

Inclusivity at university

Muslim student experiences

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Introduction

Universities are becoming increasingly ‘diverse’ and ‘multicultural’, attracting a greater number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students, especially through widening participation schemes (Andersson et al, 2012). Yet, a diverse student population does not necessarily lead to a more cohesive and integrated university (Hopkins, 2011). Based on a study of social and academic exclusion of Muslim students at King’s College London (King’s), this policy brief provides suggestions for overcoming institutional inequalities.

With nearly 330,000 Muslims in higher education (Malik and Wykes, 2018), these students are far from a homogenous group. Differences exist across ethnicity, age, nationality, class, and so on. In the UK, Muslims mainly consist of BME groups – 38 per cent of Muslims are Pakistani and 15 per cent are Bangladeshi (Runnymede Trust, 2017). These intersecting identities are managed in complex and contradictory way, creating diverse student experiences (Hopkins, 2011).

Why Muslim students?

In a study of 578 Muslim students’, the National Union of Students (2018) found that one in three students experienced some form of abuse or crime on campus. This can lead to disengagement, isolation, anxiety and a decline in education achievements (TellMAMA, 2019). In turn, this can impact students’ sense of belonging and membership on campus (Stevenson, 2018). Muslim students are also more likely to leave higher education early (Rose-Adams, 2012) and have a lower degree attainment than their non-Muslim peers (Stevenson, 2018). Therefore, genuine inclusion may strengthen attainment and retention rates (Malik and Wykes, 2018).

Although this study focuses on Muslim students, these policy improvements are fundamental for creating universal and equitable education for all students, promoting a genuinely cohesive university.

What is the problem?

Attainment

Muslim and BME students face academic exclusion across higher education seen through 'the attainment gap'. For UK geography undergraduates between 2013–15, '11.2 per cent of BME students attained a first and 69.5 per cent attained an upper second... compared with 16.9 per cent and 80.0 per cent for white students, respectively' (Desai, 2017:321). Addressing these attainment issues is important because for British ethnic minorities, 'educational attainment is a key motivator in achieving upward social mobility' (Modood, 2006:4). We therefore need to look at the institutional practises which are disadvantaging BME students (Esson, 2018).

This is highly relevant for Muslim students as they have the highest dropout rate of all faith groups, with only 10 per cent gaining their intended award or higher (Malik and Wykes, 2018). Additionally, they are the most economically disadvantaged group in the UK, with Muslim women experiencing the largest pay gap in the country (NUS, 2018). Greater inclusion would improve attainment and potentially enhance future employment rates.

Securitisation on campus

Muslim students may find themselves under forms of monitoring and surveillance at university. The government-led 'Prevent' strategy – a legal duty for universities under the 2015 Counter-terrorism and Security Act – aims to stop individuals from becoming vulnerable to radicalisation and extremism. However, this can lead to the Muslim population being viewed as a 'suspect community' (Awan, 2012). This can lead to self-censorship in Muslim students, particularly around politicised aspects of student life (Brown and Saeed, 2015).

Methodology

To gain an understanding of Muslim student experiences, sixteen semi-structured interviews with Muslim students at King's were completed, gaining in-depth, personal and emotive data (Garner and Selod, 2014). Participants are more likely to be open regarding sensitive topics in individual interviews compared to group interviews, where confidentiality is often compromised (Kaplowitz, 2000).

Anti-Muslim hate crime

Muslim women who veil are more fearful of anti-Muslim discrimination on campus than those who do not, as they are visibly Muslim (NUS, 2018). Of all anti-Muslim hate crimes recorded in 2017, 62 per cent of individuals were wearing Islamic clothing such as the hijab (veil covering the head) or the burka (full-body veil) (TellMAMA, 2018).

This can lead to Muslim women feeling isolated and misunderstood at university (Cole and Ahmadi, 2003). Muslims may also face covert forms of discrimination – including stereotyping all Muslims as terrorists, pathologising or exoticising Islam and using Islamophobic language (Husain and Howard, 2017). Again, this can impact feelings of belonging on campus.

Social exclusion

The hegemonic drinking culture at university through the strong presence of student bars and clubs can prevent Muslims from mixing with other students. These institutional arrangements can separate those who drink from those who do not, causing Muslim students to become socially excluded (Andersson et al, 2012). The dominance of alcohol can also make Muslim students feel as though they cannot take part in society events (NUS, 2018).

To recruit participants, snowball sampling was used – where an initial contact helps you to recruit other contacts (May, 2011). However, snowballing relies on existing social relations which may limit the scope of the study by recruiting from a small circle of like-minded people (Valentine, 1997). As a result, this study was also advertised on the King's fortnightly research recruitment circular, allowing participants to contact me if they would like to take part. Combined, these two methods created a diverse pool of participants.

Findings

1.

Events with alcohol serve as institutional barriers to Muslim students

Layla: *‘drinking is a huge culture over here so I mean the fact I can’t relate to that is huge because it does stop me from being friends from a lot of people.’*

Samirah: *‘I went to a boat party for India Society and I didn’t anticipate that there would be that much drinking and now because of that I feel like I don’t want to go to those events because it’s mainly just about drinking rather than your friends.’*

Alcohol-dominated spaces can act as institutional barriers that prevent Muslim students from integrating into the university (Andersson et al, 2012). As well as student bars, Muslim students can feel excluded from society events. Raheem claims that ‘even with the King’s Mountaineering Society... most of the socialising happens afterwards at the pub’. Similarly, Layla wanted to attend an end of term celebration organised by her Psychology department for completing a project. She claims, ‘I was really excited to go until like it was all based on drinking... that’s such a put off because why would I go if everyone’s going to be drunk’. Hence, the dominance of alcohol can socially exclude Muslim students.

Policy recommendations:

1. Non-alcoholic, inclusive society events are essential to ensure the participation of Muslim students, increasing interactions between those who do and do not drink. This has already proven to be popular as Hanna states, ‘I think the geography society are pretty good – they do coffee and cake get together and junkyard golf.’ Similarly, there is also a appreciation for ‘The Shack’ – ‘I think it’s really good that King’s have created this alcohol-free environment on campus because it’s not just Muslims that don’t drink, there are many other groups of people as well...’ Yasmin states. These spaces are clearly in demand and are important in ensuring that those who do not drink are not excluded from the university.

2.

A diverse curriculum could help to create a sense of belonging

Ikram: *‘I’m Pakistani and the first time Pakistan was used as a case study in my degree was in my final year... by a Pakistani lecturer. Without him, would my degree be linked to my home country at all?’*

The proliferation of ‘white geographies’ marginalises minority students (Esson, 2018). A greater range of perspectives in the curriculum must be considered so that students are not exclusively digesting Eurocentric content. Instead, the curriculum should reflect the experiences of a diverse range of students, allowing minority students to see themselves as legitimate creators of knowledge (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2018). This is relevant because 48 per cent of King’s students were from BME backgrounds in 2018–19 (King’s, 2019). Additionally, Muslim students are most likely to be disappointed with their teaching (Neves and Hillman, 2016). A diverse curriculum would therefore create a more inclusive teaching environment.

Policy recommendations:

- 1. Incorporating non-western voices that are often silenced through a Eurocentric curriculum can help to overcome institutional whiteness. This could include incorporating knowledge from Muslim scholars, as well as black and indigenous scholars that are relevant to the lived experiences of students (Desai, 2017). This is important because Muslim student dropout rates may be due to differences in social and cultural capital (Malik and Wykes, 2018). Therefore, a more inclusive learning environment may improve low attainment and retention rates. This would also benefit non-Muslim students by enhancing cultural competence and critical thinking through diversity in the curriculum.**
- 2. In keeping with the need to recognise who the curriculum is for, departments should take into consideration what students would like to see more of in terms of both topics and scholars (Esson, 2018). Hence, student input is important.**

Findings

3.

Students feel more connected to staff when they can identify with them

Zain: *'I feel like there's more to connect with them (BME lecturers). I'll try to pursue them a bit more, I'll try to talk to them a bit more, because I know that there's more there in common. There's more there to talk about.'*

Layla: *'People who are female or like the same ethnicity... obviously you have a base in which you can relate especially if you're a minority. You stick together.'*

We need to go beyond simply adding 'black thinking to a white pot' (Esson, 2018:5). As well as diversifying the curriculum, the lack of staff representation must be addressed. Across the UK, 8.2 per cent of staff are BME, compared to only 4.3 per cent in geography (Desai, 2017). This creates challenges for 'who produces geographical knowledge and how it circulates' (Esson, 2018:2). Staff representation is important as students feel closer to lecturers that are similar to them – whether that's due to gender, ethnicity or religion. This creates positive, diverse role models for students (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2018). However, BME staff can face invisibility, isolation and discrimination (Desai, 2017).

Policy recommendations:

1. Universities need to focus on **recruiting and retaining BME staff**, as well as accommodating more Muslim role models within institutions (NUS, 2018). This also involves taking clear steps and **targeted support for BME staff in relation to career progression** (McIlwaine and Bunge, 2018).

This creates benefits for minority students, who feel more connected to BME staff. Nav claims that these lecturers 'can actually relate to student problems and they're very open to receiving emails from students which makes things a lot easier'. As a result, this can increase the sense of belonging of minority students at university, by fostering a teaching environment where students are comfortable asking staff for advice and support (NUS, 2019).

4.

Manage Islamophobia in the classroom

Neelam: *'They (white students) have this sense of superiority... It feels like I'm always at the back of the room and have to work ten times harder than everyone else. So yeah it's a huge struggle... I do think if I wasn't wearing this (the hijab) they wouldn't treat me like that.'*

Muslim students like Neelam, through a combination of both religion and ethnicity, can feel 'out of place' (Root, 2000:630) in the classroom. This is especially because her hijab makes her visibly Muslim.

Policy recommendations:

1. Departments must clearly understand Islamophobia and its impacts on Muslim students and staff. **Robust training must be provided to staff on how to identify and deal with discrimination.** For example, if discriminatory comments are casually made during a classroom discussion, professors have a duty of care to sensitively step in and mitigate harm. This can help victims to feel less isolated, by ensuring that **Islamophobia is challenged as it happens** (Stevenson, 2018).

2. Experiences of Islamophobia can threaten Muslim students' self-esteem, confidence and sense of belonging on campus which impacts retention and attainment (Stevenson, 2018). It is therefore essential that departments are **assessing student attainment in relation to their backgrounds** (Desai, 2017). In order to recognise and eradicate inequalities, data should be collected about 'access, retention, success and progression into further study or employment' (Stevenson, 2018:2).

3. Departments should also ensure that Muslim students are finding the support and connections they seek (Modood and Calhoun, 2015). The geography department runs an excellent mentoring programme which may be further improved if mentees had the option of highlighting different **preferences for their mentors** – in relation to gender, ethnicity and religion. This may help to create positive role models, helping Muslim students feel less isolated.

Findings

5.

Try to schedule classes around Friday prayer

Raheem: *'I think the only difficulty is when you have to go pray and you're in the middle of a lecture.'*

Whilst students appreciate that King's has 'multiple prayer rooms on different campuses' as Qasim states, there are sometimes difficulties in participating in religious practises. Raheem struggles to complete obligatory prayers if this clashes with timetabled classes. This is not uncommon, as 'only one in 10 students believed that their institution avoided scheduling classes and exams during prayer times' (NUS, 2018:17).

Policy recommendations:

1. Departments could be more accommodating of Jummah (Friday) prayer. This is a special congregational prayer held every Friday at noon – the holiest day for Muslims. The King's Islamic Society organises this prayer service on campus which usually takes up to an hour – typically between 12.00-14.00.

Muslims tend to use their lunch hour for this prayer, however this is not always possible. **Keeping Friday lunchtimes free from lectures and tutorials where possible** to allow Muslim students to take part in this prayer would be beneficial.

The timings of Jummah prayer depend on the sun's position in the sky, meaning that as the seasons change, so do the timings. In order to ensure that classes do not clash with Jummah prayer, the geography department may wish to liaise with the Islamic Society each term.

Conclusion

This policy brief demonstrates the complexities of diversity and inclusion within higher education. We must take a holistic and integrated approach, which requires increased cooperation between students and staff. In doing so, we can ‘confront the reproduction of white geographies’ (Esson 2018:5) and institutional inequalities, such as the dominance of alcohol and timetable clashes, which can lead to social and academic exclusion.

This would result in a universally inclusive education for both Muslims and non-Muslims. These policy recommendations would be beneficial for all students, by increasing cultural awareness and reflecting the real world through a diversity of knowledge within academia. For non-Muslims that do not drink, it would also make social events more accessible. Without implementing these policies, the university is likely to become increasingly marginalising and exclusionary.

Key findings

- **Muslims are a heterogeneous group, leading to diverse student experiences**
- **British universities are portrayed as ‘diverse’, yet the university can also be segregated, hostile and exclusionary (Hopkins, 2011)**
- **Overcoming institutional and structural inequalities is essential to create an inclusive university for all students.**

Policy recommendations

- **Incorporate more inclusive society events that do not revolve around alcohol**
- **Include a greater range of voices into the curriculum to overcome institutional whiteness**
- **Increase staff representation to help create a sense of belonging for minority students**
- **Support Muslim students by recognising Islamophobia and tracking their attainment**
- **Where possible, adapt teaching schedules on Friday lunchtimes to allow Muslim students to pray.**

Further reading

Towards critical geographies of the university campus: understanding the contested experiences of Muslim students.

P Hopkins (2011)

Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers – 36(1), pages 157–169

Placing diversity among undergraduate Geography students in London: Reflections on attainment and progression.

C McIlwaine and D Bunge (2019)

Area – 51(3), pages 500–507

The experience of Muslim Students in 2017–18

NUS (2018)

London: NUS

About the author

I graduated from King's College London in BA Geography in 2019. This policy brief is based on the findings of my undergraduate dissertation – ***Negotiating Muslim Identities at a British University***, which was awarded the department prize for the 'Best Undergraduate Dissertation in Geography'.

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