

A 'satisfied settling'? Investigating a sense of belonging for Muslim students in a UK small-medium Higher Education Institution.

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Abstract:

In West European and North American Higher Education (HE), students of Islamic faith often feel overlooked, disregarded and marginalised by traditional post-secondary education colleges and Universities (Stevenson, 2014). This paper presents the findings of a research study conducted at a small-medium sized University in the UK to explore Muslim students' sense of belonging at the Institution, aiming to assess whether the University of Winchester followed a western trend of housing barriers to a full HE experience for minority student groups (Harper & Quaye, 2015). As the student population in the UK is growing to 50% of 18-24-year-old adults, so too is the number of students from diverse and underrepresented groups such as: students of faith, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students, disabled students and students with caring responsibilities (Lea, 2015). Therefore, understanding Winchester's Muslim student populations' sense of belonging and engagement at the Institution was to be deemed necessary. This study spanned over Winter 2017 / Spring 2018 using semi-structured interviews with 20% of the Muslim student population at the University, with findings suggesting that although the HEI has a very small Muslim population, students generally felt valued and a sense of belonging to the Institution. However, this was seen to be one-sided (fuelled mostly by positive academic experiences) and was implicated by being of minority status, to which the article labels as a 'satisfied settling'. The article will also discuss how simple implementations by HEIs can further engage and enhance the university experience for these students.

Background:

The University of Winchester is located in the county of Hampshire, approximately 80 miles south of London and approximately 15 miles north of Southampton on the south coast of England, United Kingdom. The University, formerly King Alfred College, was established in 1840 as a teaching training institution with an Anglican Church foundation. The Privy Council granted its title: *The University of Winchester* in 2005. The University has been growing ever since its roots were laid in 1840. Today, there are around 8,000 students (The University of Winchester, 2018) making it a medium sized UK University. Of this student population, Winchester, like the rest of UK HE, has a steadily growing Muslim population (The Muslim Council of Britain, 2015). However, the Muslim student population accounts for approximately only 2% of the total student population, with a student population majority being derived from white UK/home students. The University of Winchester has recently established a Centre for Student Engagement in August 2018, with research and strategic priorities which include ensuring that all students are able to fully engage in campus activities and the full potential of HE study. This follows recent UK regulatory targets where Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are tasked with ensuring all students from all backgrounds are able to access, succeed in and proceed from HE (Office for Students, 2018), building upon over a decade of momentum relating to a greater emphasis on Student Engagement in HE as a means to enhance students' experiences of post-secondary education (Bols, 2017, Dunne and Zanstra, 2011, Bryson and Hand, 2007).

This study began in Autumn 2017, inspired by the recently conducted Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) project: *Realising Engagement through Active Culture Transformation (REACT)*, which focused on exploring the term 'hard to reach' and identified a sense of belonging could be attained through student engagement activities and spaces within a University (Lowe & Dunne, 2017; Humphrey & Lowe, 2017; Beniston & Harris, 2017). Although *REACT* was a key catalyst underpinning this piece of research, another main driver for exploring a sense of belonging amongst Muslim students in HE was the lack of insight into this specific research area generally (Stevenson, 2014). As universities and colleges in the UK come under increasing pressure to support and ensure satisfaction in students, a growing body of literature aligns student success, retention and satisfaction to a sense of belonging at their HEI (Lea, 2015; Thomas, 2012). This has included references to students being involved in campus activities, having university colleagues who are 'real models' and feeling a part of the campus community (Cook-Sather *et al*, 2018; Horsley, 2016; Thomas, 2012). To date, there has been an absence of original research into the student experience at higher education institutions from a religious perspective; a claim that is supported by Stevenson (2014) and Aune and Stevenson (2017), who contend that this is a neglected and under-developed area of academic research.

The need for such primary research is further strengthened by the secular nature of many UK campuses which bring historic barriers to study, often alienating students who do not feel a sense of belonging from institutions where they do not recognise individuals similar to themselves (Austen *et al*, 2017; Mann, 2001). Sabri (2017) notes that there has been an aversion to the phenomenon of religious beliefs and the student experience within a university setting by academics and professional researchers. Instead, the focus has been on a discourse concentrating on religious fundamentalism, which impacts disproportionately on the Muslim student community causing a discomfort in institutions such as HEIs (Harper and Quaye, 2015). This has led to many Muslim students feeling silenced, not participating fully, and on the periphery of student life within higher education institutions (Stevenson, 2014). Also, Muslim students are often part of the wider BAME group which have been identified by nationwide studies to be more likely to drop out of HE, and a well-known attainment gap currently exists in UK HE (McDuff and Barefoot, 2016, Cotton *et al* 2015) – a challenge most institutions are still struggling to deal with in terms of finding tangible solutions (Austen *et al* 2017). Finally, the research sought to investigate further into the students' experiences of HE at the University of Winchester as so often Muslim students can be simply referred to as 'hard to reach' (Shaw *et al*, 2017), being labelled as students who do not engage with the HEI, rather than the HEI not engaging with students.

Rationale

The purpose of this research is to gain a better insight of Muslim students' sense of belonging and what matters to them while at The University of Winchester. This research would enable the researchers and HEI to further understand the student experience of this faith group, to ensure that all aspects, beyond the course (e.g. extra-curricular activities) are accessible and available to all students at Winchester. As Sabri (2017:197) eloquently puts this:

'If religious beliefs are taken to be more than attributes but a matter of agency, then students need to be able to engage in negotiation about their needs and the capacity of their institution to accommodate them'.

Additionally, where the experiences of why struggling to belong on campus have seldom looked beyond gender, age or class, a religious dimension is not only useful to consider but in order to develop internationalisation strategies, universities need 'to take a more nuanced account of the cultural backgrounds of their students, including their religious affiliation' (Stevenson, 2014:13).

Method

The project takes the line of action research in that it was designed and conducted where the end goal was to seek commendations and recommendations for institutional improvement (and, in disseminating the research, sector-wide improvement) (McNiff, 2013). As such, the research opted to use an asset-based model, as opposed to a

deficit-based model, to ensure that sense of belonging was seen as something to improve and enhance rather than to assume that Muslim students at Winchester did not feel a sense of belonging at all.

The Appreciative Inquiry (AI) model was an important framework used which guided the main research approach. Bushe (2013; as cited in Kessler, 2013) states that AI has primarily been used as a response to problem-solving in managerial work, though it has been used as an action research approach to organisational inquiry and change. AI seeks to bring more effective and sustainable social systems through inquiry. Inquiry must therefore begin with appreciation, leading to be collaborative, productive and applicable. As a result, this research has been designed to be rigorous and robust in order to explore a relatively under-researched area (belonging and HE experiences of Muslim students), whilst also seeking to implement change from the findings.

This model was reflected through the interview structure devised by the research team (e.g. asking 'what' questions and not making any assumptions). This research was conducted in line with the University of Winchester's Research Ethics Policy ensuring that all data was stored appropriately and the identities of the students be kept anonymous (The University of Winchester, 2014) The interview was split into four main sections, with each section including a briefing paragraph and finishing with a debrief:

Section 1 – Demographic Information

Section 2 – Gauging Belonging and Engagement

Section 3 – Barriers to Belonging

Section 4 – Enhancing and Improving sense of belonging

In seeking to gather qualitative data, the agreed data collection method was to use semi-structured interviews. This provided a balance of having a standardised body of questions to work with which also provided the scope to explore any further lines of interest. As mentioned previously, Muslim students at The University of Winchester comprise 2% of the student population, equating to 120 students. The research team agreed that gaining 20% of this population would allow for a representative picture of the cohort's opinions surrounding 'belonging'.

Multiple methods of recruitment were used. For example, weekly Virtual Learning Environment posts and flyers/leaflets were posted around both campuses. Additionally, the Muslim Prayer Room proved to be an effective mode of recruitment, often allowing the lead researcher to schedule multiple interviews at a time. The significance of the Prayer Room will also be discussed later on in the article. Given the nature of the research (i.e. primarily gaining Muslim participants), a 'snowballing' method was also used. This was done through asking students at the end of their interview whether they had any Muslim friends/peers who would be interested in taking part. Again, this proved to be rather effective and ensured a consistent flow of students, especially as Muslim students at the Institution can be argued as 'difficult-to-reach' (Berg and Lune, 2014:52) – one student was able to provide a list of seven

of her Muslim friends whom she said were contactable through the university email system.

An impromptu recruitment method used included social media, where it had been suggested to post the research flyer on the 'International Society 2017/18 - University of Winchester' *Facebook* page – this brought two more students to interview. Whilst it demonstrates the use of social media as a research tool (Khatri *et al*, 2015), it was especially appreciated where the Institution does not have an established Muslim society/network (either physically or online). As a result, combining these methods of recruitment was essential and also called attention to the fact that there was no centralised space of meeting as a Muslim student at Winchester.

The project also advertised a £25 Amazon voucher as an incentive to be won in a prize draw. Furthermore, in being fully transparent and accessible to all participants, students were made aware that they could access a copy of the questions prior to the interview, and that they had a choice in requesting a male or female interviewer. The latter was done to be religiously sensitive to the fact that Islam limits contact between the sexes and so Muslim students who strongly adhere to this would feel comfortable participating.

It should be noted that the lead researcher was a young Muslim woman who recently graduated from The University of Winchester and conducted the vast majority of interviews. The research team recognised the possibility for potential bias from the lead researcher however the analysis and write up has been conducted by the full research team. Additionally, it is important to note the advantages of this ethnic-matching of interviewer and interviewee which certain scholars have addressed e.g. responses may be deemed as more valid where participants may not feel the need to provide 'compliant' answers (Hoong Sin, 2007). Furthermore, age similarities have been regarded as advantageous in establishing trust (Corrigan, 1979; as cited in McNeill and Chapman, 2005). Though this was not something that respondents were directly questioned about, many students naturally used Arabic jargon e.g. 'Halal' (something which is Islamically permissible), 'Imamsaab' (a male Islamic leader), and frequently used the phrase 'you know what I mean'. Though there are other factors and power dynamics to consider (i.e. the relationship between staff and student, gender etc.) (McNeill and Chapman, 2005), students appreciated being able to share their thoughts and to speak to someone more "relatable". Examples of this relation are outlined in some example quotes from participants below:

'...maybe you want to speak to someone who you relate to more, like a Muslim woman, or like for example, someone like you...'

- Participant 15

'...I'm really thankful for you being with me here I was actually trying to get a chance to try and speak about these things...'

Findings

Overview

24 Muslim students participated in the project, in which students were asked to confirm that they self-identified as ‘Muslim’. The goal of sampling 20% of the university’s Muslim population of 120 was met with 23 semi-structured interviews being conducted and 1 paper response being submitted. Below is a summary of cohort demographics (see Figure 1) which largely correlate to Muslim student demographics within HE e.g. a higher number of commuting students, and course choice (Stevenson *et al*, 2017; Open Society Institute, 2005):

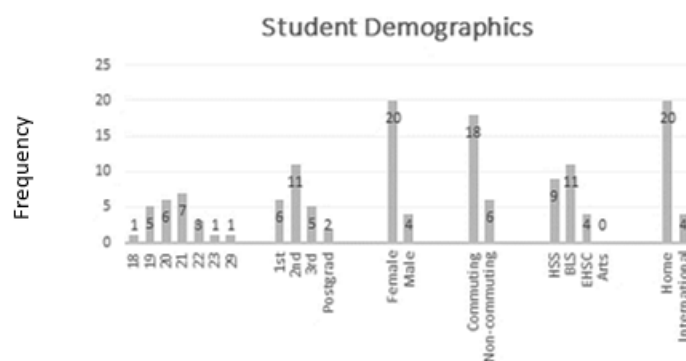


Figure 1 – Student Demographics of participants

The quota was seen to be suitable as, when nearing the final few interviews, a saturation point had been reached. On average, interviews lasted between 18-20 minutes, with the shortest interview being around 10 minutes and the longest being 55 minutes. All interviews were transcribed and underwent a thematic content analysis and hand-coding process. This included both microanalysis (‘coding that is open, detailed, and exploratory’) and general analysis (Corbin and Strauss, 2015:70).

Sense of Belonging

As stated previously, existing literature has noted the often discriminatory and negative experiences Muslim students face at universities and on campuses (Stevenson, 2013; Stevenson, 2017; Nasir and Al-Amin, 2006). It therefore came as a welcome point of interest when the research captured contradictory outcomes (from previous published findings), with the majority of the participants expressing a largely positive HE experience at Winchester. The main findings of this research identified the following. First of all, the vast majority of students, when asked, stated that they did feel a sense of belonging at the Institution (i.e. two-thirds of students interviewed), and just over half said they felt comfortable in fully participating in activities held by the university. The perception of ‘belonging’ itself aligned to existing literature (i.e. relating to academic and social engagement, and certain psychological aspects) (Thomas, 2012). However, it also largely correlated to factors regarding a ‘Muslim identity’. For

example, the biggest factor that made Muslim students feel a sense of belonging was primarily through having a Prayer Room available on campus.

'...if that wasn't there I don't feel like I would belong here...I think the Prayer Room is the main thing that makes you feel like you do belong here and they [the university] are welcoming...'

- Participant 10

'...the Prayer Room being here definitely. I can access it whenever, that's definitely a massive thing otherwise I would have dreaded to come here...'

- Participant 9

Additionally, students suggested that belonging was tied to: relationships to other Muslim peers, being considered as a Muslim student, and other Islamic-related aspects e.g. learning about or discussing Islam. As such, the way in which the Institution engages with Muslims and Islam (i.e. religious respect) was seen to be important, demonstrating how identity hugely influences sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). The emphasis on this is outlined in the contrasting quotes below:

'...they care about what I have as a Muslim and what my religion says I should have...I do find myself belonging because they have put priorities for my religion.'

- Participant 6

'...there's not really a big Muslim community here... in college I had all of my Muslim friends around me, we'd all go pray together and get excited about Ramadan and things like that but here I can't do that... it's not very diverse here so you don't really feel like you belong...'

- Participant 3

Nevertheless, there was a disparity in students' academic and social experiences, with the former being highly praised and the latter contrasting starkly. Therefore, sense of belonging seemed largely one-sided where students could speak positively about academic and institutional support, and of course content/delivery (especially when lecturers were religiously sensitive and inclusive), yet could not do the same regarding social and extra-curricular activities. This aligns to Asmar's (2005) research on the experiences of local and international Muslim students in Australia where there was a dichotomy between the academic and broader campus environment.

'...with my degree there's quite a few terrorism stuff, it does link with Islam, to a certain extent, and I do feel like some of my lecturers try their best to not offend us...'

- Participant 11

'...there's like few teachers that I look really forward to, kind of like they are my role models if that makes sense, so some of them I really look up to...'

- Participant 2

Student Engagement with Extra-Curricular Activities

Interviewer: *"Have you gone to any student union events or activities?"*

Participant 21: *"Nope, not any at all in my three years"*

Social and extra-curricular engagement was found to be low, with seven students being able to detail what they were doing outside of their course. The article will explore this in the discussion section by looking at a multitude of factors affecting Muslim students.

Students were also asked what 'mattering' meant to them, and whether or not they believed they mattered to the Institution. Though this did generate slightly more ambivalent responses, the majority of students (i.e. 15) believed they did matter, with two students disagreeing and four being unsure (the remaining three students did not provide clear enough responses). Amongst the cohort, 'mattering' equated to value, acceptance, care, respect and worth (similar to Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) definitions on mattering) yet this was largely through their academic experiences (e.g. module evaluation and feedback forms).

'I feel like lecturers appreciate me more and see more potential in me...I'm not aware of the other potential opportunities out there that would make me feel like I'm valued or I matter more.'

- Participant 1

University and Campus Environment

Overall, students reported positive university and campus experiences, with many being complimentary of the Institution as a whole. Students' statements reflected the Institution's strong recruitment pull of an attractive and modern campus, with a relatively small and safe environment.

'I genuinely think it's actually a really friendly place and I think it's really open and welcoming...'

- Participant 7

However, there was a disparity in the experiences of students' belonging to each campus. The King Alfred campus was more favourable than the West Downs campus, and, again, related to the provisions in place – largely for being a Muslim student, and access to support. This preference over the King Alfred campus was mainly due to there being a Muslim Prayer Room. Without one at the West Downs campus, it was

seen as inconvenient and was enough for one student to not use it altogether. This is especially troubling, since the majority of Muslim students (who are a part of the Business, Law and Sport Faculty) would primarily be using the West Downs campus.

'One thing that I found was really hard for students who are studying at West Downs because we've only got Prayer Room in the main buildings...distance is the main barrier which is stopping me to use it...there is nothing actually that has made me feel I'm not getting this benefit there [in West Downs] apart from the prayer room.'

- Participant 17

'I feel there is more advantage here [King Alfred Campus] because there's a full student support service. I feel I don't have much advantage over the services since I spend most of my time in West Downs.'

- Participant 12

On the whole, students did not feel that by being Muslim created any negative difference, though a few students noted instances of indirect discrimination. Though the level of discrimination was low, this shouldn't detract from its worthiness to be explored in which further dimensions will be later discussed. Furthermore, there were interesting antithetical experiences regarding indirect discrimination. Specifically, that the feeling of difference was more palpable in the town centre than it was when on campus.

'...in terms of me feeling comfortable, like I belong here, I think people are really nice even though there aren't that many Muslims, but the other people are nice...'

- Participant 16

'Well, when I first started I did notice when I came on campus I kind of got stared at a lot when you're walking down, and it just made me feel a bit weird because I've never been used to being stared at before...it felt very uncomfortable at the start.'

- Participant 14

'...I haven't felt anything to make me feel like I'm out of place, that's within the university. If I go into the town centre that's a different feel compared to the university, and I've spoken to my friends as well and they all feel the same things...'

- Participant 18

Barriers to engagement

Although half of the students interviewed did not see any barriers to fully belonging as a Muslim student at the Institution, there were several aspects which did seem to constrain it. The biggest factors stemmed from commuting and the salience of university drinking culture. This supported Gilby *et al's* (2011) literature review

exploring the attitudes and experiences of Muslim students at university, who cite several studies that note the difficulties in maintaining contact with non-Muslim students outside of their courses, and to engage in social and student union activities that revolve around alcohol. Therefore, belonging was regarded to be more one-sided (in terms of being academically and not socially sufficient), it was also seen to be conditional in the sense that it was something which could be built upon (i.e. 'I do belong but...').

'Yeah, like I said if I were to live here it would be a complete different experience. I would be able to see and integrate more with the students that live here and stuff like that, and I would be able to experience the clubs, I would have time to do that.'

- Participant 19

Discussion

A demand to engage versus a pervasive university bubble

There were seen to be multiple barriers to engagement, which Figure 2 details below. Any one of the listed barriers are significant in reducing the likelihood to engage i.e. being a commuter (Goddard, 2017), international student (Asmar, 2005) or simply coming from a "non-traditional" background (Wyatt, 2011). However, where it was apparent that participants were occupying a mixture of these factors, meant that Muslim students were further disadvantaged in how they could get involved. This does not imply that the students interviewed were not seeking to engage, in fact the demand to engage was rather prominent and it seemed simply to be that this demand was not being catered to. Consequently, this can have impact upon 'educational outcomes, retention, and attrition' (Seggie and Sanford, 2010:61).

'With the wide range activities at the university, I can participate in many of them if I wished to do so, however, none of them interest me.'

- Participant 24

'...I don't really spend that much time on campus...the social side, there's not much that I can join in with I feel, so maybe having more social activities that Muslims can join in with.'

- Participant 14

'I would want to improve my social experience here... I would really really want there to be something even if it's just like an Islamic Society...'

- Participant 10

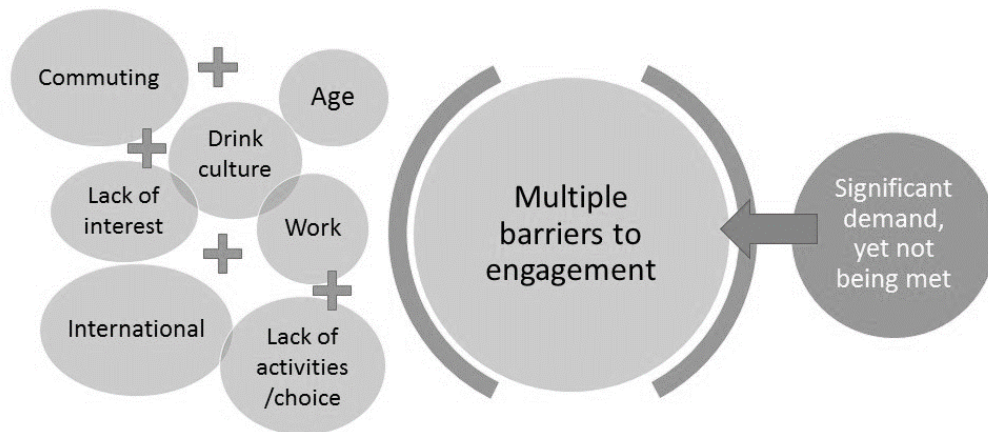


Figure 2 – Multiple barriers to engagement

The most prominent factors that presented barriers were commuting and the lacking choice/interest in activities available. The latter can be linked to this notion of a ‘campus bubble’ (Lowe, 2018) where closed off social networks mean that those outside of the ‘bubble’ (usually non-traditional students) cannot access the same support or opportunities as those students within it. A key aspect contributing to this for Muslim students (which around half of the participants spoke about) was a pervasive drinking culture that led to automatic exclusion, supporting Stevenson’s (2017) claims of alienation felt.

‘...when you go to uni everyone is all about drinking and going out... for the first couple of weeks I didn’t really enjoy uni only because of that, I found it quite hard...’

- Participant 23

‘...it’s a pet hate for me because each activity that I’ve seen lately is all about drink in all of their activities and I’m not really into that, maybe that prevents me from participating in each activity because I would not be relieved in having drinks or having things that I’m not familiar with.’

- Participant 6

This was compounded by the fact that students felt that, as a Muslim, activities or societies were not suitable or inclusive enough. The importance of student societies has been noted by Loader *et al* (2015) and, though they regard this from a more political viewpoint, it brings attention to the social and cultural capital student societies create through being a part of a social network. Therefore, by not belonging to societies, attending student union run events or activities, Muslim students are more disconnected and detached from their institution and peers.

‘...there is a reason why I didn’t really join many [societies]...every single email I got was “if you want to join, you have to come to the pub...and all of these things, it was all very surrounded by like alcohol and that lifestyle...I feel like that is quite unfair [to

both Muslims and non-Muslims]...if you're not in that bubble, they brush you off...they're very "you either do it, or you're boring"...

- Participant 15

The sentiment expressed above highlights an important point regarding both accessibility to engagement and the possibility of indirect discrimination. It should be noted that the majority of students felt comfortable in being a Muslim student at the Institution.

'I think it's like friendly and everything for Muslim students, there's nothing wrong with it...'

- Participant 23

Although instances of discrimination were not widely spoken about amongst students within the cohort, it is still important to regard that it is very much a possibility that Muslim students at any HEI are susceptible to facing. Participant 15 describes individual accounts which detail examples of discrimination from both staff:

'...some teachers can be very rude. I'm not saying this because I'm different or anything, but me and a few of my friends have noticed who are Muslim and Asian...I never complained saying that was why...I did feel she picked on us for that reason.'

And students:

'...the people I lived with they were like "why don't you drink?" they don't understand, they kept saying you're boring, you're this you're that, but in a jokey way so they wouldn't try and offend me. The girls would be like, I'd go out with them during the day and some of them would be like "why don't you wear a dress? Why don't you wear a short dress? Are you ashamed of yourself?" like things like that. I would get picked on because people would notice I wouldn't do certain things.'

Additionally, both Participant 15 and 3 had suggested that this treatment was worse for Muslim students who wore a hijab:

'...I don't get it [inappropriate/discriminatory behaviour] as hard because I don't wear a headscarf, so those who do wear a headscarf 100% get it, they get it 10 times worse than I do ...'

- Participant 3

Participant 14, who wears a hijab, corroborates these claims with her experiences. In this way, as Participant 15 stated, hijab-wearing students can feel *'a little bit more out of the bubble'* and *'very excluded'*. Again, though this was not something that the majority of hijab-wearing participants had divulged (nor was racism an aspect the research choose to directly query), it resonates with a 'hijab effect' which Asmar *et al* (2004:58) noted on an Australian university campus through being a more 'visible

minority'. Although Asmar *et al's* (2004) research also found that students found the off-campus environment as less comfortable, it is stated that further investigation is required to draw firm conclusions about this effect. This is particularly illustrative of the different intersections that sense of belonging can have when regarding Muslim students.

'...no one ever approaches you specifically to talk to you, like 'would you like to go?' and like they always seem to go around you to talk to someone else.'

- Participant 14

The drinking culture was compounded by the fact that activities available were not deemed suitable for students to participate in. This is similar to Jones *et al's* (2002) research where activities at predominantly White institutions were not geared towards students of colour. As such, furthering inclusivity measures would be greatly beneficial.

'...there isn't really anything on offer for us, there's nowhere for us to go specifically because not everyone does want to go and sit in a pub if you don't think that's the right thing to do. That's definitely something we've all felt at [X campus].'

- Participant 18

'...social events which weren't specifically for Muslims but they felt comfortable attending, and then that way they would feel like they belonged more to the university because I do know a lot of girls who don't go to a lot of clubs and societies because they automatically have the same thought as me of 'oh I wouldn't want to come' and actually feel partly excluded...'

- Participant 5

Jones *et al's* (2002:30) research was focussed on American institutions where cross-cultural centres provided BAME students with a 'home away from home' – a space for relaxing and the bringing together of shared identities. As such, having such spaces for comradeship were seen to be important, even contributing to retention.

Group identity – the longing to belong and the desire for religious dialogue

In reference to the demographical makeup of the Institution and the city, there were feelings of slight alienation and isolation. This was perhaps exacerbated by the fact that there is currently no established network to connect with other Muslim peers. It was no surprise that in the face of not having a representative place to belong, students had a strong desire to have an Islamic society. Group identity has been noted as extremely significant for minority ethnic groups in terms of out-of-class engagement, overall development and even retention (Harper and Quaye, 2007), and Muslim students have noted that peer groups are important in establishing one's own

religious commitment (Mubarak, 2007). As such, the significance an Islamic society could provide should not be under-estimated.

'I think it would be good to have a Muslim Society just so we can meet other Muslims from our campus and from the uni in general...'

- Participant 8

'...for me, the only thing that would have something that I could find myself in is if there was an Islamic Society because all people sitting there would have something to share, you know?'

- Participant 2

This desire to connect was prominent not only through participants' statements, but also where the Muslim Prayer Room was holding a dual function of being a centralised place for both worship *and* for socialising.

'I think not having that many activities can be a barrier because in my first year we spent a lot of our time in the Prayer Room because that's where we felt there was a few of us, we could just meet and there it was...'

- Participant 10

'I don't think I've ever been to societies...but then the prayer room, I think that's really nice because you get girls in there and sometimes we just sit for half a day and chat...'

- Participant 16

Due to not being able to engage in societies, there was a relative absence felt by some students whose friends attend institutions that hold more ethnically-inclusive events or have Islamic societies. This suggested that having a network to share "insider knowledge" would be useful as a Muslim student attending the Institution in order to navigate through similar experiences. For example, Participant 17 described how he had searched for two weeks to find somewhere in Winchester that hosts a Friday prayer service (*Jummah*), and Participant 3 spoke about not being able to get into the spirit of Ramadan (*'there's always like a hype for Eid, isn't there?'*) because of the lack of Muslim community and institutional recognition.

'...you know how other universities have ISocs [Islamic Societies] and you hear about what they've been doing... it would just be nice to have those lectures and talks...'

- Participant 9

'...I know at [local city] uni they do in their Islamic Society like lectures and stuff which people attend and I've been to some of them there but I think they should do that here so people can learn from it really, and it can help Muslim students as well as other students so they can learn about faith more.'

- Participant 22

The latter statement exemplifies the worth that an Islamic society would have in bringing together Muslim peers through a common-source identity, but also to bridge the gap between Muslim and non-Muslim students through religious dialogue – a function students were particularly keen about.

'...especially in this political climate and everything, there are a lot of misconceptions about Islam and a lot of people, I didn't realise, thought different things about it. It's just a lot of people aren't educated on it and sometimes they like to be, so it could also be an open thing whether you are a Muslim or not, to have that freedom to have discussion and debates and just kind of be open about the religion.'

- Participant 20

In addition to dispelling harmful stereotypes, there was evidence to suggest that being with other Muslim students would lead to higher forms of engagement. This would be due to the group identity that Harper and Quaye (2007) noted, and not feeling your difference as highlighted below.

'...if you're the only Muslim and you have a society or event that is full of non-Muslims you're going to feel out of place, you know? It happens to me sometimes too, like you're going to be like you don't want to interact too much because I'm so different.'

- Participant 1

'...it would be somewhere where the rest of them [Muslim students] would feel comfortable... because they've got other people who would want to do stuff like that...' (When talking about if she would take part in Pole Fitness within an Islamic society).

- Participant 21

Halal food – a trivial gateway to a higher level of engagement and belonging?

Along with an Islamic society, Halal food was another aspect which suggested to be inhibiting sense of belonging and engagement – 75% of students had mentioned this as an issue in one form or another. The absence of Halal food was seen to act as another automatic form of disengagement and exclusion in that it was leading to academic, social and practical repercussions. It was enough for three students to feel that it was the only barrier to fully belonging for them, and for many to state that if Halal food was provided it would greatly add to a sense of belonging. Therefore, academically, it proved to disrupt studies; socially, it led to students spending less time on campus; and practically, meant students had to strategically think about food, especially where Halal food is extremely limited in the area.

'... I know me and my friends, we don't tend to eat at uni because of that. We go into town and grab something which takes time, which like stops us from studying and going back to the library...'

- Participant 23

'That's one of the main reasons I don't go to the canteen, because there's not Halal food. I usually just go to town and that kind of stuff, that's like the main difficulty I've faced'

- Participant 13

When probed further, students stated that if Halal food was available on campus, they would be more inclined to stay.

'I think that would also make Muslims interact or socialise more. So, say they had more Halal food in the SU shop, they would be more likely to come and eat and people would be more likely to interact...'

- Participant 22

Interviewer: *And if there was more Halal food on campus, do you think that you would be more inclined to stay longer than you do now?*

Participant 21: *Yeah because once I'm out I don't want to come back, as in if I'm going to eat I'm like "ok I'm going home now"...*

'Satisfied settling'

An interesting linguistic discovery became apparent when interviewing students. Though a semantic analysis was not intended, many responses seemed to infer a 'satisfied settlement' of Muslim students' university experiences. This term has been coined specifically out of the research findings, but it could be argued that this could apply to a wider range of students. The article has defined this as:

A mechanism in which (Muslim) students have justified (unconsciously) not having access to a richer and more fulfilled university experience in relation to religious needs.

This notion of 'satisfied settling' was most prominent when students spoke about Halal food and the Muslim Prayer Room (which has been identified as unfit-for-purpose e.g. inaccessible for disabled Muslim students and general size of the room), as illustrated below.

'I reckon they could integrate some Halal food down here, I don't think they have any but I don't think they have many Muslim students still...'

- Participant 4

'...the university canteen doesn't serve Halal food and once, when I spoke about it, they [a canteen manager] were like "there's not that many Muslim students" so they don't feel like they need to do it...so I was like "that's fair enough".'

- Participant 13

'...I think we have to take into account like funding and the requirements that need to be met, like at least they provided a Prayer Room and a washing facility.'

- Participant 12

'...we kind of stay in the study room, there's not really any social space for us to go to and relax during our breaks but we make do with what we have...'

- Participant 18

There were many statements like those above, which demonstrate how Muslim students are consciously justifying why religious needs are not being met. This was performed through being appreciative of even being considered (e.g. having access to a Prayer Room was an achievement in itself), but also recognising that Muslim students are a minority group. As a result, it suggested that Muslim-specific needs did not seem as important due to comprising of such a small minority. This was especially interesting when two students believed that, although Halal food and a more suitable Prayer Room were a practical requirement, it may negatively impact the Institution financially.

Khawaja and Stallman (2011) note a similar occurrence when studying the coping mechanisms used by international students who experience stress entering a new environment. One coping mechanism was to downgrade expectations and to accept the current reality. Despite this research focussing on Muslim students, where both populations are minorities at HEIs, certain parallels can be drawn. This could support Turner's (1994: 356) claim that BAME students can feel like 'guests in someone else's house', perhaps happy to even have a seat at the table.

Recommendations

Though the study has not brought in data on Muslim students' academic attainment, providing an environment where students can fully experience university at the same level of opportunity as their non-Muslim peers, may almost certainly result in positive outcomes regarding retention and success (Tinto, 1993). Though some authors are critical of whether an enhanced social experience would translate into academic

success (Cotton *et al*, 2015), university should be regarded as an all-encompassing experience for students to enjoy and gain from.

Some practical guidance this research can provide to practitioners and/or other HEIs to better improve the Muslim student experience are simple and are based around fostering inclusivity. Firstly, there should be a broader range of intra-university efforts to celebrate (religious) diversity, but also to be more inclusive in their conduct. For example, hosting (and also raising awareness of) events that would appeal to a diverse range of students and being more religiously sensitive (e.g. alcohol-free events).

The notion of group identity seemed to be powerful in determining or drumming up engagement, with students often noting how they would get involved with their Muslim friends or feel comfortable being a part of a group of Muslim students. As such, universities should strive to cater to the requirements and specific desires of a diverse student population.

Additionally, where the salience of religious societies has recently been noted, Islamic societies have been found to be ‘the single most trusted forum among...Muslim students’, often facilitating open discussions of critical issues (e.g. pastoral needs or reporting of hate crime) (NUS, 2018:20). By having a representative space, issues pertaining to Muslim students are then able to be reflected in student union policy (and perhaps even institutional policy).

Conclusions

Given that 24 students had participated in the study, the research was limited in that clear assertions could not be made. Additionally, where the notion of ‘satisfied settling’ is still in its infancy, and students were not directly queried about it, its validity requires further examination from the research team.

The research suggests that, from the cohort of students interviewed, it was clear that the majority of Muslim students felt a sense of belonging to the Institution. This was particularly apparent from positive academic experiences, and therefore affected how students believed they mattered to the university. Core to the notion of belonging was identity, specifically matters correlating to a ‘Muslim identity’ which was apparent through the reiterations of the Prayer Room and the significance it had – both as a space for worship and as a space to socialise where students can ‘*automatically kind of become friends*’ (Participant 5).

It was found that social and extra-curricular participation was low, yet the article is not suggesting that Muslim students are inherently ‘disengaged’ students (which cultural minorities are often branded as, Leask and Carroll, 2011); simply that their demand to engage was not being fulfilled, and that they faced multiple barriers to further engagement. Additionally, some students interviewed displayed many forms of varied engagement at the Institution – Participant 2 is an avid volunteer, Participant 23 was

a Changing Mindsets workshop leader, and Participants 3 and 15 (along with Participant 17) are in the process of setting up their own societies (a Cosplay society and Asian society respectively). A couple of students were aware or had mentioned this potential Asian society, where it was created because ‘there wasn’t anything really for us [South Asian students]’ (Participant 18).

As a result, the most inhibiting factors to further engagement was seen to be: commuting, a “university bubble” characterised around alcohol, and a lack of varied choice that were of interest. This may be why many (if not all) the participants were keen for an Islamic society at the Institution. Given that many students had given viable reasons explaining their low social and extra-curricular engagement, when pressed if students would make time for/go out of their way to belong to an Islamic society (or attend university-held events that interested them), the response was an overwhelming yes. This is significant as it illustrates that there is a definite demand to engage more socially, but where there is nothing in place to satisfy that desire, students are neglected of a more enriching university experience.

As Strayhorn (2012) notes (in reference to Black male college students), encouraging participation in clubs, organisations, and meaningful academic activities and challenging discrimination and racism, would effectively raise sense of belonging. This would also contribute to increased levels of self-importance which is integral to educational success in future life.

In providing a common source place to connect, especially studying at an institution where your difference is all the more highlighted at a predominantly White campus, students can benefit from ethnic societies/organisations that enable involvement and opportunities to connect with those from similar backgrounds (Museus, 2008). Furthermore, though the majority of students spoke positively about their campus experiences, some students spoke about the difference felt off-campus in the town centre. Therefore, the role of the Institution becomes all the more crucial regarding sense of belonging.

The issue of Halal food on campus was extremely prevalent. It was apparent that something as small as readily available food was an influential factor in shaping social, and arguably academic, engagement. Without access to Halal food, students were having to consciously think about where they could eat which often led them off campus. As a result, time spent studying was shortened and some students noted missing lectures or seminars because of this. Though vegetarian options then became the default, it is unfair and unequal to expect students to accommodate their diet all the time. By introducing such provisions could increase levels of academic and social engagement as, when probed further, students would be more likely to spend longer amounts of time on campus.

Overall, the study contrasts against existing literature that detail the negative and extremely alienating experiences of Muslim students in UK HE (though similar findings

were reported in Seggie and Sanford's (2010) research of Muslim American women's campus perceptions at a predominantly Christian research university). As such, the Institution should be commended on their staff and provisions put in place (including a recently-appointed Muslim Chaplain, and Ramadan exam exemptions), and the environment created which has enabled high praise from Muslim students. However, the research has supported claims that though the experiences of minority student populations are improving, they are still not operating at an optimal level (Jones *et al*, 2002). Therefore, institutions should aspire to facilitate and 'involve much more than simply a facility to pray' (Gilby *et al*, 2011: 23), if they wish to ensure that all students, from all backgrounds, are able to engage in the University community.

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