another is central to the intergenerational reproduction of class differences. Bourdieu (1980) identifies several forms of capital, a prominent one being 'social capital' which is based on links, networks, contacts and connections made by individuals.



## 2. Political contexts, legislations and policies: British Muslims in HE

### Government strategies

'The Higher Education Act 2004' enabled universities to charge their own tuition fees, known as 'variable tuition costs', of up to £3,000 per year. The Browne Review of 2010 then saw fees rise further, to £9,000+ per year, along with the implementation of interest on loans charged at the rate of inflation of +3% (Boliver, 2013).

The context to fee increases has been the UK governments' strategies to create a sustainable way of funding HE. Various reports have been published in this regard, including The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) (2010; 2011), which identified three problems with the existing funding system: the need for financial sustainability, wider participation, and higher quality.

The 'Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998' gives the Secretary of State the power to issue annual regulations that set out the support available to students going into HE, and how and when student loans will be repaid. Since the 2006-7 academic year, a loan to cover the full cost of tuition has been available to eligible students studying at publicly funded providers, which is repaid only after the student has secured employment. This Act meant that no eligible student is required to pay their tuition fees up front.

However, Geven's (2015) analysis of HESA data, post the 2012 increase in fees, suggests that higher fees may discourage applications from significant amounts of students (particularly older students). She also asserted that the fee increase may not have affected BAME students disproportionately, but that this could have been masked by the impact of a reduction in older white students (ibid). Additionally, she indicated that more BAME students may have accessed student support mechanisms, which could have led to a stabilising of inequality (ibid). However, she stressed that much more research is needed to ascertain the impact of fee increases on equality in the UK. Meanwhile, the MCB (2015) assert that inflating university costs and policy changes have impacted on the lowest socio-economic communities, particularly Muslims who are overrepresented in this regard.



### The Higher Education and Research Bill (2017)

The Higher Education and Research Bill (HERB) (Government, 2017a) was passed in April 2017. In his open letter to students, Jo Johnson, the Minister of State for Universities and Science, stated that university education is 'a big investment of time and money' (quoted in Ali, 2016b: n.pag.), and 'Like any big investment, you expect a good return' (ibid). One of the key changes is, as Johnson states, that from 2020: 'Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) will apply to any university that wants to increase their fees in line with inflation, and, if universities fail to perform, then that right can be taken away' (ibid). Students have argued against the linkage of TEF to increases in fees, and the wider HE sector has argued that students were already being saddled with too much debt (Ali, 2016a).

The former president of the National Union of Students (NUS), Bouattia (2016), critiqued the HERB by suggesting that it forces market dogma onto Universities. The NUS has asserted that this will impact those from poorer backgrounds and from the BAME community. This argument is supported by the Department for Education's (2016) report, which showed that the percentage of state-educated pupils going on to universities and colleges in 2013/14 fell to 62%, from 66% in the previous year. Mature and part-time students have also reduced in number (Ali, 2016a). Recent UCAS data suggests that in 2017 there is a decrease of 25,000 (4%) in people applying for a UK university place (Sellgran, 2017). Potential factors for this drop include the increasing university fees and student loan interest rates, along with socio-political changes, such as Brexit.

The HERB (Government, 2017) has nonetheless called for transparency from education providers. The Queen's speech (Government, 2016:37) previously noted that 'putting more information into the hands of students was essential'. The intention is to require each university to publish detailed information about application, offer and progression rates, broken down by ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background. This would emphasise the need to widen participation and social mobility that would ensure universities are taking further action to recruit from disadvantaged backgrounds (as previously discussed in Reisz, 2015). This would include Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic minorities, who predominantly affiliate with the Islamic faith and come from less economically-developed backgrounds (Modood, 2006). Access to data is limited on Muslim students studying in the UK and yet data are

required to understand the achievement and apparent attainment gaps of those who associate with this religious grouping. This report consequently welcomes the calls for greater transparency on student statistics based on religion.

## The government's consideration of Sharia-compliant loans

Rippin (2013) asserts that Islam has influenced, and continues to influence, societies, culture, economy, law, jurisprudence, family life, moral behaviour, government, social responsibilities, art, architecture, maths and various facets of the everyday life of individuals. It is therefore pertinent to consider that Islam may play a role in governing how British Muslim students practice their faith and form specific life choices. Parallel legal systems such as Shariah law govern and provide guidance on finance, religious etiquette and rulings for Muslims.

Some young British Muslims, such as second generation immigrants from India and Pakistan, have begun to reassert their faith, belief and practices, and to present them more overtly in their everyday lives (Werbner, 2006; Mustafa, 2014). As part of their religious beliefs it is of central importance to many young Muslim students to gain Sharia-compliant loans, as Sharia law dictates that the consumption of usury is 'haram' (unlawful) (Esposito, 2003). Usury is perceived as an inequitable economic framework, which penalises less economically-active individuals. Consequently, British Muslim students who are seeking to uphold their religious values and moral beliefs, whilst also holding aspirations to achieve educationally at



UK university establishments, can face financial barriers (Satiff, 2016). Student loans are based upon interest, which is sinful from the Islamic religious perspective (whether to have monetary gain from it or to pay interest rates off) (Zaman, 2008).

DBIS (2014) began governmental work on initiatives for Muslims who are seeking religiously appropriate forms of HE funding (various coalitions had lobbied the government to introduce Halal (permissible) finance for Muslim students (Halal Student Loans, 2014). From these endeavours emerged Article 80-82 of the HERB (Government, 2017), which promotes a national framework for a Shar'iah-compliant 'Takaful' loan scheme. The tabled proposal, at the report stages of the House of Lords, having passed through the Commons, creates space for future legislation that enables 'Alternative payments' by students of all faiths or none.

DBIS' (2016:41) paper states: 'We will introduce an alternative student finance offer to support the participation of students who feel unable to take on interest-bearing loans for religious reasons, particularly some Muslim students'. The paper further states: 'Alternative student finance should allow those who might otherwise have been deterred from or restricted in their participation to benefit, alongside their peers, from higher education' (ibid:61). This initiative may make HE appear more inclusive and accessible to Muslim BAME students, and the MCB (2016), a prominent Muslim umbrella organisation, has welcomed it.

However, the government is also abolishing maintenance grants for student living costs, which means that students from low-income homes - which includes most BAME students - who apply to university will need to apply for additional loans, leading to more debt (Weale, 2016), or will need to access more grant support (as implied by Geven, 2015). In response to these growing financial pressures, civic organisations such as 'Satifs' (2016) have striven to promote social change, and overcome the barrier of university fees, by providing some interest-free student loans.

The Parliament (2016:29) report argues that BAME students are under-represented at Russell Group universities, and face barriers to studying at university, including: finance; parental support, and an attainment gap both at university and after graduation. Due to the lack of data available, the parliamentary report (ibid) looks at 'widening access', which is based upon BAME students rather than just Muslim students. There is concern around the lack of data about Muslims: specifically about their attainment and then subsequent employment. The report emphasises this by stating: 'While British



Muslims are well represented within universities, they are still disproportionately under-represented within the Russell Group' (ibid:33). The same report asserts that, in conjunction with the Universities Social Mobility Advisory Group, the government should encourage universities to have a system of support for students from minority backgrounds, which goes beyond admission, and focuses on their entire time at university (ibid).



### 3. HESA Data

#### Information about the data, and data collection

This section presents quantitative HESA data from 2012-2016. HESA is the official agency for the collection, analysis and dissemination of quantitative information about HE in the UK, which it derives from HE providers. In 2012, HESA began recording entry levels into universities based on religious belief. This is an optional category provided to students, with the option of 'prefer not to say' provided. This means that the data sets do have limitations, because a large proportion of the population sample have not disclosed their religious affiliation. The data therefore do not represent the general population of HE students, and consequently lack internal and external validity (Cohen, 1988) (validity can usually be statistically tested, but these data are not suitable to do so). The most complete statistics from the HESA data set are from the year 2015/16 in which 57% of respondents could be associated with a particular religion, or no religion, and this data is therefore presented where possible (some of the data could only be presented in the full range of years, however).

Furthermore, aside from the HESA data set, there is currently a lack of data, and access to data, about students' religious identities, which poses challenges in presenting

the demography of HE students. Most of the previous data are based on ethnicity and, relatedly, only since 2001 has a question on religion been included in the census (Field, 2011). The first author also sent freedom of information requests to all of the UK universities. The same limitations applied to these data, due to the question of religious identity not being compulsory for students to answer: these data have therefore been omitted from the report (also because the sample was smaller than HESA's).

The HESA data are therefore useful in providing an (imperfect) overview of the key statistical information that is available about British, and pertinently, British Muslim, students at universities. The data are presented as tables and figures, which were produced using SPSS. 20% of the total amount of data was verified by an external statistician to confirm the reliability of the data analysis (Aldridge and Levine, 2001).

The HESA data were accessed through a bespoke data request submitted to HESA. Confidentiality agreements between HESA and the first researcher were signed in relation to which specific data can(not) be published by Bridge Institute, as many of the data remain confidential and the intellectual property of HESA. Bridge Institute abided by HESA's criteria, including the data anonymisation and the grouping of the data into mission groups and 'all years' categories. The Research and Development guidelines for research defined by the OECD (2002) were also followed.

## Religious data of UK domiciled HE students from 2012-16

Table 2 shows that the religious beliefs of over three-fifths of the UK domiciled HE student population is unknown (60.3%). Students of no religion make up 17.8% (over 1 million), followed by Christian students (13.6%; over 831 thousand), those who refused to give this information (3.7%; over 226 thousand) and Muslim students with 2.2% (over 136 thousand). Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, Spiritual students, and those students who have any other religion or belief make up 2.4% (over 145 thousand).

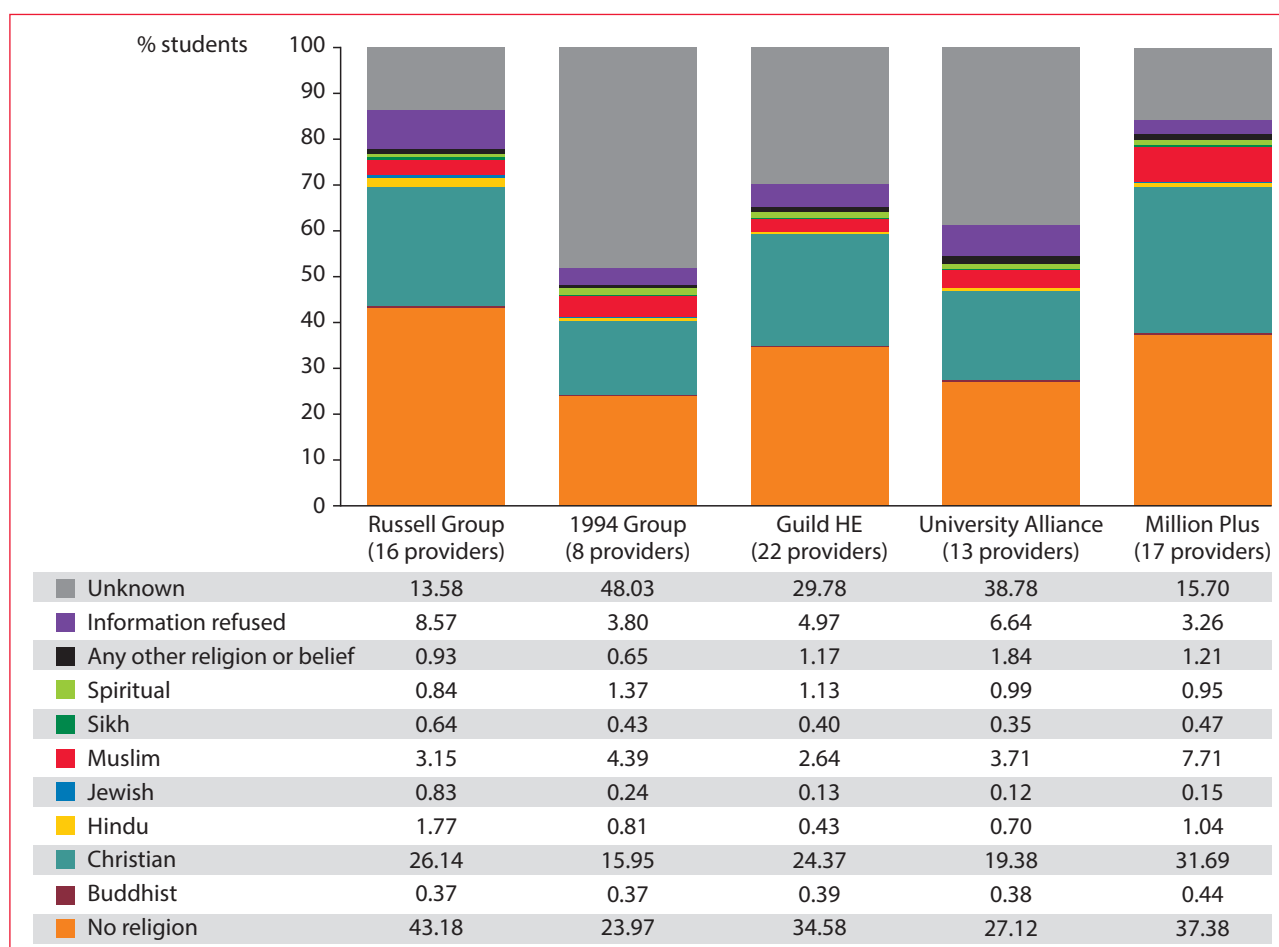
Figure 1 indicates the total year entry levels of HE students by their religion and university's mission group in 2015/16. This data of 2012-16 was provided as an aggregate sum by HESA. It is apparent that proportionately about as many Muslim students attended Million Plus institutions, as did the generally more highly-esteemed Russell Group and 1994 Group universities combined.

Excluding those students for whom no information is provided (unknown category), Hindu students have the highest percentage for continuing at their HE provider (44.3%), followed by Jewish students (43.5%) and Sikh

**Table 2:** Population of UK domiciled students studying at HE institutions by religious belief, 2012-16

Religious Belief	Total	% of total student population
No religion	1089321	17.8
Buddhist	12221	0.2
Christian	831046	13.6
Hindu	32496	0.5
Jewish	9438	0.2
Muslim	136820	2.2
Sikh	18663	0.3
Spiritual	28445	0.5
Any other religion or belief	44318	0.7
Information refused	226460	3.7
Unknown	3682081	60.3
Total	6111309	100.0

students (42.5%), as shown in Figure 2. Only 37.3% of spiritual students were continuing their studies at their HE provider. Over 17% of students who gained their intended award or higher, were of the Jewish faith, followed by Christian students at 16.2% and students of any other religion with 14.5%. Only 10.1% of Muslim students had gained their intended award or higher, and this group had the highest number of students leaving their HE provider with no award (3.2%).



**Figure 1:** Total year entry levels based on religion and mission group

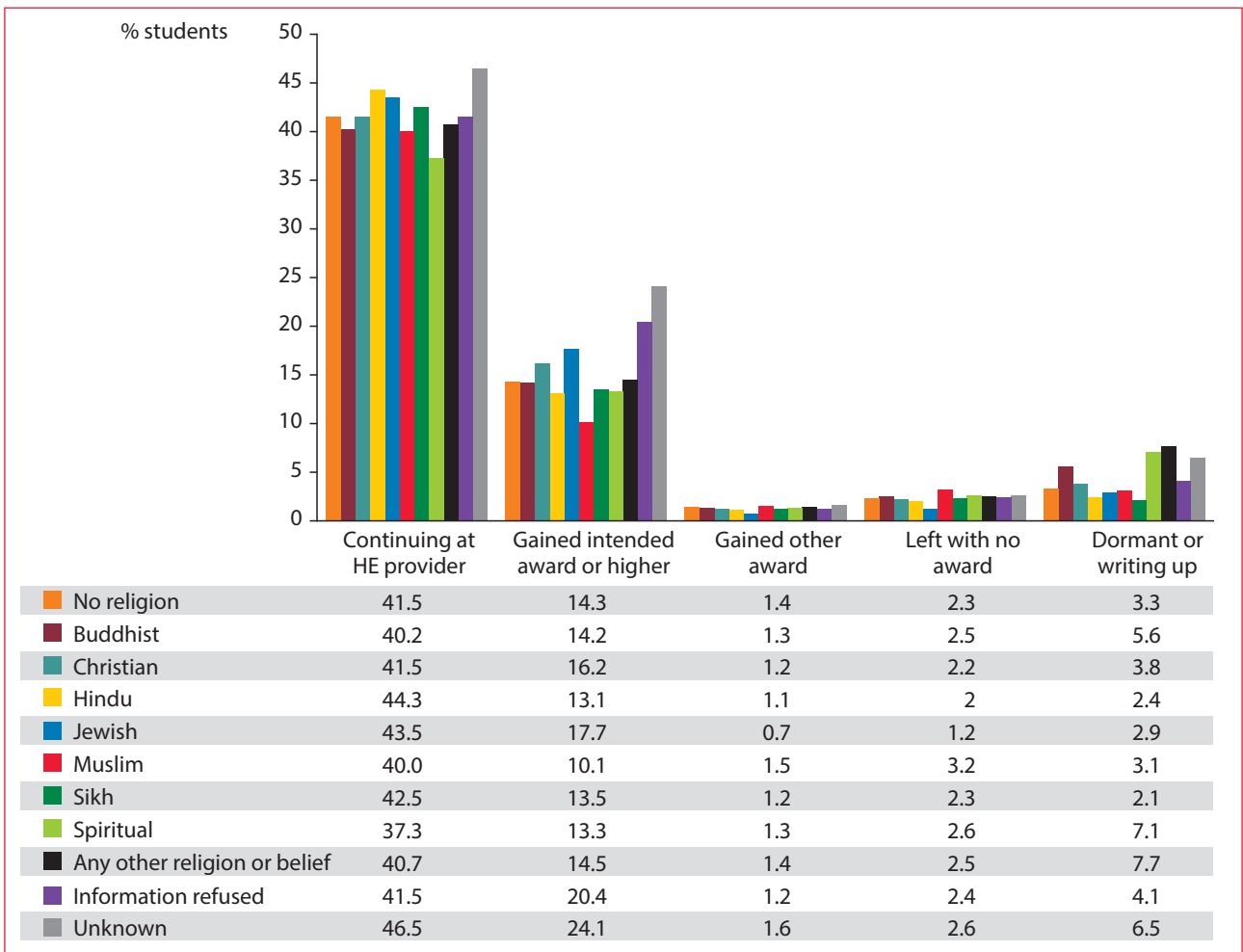


Figure 2: Qualification Gained by Religion Across All Years, 2012-15

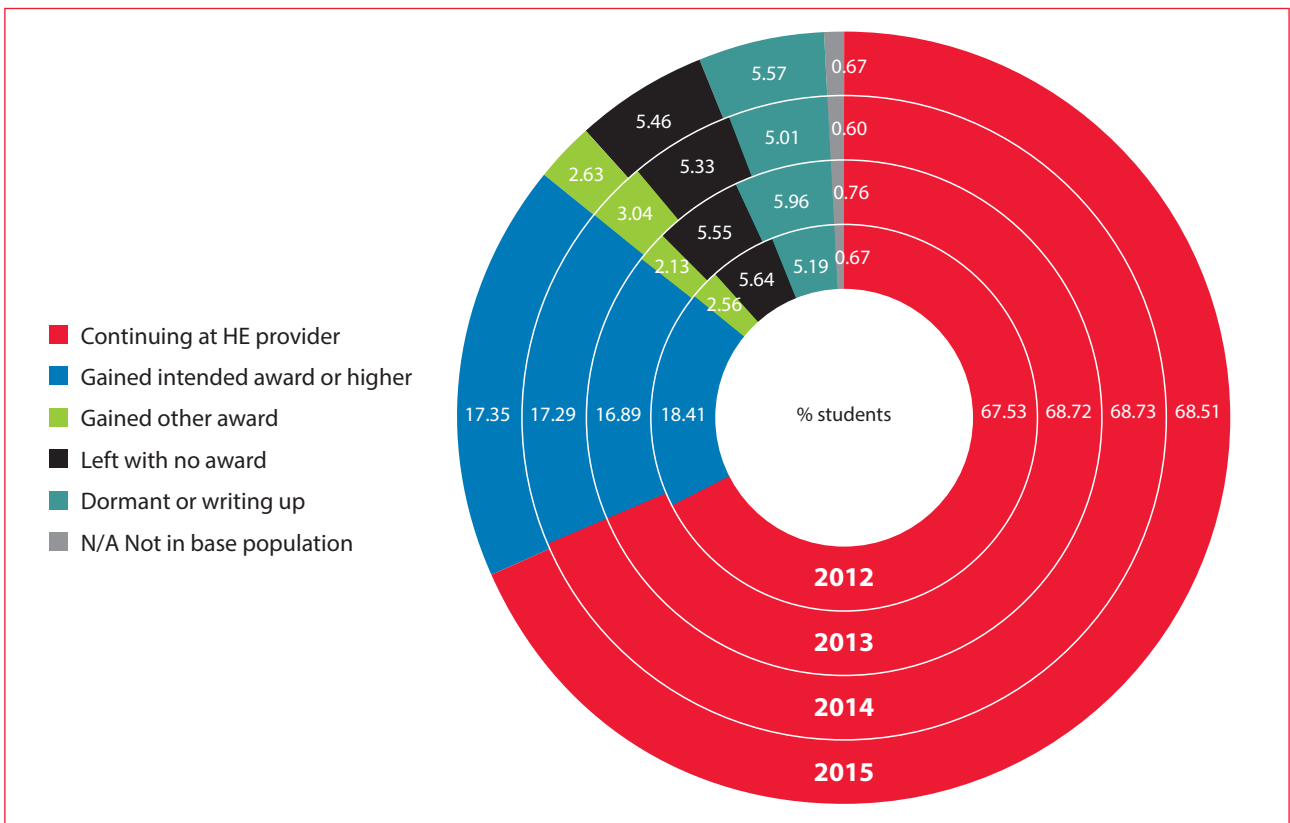
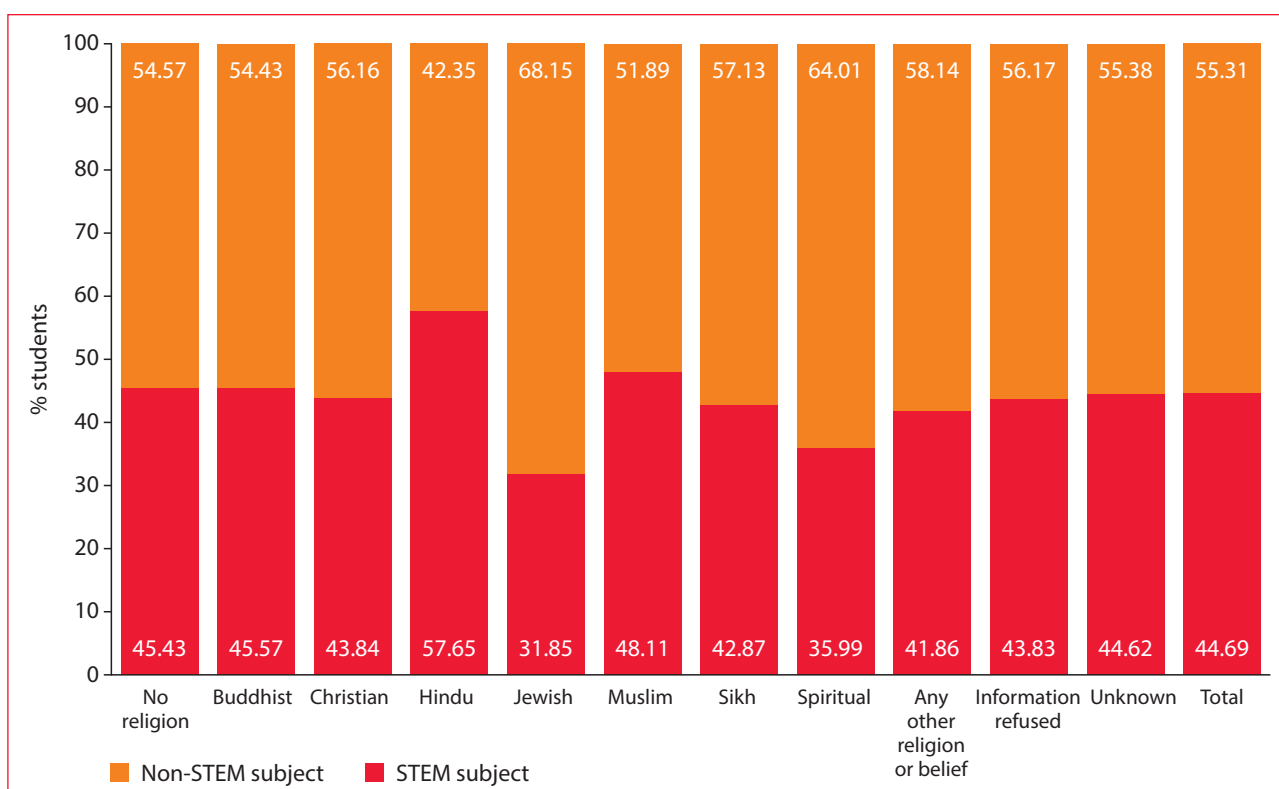
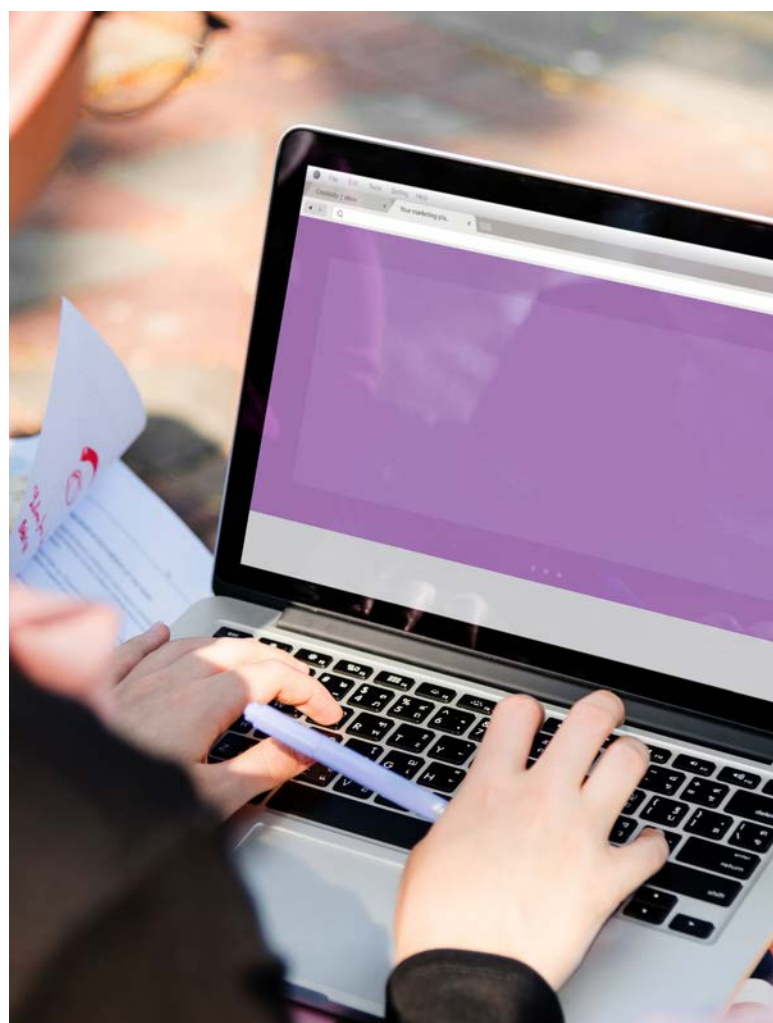


Figure 3: Qualifications gained by British Muslim students from 2012-15

Figure 3 shows the qualifications gained by Muslims from 2012/13 (inner ring) to 2015 (4th ring). The majority of Muslim students were continuing at their HE provider, with this number increasing over the three years. The number of Muslim students who gained their intended award or higher has fluctuated between the years, with a similar pattern being seen with Muslim students having gained other awards, or who are dormant or writing-up. The number of Muslim students who left with no award has decreased slightly throughout the 3 years but, as mentioned previously, this is still the highest rate out of all the faith groups.

Figure 4 suggests that all religious or faith groups, except Hindu, have students studying more non-Science, Technology, Engineering or Maths (STEM) subjects, than STEM subjects. 57.6% of Hindu students were studying a STEM subject at their HE provider, and 42.3% studying a non-STEM subject. The greatest difference between students studying STEM and non-STEM subjects arises in the Spiritual group, which has a difference of 28%. The group with the smallest difference between students studying STEM and non-STEM subjects was the Muslim students with a difference of 3.8%.

Table 3 suggests that female Muslim students are 3% more likely to continue at their HE provider than their male counterparts, and that approximately 1 in 5 (17.2%) further female Muslim students gained their intended award than male Muslim students.



**Figure 4:** Population and percentage of students studying STEM subjects, and population and percentage of those students studying non-STEM subjects, based on religious belief. 2012-16

Table 3: Qualification Gained by Gender across Religions, 2012-15

Religious Belief	Sex	Continuing at HE provider	Gained intended award or higher	Gained other award	Left with no award	Dormant or writing-up	N/A Not in base population
No religion	Female	64.87	23.52	1.92	3.27	5.57	0.85
	Male	66.52	21.70	2.56	3.96	4.90	0.36
	Other	50.00	40.24	3.66	2.44	3.66	0.00
Buddhist	Female	62.56	22.67	1.75	3.28	8.43	1.30
	Male	62.00	21.32	2.47	4.60	8.90	0.71
	Other	66.67	33.33	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Christian	Female	61.88	25.63	1.64	3.03	6.00	1.83
	Male	65.07	22.55	2.29	4.03	5.47	0.58
	Other	36.84	47.37	5.26	5.26	5.26	0.00
Hindu	Female	69.57	21.92	1.42	2.39	3.72	0.98
	Male	70.26	19.34	2.15	3.94	3.78	0.53
	Other	75.00	25.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Jewish	Female	64.83	27.09	0.96	1.87	4.25	0.99
	Male	66.38	26.04	1.09	1.87	4.49	0.14
	Other	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Muslim	Female	69.52	18.69	2.16	3.71	5.21	0.71
	Male	67.44	15.94	3.13	7.31	5.54	0.63
	Other	60.00	30.00	0.00	0.00	10.00	0.00
Sikh	Female	67.73	23.18	1.69	2.89	3.29	1.22
	Male	69.11	20.25	2.14	4.50	3.41	0.60
	Other	0.00	100.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Spiritual	Female	59.75	21.24	1.69	3.62	12.58	1.10
	Male	60.62	21.72	2.76	5.05	9.44	0.40
	Other	85.71	0.00	14.29	0.00	0.00	0.00
Any other religion or belief	Female	59.09	22.20	1.77	3.16	12.02	1.77
	Male	61.53	20.55	2.51	4.17	10.86	0.38
	Other	50.00	36.67	3.33	0.00	6.67	3.33
Information refused	Female	58.55	29.77	1.39	3.05	6.41	0.83
	Male	59.97	28.45	2.15	3.76	5.26	0.41
	Other	46.77	43.55	2.42	3.23	4.03	0.00
Unknown	Female	54.95	30.36	1.75	2.86	8.13	1.95
	Male	58.48	27.67	2.34	3.54	7.47	0.50
	Other	15.32	72.21	0.00	3.90	8.05	0.52

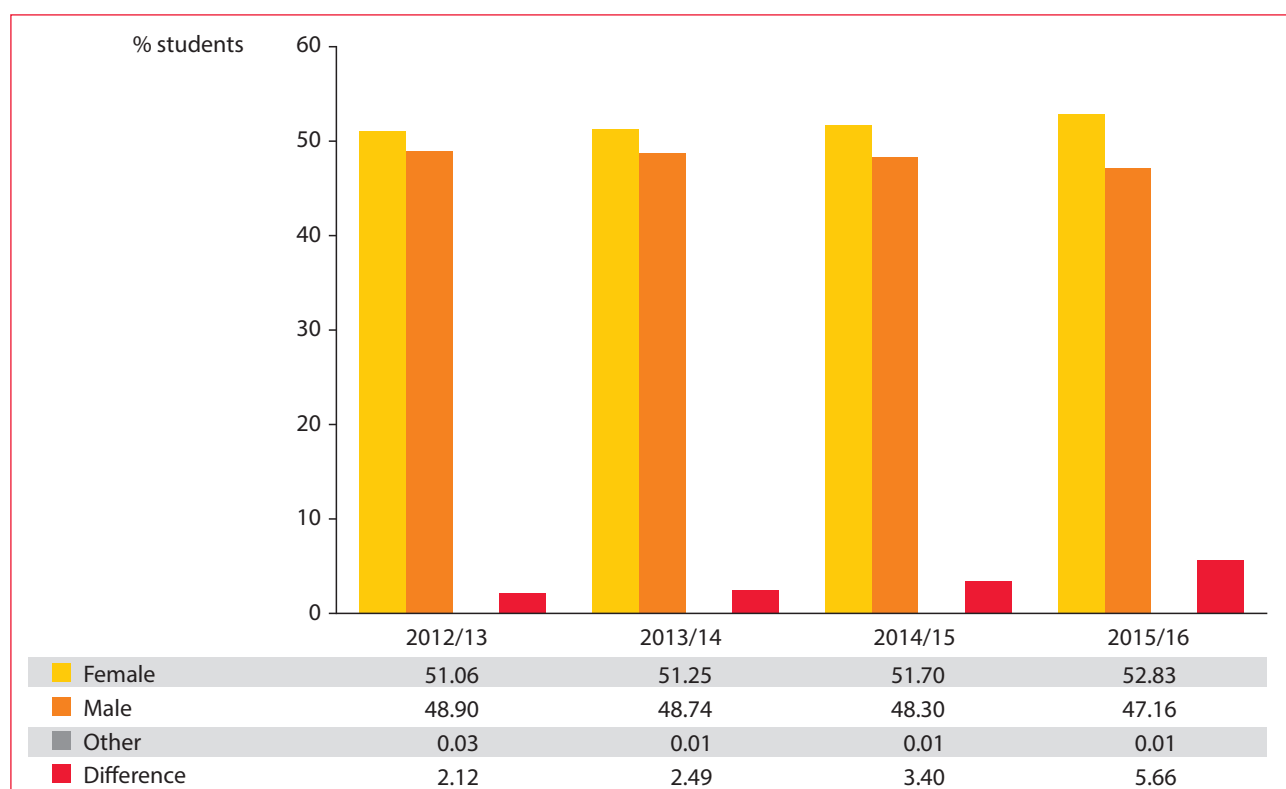


Figure 5: Entry level of Muslim students by gender, 2012-16



Figure 5 shows the population of Muslim female, male and other students entering university between 2012 and 2016, during which there is an increasing difference between the numbers of Muslim female and male students, in favour of female Muslim students. This is consistent with a wider trend of more female, than male, HE students within the UK (UCAS, 2017).

## Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

The HESA data show that we are not fully aware of the majority of UK domiciled HE students' religious beliefs. Additionally, the second largest group of university attendees stated that they had no religious identification.

The presented HESA data suggests that the numbers of British Muslims in HE have been increasing annually, between 2012 and 2016. Nevertheless, it is difficult to tell if this is a rise in absolute terms, because the general British Muslim population is also considered to be rising (ONS, 2012). British Muslim students also had the smallest difference between those studying STEM and non-STEM subjects. This can be interpreted as a positive

indicator, as STEM subjects are commonly perceived as the most desirable, in that they arguably further students' employment prospects (Naughton, 2014). These developments could be attributed to within-group strategies and (ethnic and Muslim) capital (Franceschelli and O'Brien, 2014; Modood, 2004; Shah et al, 2010). It also supports Dwyer et al's (2006) assertion, from her study of Asian Pakistanis, that minority groups are achieving within academia. From Gonzalez's (2000; cited in Tufte and Riis, 2001) perspective, this suggests the use of 'cultural fronts', whereby British Muslim students as social agents invest significantly into their education to counter an overarching hegemony.

This seeming increase in British Muslim students additionally relates to Modood's (2006) assertion that religiosity can be a motivational marker for those accessing education. Thus, if religion plays a key role in students' motivation to pursue education then financial loan systems such as Sharia compliant loans (including Takaful) would further encourage and motivate British Muslim students to access HE. The HESA data suggest that the current lack of Takaful loans is not preventing British Muslims entering universities. Yet having an awareness of religious needs and requirements would instil Muslim students with a choice. Civic organisations have demonstrated that there is a demand for religiously-based loans, which they have only partially been able to address (Satif, 2016).



Furthermore, the HESA data also showed a significant dropout rate for British Muslims, especially Muslim males. Reasons for these figures could be inhibited mobility, pertaining to differences in the students' social, economic and cultural capital. Thus their 'habitus' may be shaping the experiences that they have in the 'field' (Bourdieu, 1972).

The Equality Challenge Unit (2017) has called for universities across the UK to reflect on their role in the reproduction of race inequality in HE. As a result, many universities are attempting to tackle racist practices which are specific to their universities. From a qualitative perspective, France et al's (2008) study provides accounts of student experiences of university life. This gives a context to the social, economic and cultural understandings of ethnic minority students and the barriers they face in their institutional setting. France et al's (2008) study suggests that academic staff leading on these equality issues may not understand the deep-rooted nature of racism within academic spheres and the impact this has on ethnic minority students' experiences within HE. The subsequent need for universities to commit to, and promote, their diverse staff and student HE populations differs from simply stating the presence of black and ethnic minority students, and instead should focus on their holistic experiences (ibid). By noting the problems experienced, this would further understandings of, and thus offer a solution to, persistent ethnic and race equality issues (ibid).

The HESA data further suggest that there is a larger proportion of British Muslim students attending 1994 group, Guild HE, University Alliance, and Million Plus institutions, than Russell Group universities. This reflects Shiner and Modood's (2002) research, which identifies that ethnic minorities are achieving at the HE level, but are less likely to enter into prestigious universities. This suggests that British Muslim students may not be able to access specific institutional fields, and are thus less likely to increase their social, cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1972). This links to Crawford and Greaves' (2015) assertion that children who live in deprived areas go to under-resourced schools, meaning their university participation and outcomes can be hugely influenced. The 2011 Census indicated that Bangladeshi and Pakistani families tend to live in poorer areas (with low socio-economic backgrounds), which may mean that some British Muslims' chances of attending the best universities is limited. Indeed, recently-uncovered data shows that around a quarter of Oxbridge offers went to students from only eight local authority areas (Richardson, 2017).

Interestingly, there appear to be more British Muslim females attending universities than male Muslims. Khattab and Modood (2017) imply that women outperform Muslim men in terms of qualifications and entry into HE

and, by so doing, have reversed the initial gender gap in their favour.

Khattab and Modood (2017) argue that some Muslim women have challenged cultural perceptions, not by abandoning values, but by assuming a strong Islamic identity which is used as an empowering strategy through which they were able to participate in the public sphere, such as obtaining HE qualifications and employment (Khattab and Modood, 2017; Brown, 2006; Dwyer, 2000).

Ahmad (2001) has argued that Muslim women are highly motivated, even more so than the majority group. Franceschelli and O'Brien's (2014) study referred to the term 'Islamic capital', which explains how parents use Islamic values and norms as a source to transmit a sense of morality and to avert their children from un-Islamic practices. Khattab and Modood (2017) argue that these values are also used by parents to foster high aspirations among the young generation, to discipline them towards schoolwork at home and to shape the girls' relationship with their parents and their parents' norms. The gender-difference perspective of parents has ironically helped girls to improve their educational outcomes at school: allowing boys greater freedom to spend time out of the house can lead to boys spending less time on academic homework and sometimes becoming part of an anti-academic peer sub-culture, while girls are likely to devote more time to schoolwork (Shah et al, 2010).

## Expanding this research area

This report acknowledges the beliefs, values and principles of British Muslim students. The academic debates cited in this study suggest that religion plays a key factor in motivating students' educational aspirations (Modood, 2006). The afore-mentioned limitations of the currently available data about HE students' religious identities, means that further quantitative research is necessary in order to explore if there are correlations between students' religious identity, socio-economic status and educational attainment, for example. Studies currently conducted by Scott-Baumann (2018) investigate the impact of Prevent statutory duty on student experience, which would offer an insight on the HE experiences of Muslim students. Particularly as Murtuja and Tufail's (2017) report proposed a rethink of prevent and found that the prevent scheme fostered fear and censorship at universities (Halliday, 2017).

Qualitative research could explore the apparent disparity of British Muslim students' access to specific mission group universities and the reasons for this. Unlike the shortage of research on Muslims in education, the literature on the performance of Muslims in the labour market is more developed. Key research shows Muslims

face more penalties and disadvantages than any other group, especially in relation to the Christian White-British majority group (Cheung, 2014; Heath and Martin, 2013; Khattab and Johnston, 2013).

Nonetheless, future research could pertinently focus on whether female British Muslim students post-HE are able to secure employment. This would address the Women and Equality Committee's (2015) findings that British Muslim women, specifically, faced a 'triple penalty' when seeking employment. Indeed, Tyrer and Ahmad (2006) assert that Muslim women - especially those planning to become economically active after leaving school - understand that they are more likely to face labour market penalties due to widespread stereotypes and racism, perhaps more so than Muslim men.

The apparent increase in the numbers of British Muslim minority students accessing HE will potentially lead to further positive examples of integration. Yet the cohort of 2.7 million Muslims is not homogeneous, and their experiences are therefore shaped differently, which impacts on their life choices and outcomes. This report, and the analysis provided, suggest some of the gaps in access to, and also the achievements within, academia for some British Muslim students. There remains great scope to increase equality, overcome discrimination and bridge gaps for marginalised minorities in the UK from varying faiths, traditions, backgrounds, religions and cultures. This report asserts the significance of considering HE students' 'religious beliefs, values and principles', so that British Muslim students can access education equally to their non-Muslim counterparts.

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