

Exploring Muslim Students' Experiences of Inclusion at the LSE

Muhammad Zainuddin

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Background

This project is a continuation of Sibba Abdelhadi's Change Makers project "An investigation into the experiences of LSE students of faith". This project acts as a natural progression, conducting a more specialised investigation on Muslim students at the LSE. Muslims hold a unique position as a faith group and demographic in the UK, and particularly, in Higher Education (Malik & Wykes, 2018). Abdelhadi's findings and the British Muslim demographic prompts key questions: Do all Muslim students feel comfortable in faith societies and, crucially, do Muslim students feel like they belong outside of these societies; within their classes, or the wider LSE community?

See extended report for research on intersectional discrimination, and inclusion and exclusion in UK university settings.

Methodology

The method for this study serves to build upon Abdelhadi's project (which used a questionnaire), to provide a more nuanced, in-depth qualitative understanding of Muslim student experiences. As such, this study collected qualitative data through the use of two online focus groups. In total there were 8 participants that took part in the focus groups, with all participants identifying as Muslim students at the LSE (3 females, 5 males; 6 UG, 2 PG)

Findings: Feelings of Inclusion/Exclusion

Participants commonly expressed the importance of their Muslim identity and thus, the importance of its inclusion at the LSE.

"We cannot separate our religious identity from our own innate mentality, ideology and values, so to me, being Muslim should be no different to any of the other identities that are normally integrated across the board in any workplace or institution!"

As such, it was also given as the reason why Muslim students don't necessarily feel included

"Our beliefs, our principles are kind of seen as like the other, and everything else is kind of seen as the default"

Nevertheless, the findings indicated that in general, the student experiences of Muslim students were pleasant, but their Muslim identity still affected their inclusion on a university-wide scale. More specifically, social rather than academic inclusion was deemed more of a concern.

"I would say that it (being Muslim) affects social life way more than it does academics."

This echoes Islam et al.'s (2018) research showing that the inclusion of Muslim students at a UK university was one-sided, fuelled predominantly by positive academic experiences.

See the extended report for specific explorations of inclusion in social settings, academic settings, and the broader LSE environment.

Recommendations

In line with priority 3 of LSE 2030 (Developing LSE for Everyone) as well as LSE's EDI objectives, it is incumbent upon LSE to work towards fostering the inclusion of its Muslim students.

Many of the following recommendations that are derived from the above findings seem to echo Abdelhadi's department-level recommendations, which goes to show the added importance of making such changes, and the fact that these issues are still very much prevalent. While many of the recommendations have an LSE-wide focus, specific discussion with the LSE Faith Centre prompted the Free Speech Working Group, LSE Ethics Committee, and EDI Committee as promising avenues to potentially enact such changes, as well as incorporation into department level projects on EDI and decolonisation such as in the PBS Department by Dr Miriam Tresh.

Social Inclusion

*"[A] major challenge that I have faced is the challenge of finding community within LSE"
"I do think being a Muslim student has placed barriers on accessing the same career opportunities as everyone else ... this drinking culture or bar culture, and that genuinely is such a big disincentive from joining those societies and building those networks"*

Almost every concern relating to social inclusion for Muslim students mentioned alcohol and drinking cultures. This served as a major deterrent from Muslim students' engagement in departmental events, SU societies and sports, and even impacted access to senior positions and career networks; despite drinking not being integral to any of these activities.

Recommendations

- Departmental, societal and sports club events or socials should be highly encouraged to be conducted in a neutral setting (i.e., not a pub or bar for example), as suggested by a participant *"in like a neutral setting, even if they still have the drinks, its less of a barrier to attend if its like in a classroom or somewhere else"*
- Departments should host at least one explicitly alcohol-free social event a term, while SU societies

Academic Inclusion

*"One thing I'm very scared about is choosing modules that would require me to talk about my identity or talk about Islam, because I do know there's a lot of negative bias associated with Islam"
"Obviously, if we have more Muslim representation, then people can definitely understand better and be more informed"*

Occurrences of biased and Islamophobic teaching/narratives had lasting negative impacts on Muslim students' academic choices and freedom of speech. As such, Muslim representation in teaching staff was suggested as an important area of concern and considered highly lacking.

Recommendations

- Despite the challenges it presents, increasing Muslim representation within teaching staff is a crucial step for Muslim students' inclusion, as it may tackle other issues that were found, by increasing understanding, reducing Islamophobic narratives, and potentially contributing to more inclusive teaching content.
- Departments such as the philosophy and social policy departments could be prioritised; Essay-based rather than mathematical courses are likely to benefit the most.
- Severe consequences (such as discontinuing their role on a course) need to be made clear for any professors that receive complaints regarding their use of Islamophobic narratives while teaching.

Inclusion in the Broader LSE Environment

"I feel I've been able to practise my faith as much as I want to."

"During Eid or Ramadan, so many people don't even know that Muslims are fasting, or like Eid is happening. And so, there's some sort of ignorance, and I feel like LSE has played a part."

The central issue for Muslim students' inclusion in LSE more broadly was the lack of acknowledgement, awareness or empathy towards Islamic religious obligations, celebrations or events; with scheduling being a particular proponent of the issue.

Recommendations

- Informing departments of Muslim celebrations, and religious obligations with the goal of increasing provisions to accommodate Muslim students and incentivising departmental events to support the Muslim community, as suggested "I do hope loads more departments employ those kinds of things."
- Introducing clear, validated signs of what is halal/not halal in LSE catering/restaurants and providing more halal food options.
- Introducing more options (e.g., online alternatives, recorded lectures) and greater leniency with regards to schedule changes for religious reasons, such as when class schedules interrupt Friday prayer times, or a clause for extension requests during Ramadan.

References

- Islam, M., Lowe, T., & Jones, G. (2018). A 'satisfied settling'? Investigating a sense of belonging for Muslim students in a UK small-medium Higher Education Institution. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 2(2), 79–104. <https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/891>
- Malik, A., & Wykes, E. (2018). *British Muslims in UK Higher Education: Socio-political, religious and policy considerations*. Bridge Institute.