# Muslim Friendly
## Universities

# MUSLIM FRIENDLY UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

Project Funding Competition: Invitation to Apply for Funding (Pilot Phase)

# AZIZFOUNDATION

# Background and Context

We partner with 50+ universities in the sector through our Masters Scholarships programme. Beyond scholarships, we also push partner universities to do more to accommodate British Muslim students, adopt inclusive practices and policies, and enhance their faith provision and student services.

We now want to go a step further and formalise a network of our university partners. This will leverage resources, bringing partners together to drive policy and systemic change within higher education. It will act as a critical forum, leading on advocacy and providing leadership on issues to do with British Muslims in the Academy.

Formalising a secretariat for the network will enhance the impact of our equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work in the sector. Effective coordination and organisation will be vital for this endeavour. Is it also worth noting that nothing like this currently exists for British Muslims in the sector.

# Purpose and Rationale

This funding competition will enable the successful bidder to establish the Muslim Friendly University (MFU) Network of institutions for an initial pilot phase. MFU is one of the existing Aziz Foundation programmes, which consists of different EDI strands that coalesce to shape a more inclusive HE landscape for British Muslims through research commissioning, showcasing good practice, and knowledge exchange. It operates as an emerging Quality Mark/ accreditation framework.

This network will be forged out of the Aziz Foundation's existing portfolio of university partners. **Prospective bidders must therefore be partners to apply.**

The Network is required to demonstrate advocacy and leadership in addressing challenges confronting Muslim students and staff across the sector. These include intersectional disadvantage (such as between ethnicity and faith, as well as other forms of intersectionality including gender, class, neurodiversity and so on), systemic exclusion from access and participation frameworks, and equalities gaps.

Moreover, to further elaborate on the above, there is much evidence* that:

- There are equality gaps that disproportionately impact British Muslims, such as the degree awarding gap and decline in participation across education levels (particularly between undergraduate and postgraduate studies) as well as with continuation
- Institutional Islamophobia is embedded in the sector, with international flashpoints and domestic policies sustaining deficits in trust between Muslim students and staff, and senior university leaders
- British Muslims face a form of 'policy exceptionalism' in being systematically excluded from access and participation frameworks and with low adoption of the definition of Islamophobia across institutions

*For references, please see the reports and links to volumes under the resources section of the Aziz Foundation website (www.azizfoundation.org.uk/resources)*

# How this fits into wider university frameworks

The successful bidder for this funding will benefit from the project's alignment with a number of existing frameworks within higher education.

These include:

- Knowledge Exchange and Transfer frameworks, where potential research and best practice can be shared across sectors
- The Research Excellence Framework, for collaborative, impact focused research co-produced with civil society and community organisations working with British Muslims
- EDI and Widening Participation: institutional strategies and access initiatives that aim to diversify cohorts at the postgraduate level
- Access and Participation Plans, for regulatory compliant plans that demonstrate how institutions are increasing access to HE for disadvantaged communities
- Student Engagement Frameworks: involving students in the design and development of interventions and programmes to enhance participation and advocacy

# Criteria and Specification

The Foundation will be accepting bids to plan, develop and operationalise the MFU Network.

In producing proposals, potential bidders should use the specification and criteria below. The 'Remit and Responsibilities' section is also intended to provide further details on what the Foundation expects from the Network.

| Specification | Details |
|---|---|
| a. Structure of the Network - how it will look<br>b. Bringing other Aziz Foundation partners on board (i.e those not involved in directly running the Network) | • Organisation and functions<br>• Operationalisation<br>• Scalability and timeframe/ phasing<br>• Composition/ personnel |
| c. Intended Outcomes<br>   i. Engagement and advocacy<br>  ii. Knowledge exchange<br> iii. Any research outputs | • Outputs - reports, research, conferences<br>• Policy making influence<br>• Convening powers |
| d. Budget Breakdown<br>   i. Itemised list of expenditure<br>  ii. Resource allocation & timeframe<br> iii. Staffing costs<br> iv. Plan for long term sustainability | • Offering value for money<br>• Tapping into other sources of funding |
| e. Evaluation<br>   i. Impact evaluation built into project design<br>  ii. Design of metrics and KPIs<br> iii. Monitoring framework | • Theory of change<br>• Impact framework and measures<br>• Systems for evaluation and monitoring |

# Project Scope: Remit and Responsibilities

As a rough guide, the MFU Network remit and responsibilities may include the following, although this is not by any means an exhaustive nor prescriptive list.

**Possible Remit and Aims/Objectives:**

- Leading on improving the British Muslim student experience, particularly, but not exclusively, at the postgraduate taught level
- Sharing best practice, in respect to widening participation programmes, EDI schemes and institution-wide policy that have an impact on improving access, attainment and progression for British Muslim students
- Knowledge exchange in respect to evidence-based impact of schemes that take into consideration the intersection of faith and ethnicity, and make a notable difference in reducing the degree awarding gap
- Provide leadership and oversight, raising awareness of the structural barriers facing British Muslim students to the wider HE sector
- Engage policymakers, parliamentarians and regulators in making the case for the necessary changes to higher education policy

**Potential Responsibilities:**

- To host network meetings on a periodic basis (i.e., once a quarter), attended by representatives from preferred partner institutions
- To hear presentations on the work preferred partners, practitioners, professional services staff and students are undertaking within the sector to better the British Muslim student experience
- Facilitate knowledge exchange opportunities and dissemination of good practice, helping in embedding initiatives that create an inclusive learning environment for British Muslim students
- Reporting, conducting, presenting and disseminating research on the state of access, participation and progression of British Muslim students
- Producing toolkits, guides and articles on best practice in relation to British Muslims in higher education
- Liaising with and collaborating with organisations with shared interests and values in the public and third sector

For the sake of clarity, this section can also be understood as incorporating the aims and objectives of the project.

# Costs and Operationalisation

We wish to offer £30k to one or a consortium of our partners to undertake the work to create a secretariat/ run the network. This will initially be for a pilot phase, with a review upon completion, and an extension of funding subject to satisfactory progress.

**How it will work:**

- The Foundation is offering £30k for a consortium of our partners (i.e. say 3-5 out of 50 existing partners) or single institution to run the network
- The successful bidder can decide how this funding is spread over a pilot phase, whether it is:
    - £30k over one year
    - £15k pa. over two years
    - £10k pa. over three years
- Universities will send in proposals, detailing how they will establish and operationalise the network, meeting all requirements of the specification above
- The Foundation will assess all bids/ proposals and award the funding to the bid that has best met the specification, criteria, aims and objectives of the proposed project
- The successful institutions will work closely with the Foundation on operationalising the network, providing regular updates and progress reports
- There would be an expectation on the successful bidder(s) to consider contributing funding to help support the sustainability of the project after the pilot phase

# How to Apply

Applications must be made during the submission window. A proposal will be submitted detailing how the bidder meets the specification and criteria above.

Proposals should be sent to Dr Zain Sardar, Programme Manager at the Aziz Foundation:

**z.sardar@azizfoundation.org.uk.**

Submission window: Monday 2nd February 2026 - Friday 10th April 2026

Muslim Friendly
**Universities**