



Building Belonging: Good Practice When Working with Muslim Students – A Reflection on Training

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71957/kg1xmb20>

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Abstract

In order for students to feel a sense of belonging in higher education, particularly students from underrepresented backgrounds, their needs must be met (Vaccaro and Newman, 2016), as doing so effectively has the potential to produce favourable student outcomes and levels of satisfaction in HE institutions (Bowman, Felix and Ortis, 2014). For Muslim students, in particular, positive experiences, sense of belonging, and successful educational outcomes within HE can be accentuated and bolstered through available information, maintained facilities, and accessible resources proactively provided by an institution. The apparent barriers in achieving this level of support and accommodation for Muslim students often amounts to insufficient contextual knowledge and understanding to best accommodate and practically implement considerations. This paper reflects on the origins, delivery, and evaluation of an interactive good practice training workshop that was independently built and delivered consistently over a five-month period to staff, primarily in student-facing roles, from across multiple departments at Lancaster University. Focus remained primarily on contextual knowledge and practical applications for staff when accommodating Muslim students, in particular. The research within the training was informed by the researcher's own lived experience as both a former student of the institution, observations as a staff member through departmental and student-facing work, and conversations with colleagues in various roles across the institution. Importantly, a series of focus groups were held with approximately twenty Muslim students from Lancaster University's Role Model Ambassador programme to best inform this piece of work based on current Muslim student observations and experiences. As a result of the training, practical implementations to support Muslim students have included the adoption of prayer timetables for events, information within Open Day materials, and further conversations on expanding this body of work at a wider



institutional level are currently ongoing. Effectively, attendees have also noted a greater sense of community and shared humanity through the training.

Introduction

The first university in the world was the University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez, Morocco, founded by female Muslim scholar, Fatima Al Fihri. When acknowledging this history, particularly through a decolonial perspective – underpinning the foundation of higher education to its legitimate origin – it would thus be an ode to honour the founder by accommodating the lineage of learners within this space. However, there remains, both within a British context and at an international level, a juxtaposition in Muslim student participation within HE and a positive experience (Possamai et al., 2016).

Belonging is more than a buzzword, but a critical factor impacting students' academic engagement, motivation, persistence, and overall achievement (Allen et.al, 2024). Through the researcher's own experience as a former Muslim student in higher education, working closely with current Muslim students through several widening participation programmes, and catering for pre-entry Muslim students, the gap between inclusive practice from a staff perspective and the impact this has on the student experience through on-campus events and professional opportunities has been heavily observed. The purpose of the training session, which was developed and delivered between March – July 2026 and totalled seven sessions to approximately 80 staff, was thus to bridge the gap between relevant contextual knowledge and practical applications when accommodating for Muslim students. To increase proactive accommodation from an institutional standpoint as well as increase a sense of belonging for current and incoming students, in addition to those of guests and other relevant stakeholders, would address barriers potentially experienced by students who have access to HE but do not feel they belong. Access, participation, experience, and success exists as interconnected facets of the student experience; a positive sense of belonging accentuates each facet to varying degrees.

Origins

The interactive training workshop itself was conceptualised through mutual conversations with colleagues, who manage and run widening participation programmes for young students pre-entry into higher education, in addition to supervising and working with current Student Ambassadors at Lancaster University. Discussions centred around the best ways in which to accommodate Muslim students and proactively bolster inclusive practice, as for



inclusive practice and policy, change is required at both an institutional and individual level to bring about inclusive policy and practice (May and Bridger, 2010). Particularly in relation to areas such as prayer times, dietary considerations, and religious observations like Ramadan and Eid, often being mindful that event itineraries, for instance, would inadvertently omit prayer times, or break times would perhaps be insufficient in length to accommodate for important factors such as prayer.

Current students were also consulted through interactive focus groups, with a voluntary sample taken from Lancaster University's Role Model Ambassador Programme from the Widening Participation department, wherein students detailed their experiences as Muslim students and considerations they would appreciate staff being mindful of. This included, but was not limited to:

- Prayer times, including Friday prayer commitments particularly for male Muslim students
- Ramadan, with less of an emphasis on the general background surrounding fasting commitments, but more emphasis on late nights due to Ramadan night prayers (Taraweeh) and the pre-dawn meal (Suhoor)
- Campus tours including brief tours of religious spaces
- The emphasised modesty of interpersonal exchanges, particularly between sexes
- Authorising absences due to religious commitments, i.e - Eid

Many current students noted that prayer and ablution facilities at Lancaster was one of the primary facets behind their choice in studying at the university, which was also highlighted in the training itself. To bridge the gap between knowledge and practical application was surmountable, particularly when utilising current student experiences.

The Interactive Training Workshop - Delivery

The primary facet of the training workshop centred around practical considerations for on-campus events, run by staff primarily in student-facing roles, for events such as Open Days, residential events, and even day-to-day considerations for current students. In addition to providing examples of contexts within which accommodating Muslim student needs would prove beneficial, contextual information behind religious considerations for Muslims as a whole were also provided to contextualise specific considerations. This included explanations pertaining to why Ramadan and Eid dates change, why the five daily prayers are so important to Muslim students, and the emphasis Islam places on maintaining a greater level of modesty within interpersonal interactions, particularly between sexes. Further situating



these experiences with why students may only self-certify absences the night before Eid, or why Muslim students may not shake the hand of a peer or staff member of the opposite sex, further deconstructed culturally-specific behaviour. A dedicated document enlisting all discussed information with relevant, contextually-specific details was created and distributed to attendees, and will be made available university-wide from the EDI team once final edits have been drafted and executed. Further, to ensure the consistent uptake of inclusive practice across the institution, it is necessary to modify institutional policy and processes, working alongside individuals to promote positive changes to practice and application (insert citation here) highlighting the benefit of providing this training in addition to the shared document soon to be made available institution-wide.

An important detail to emphasise, which was also highlighted during the training workshops, is that Muslim students, and Muslims in general, are not a homogenous group, and that the level of practice of the Islamic faith varies individually. By providing and overtly acknowledging provisions and facilities available, prior to students and guests having to ask or request, choices are thus available, which is a fundamentally significant facet of proactive inclusive practice.

Engagement

As a result of the initial sessions, delivered in March/Ramadan 2026, there was an increase in demand for more sessions to be delivered, culminating in monthly sessions being made available for staff across the university. Individual departments also reached out personally to request the delivery of this content at departmental meetings.

A shared document was also created to include information that was discussed within the presentation itself, further detailing any additional context that would be relevant for practice and any verbalised information from the training absent from the presentation itself, in addition to further examples, comments, and anecdotes that were shared during discussions beyond set training sessions. As aforementioned, this document will be made available from the EDI department shortly.

Evaluation

Whilst formal evaluation is currently being reviewed and collated, a great deal of feedback from attendees noted that the training workshop, as well as the shared document – particularly received by those who were unable to attend any sessions – has bridged the ‘gap’ between knowledge and practical application. Attendees reported generally feeling more



confident in accommodating for Muslim students, and the contextual knowledge provided bridged greater understanding for day-to-day commitments, supporting more proactive considerations for events, workshops, and general student support. The overall approach for the training itself has been developed over time, posing more questions to attendees prior to sharing information in an endeavour to increase attendee engagement and interactivity, and including examples shared by attendees throughout session deliveries to bolster contextually-relevant practice through observed experiences. Selected anonymous feedback is detailed below:

'I often organise events, that I want to be as inclusive as possible, and I know this is an area where my knowledge is limited, so I was excited to see an opportunity to fix this gap, where questions could be asked and answered respectfully, even with my level of ignorance, so I can be more inclusive to the full university community.' – Anonymous, attended March 2026

'I've felt for a long time that there is a lot I don't know about Islam and how Muslims practice their faith. This training was the perfect opportunity to increase my own knowledge so that I could better support the students I work with. Beyond work, I felt very aware of the level of division within British society, and was grateful for the opportunity to broaden my knowledge of Islam and gain a greater sense of understanding and shared humanity with a group of people whose lived experiences are different to my own.' – Anonymous, attended March 2026

'Thank you so much, great to have such an engaging session with a sense of humour and a dash of 1990s charm!' – Anonymous, attended April 2026

Conclusion

Understanding that the Muslim student identity, and the general Muslim experience, is not monolithic, emphasis was placed upon the importance of providing options and choices for Muslim students as a form of good practice itself. The significance of representation and provision, even through actions that would otherwise be considered small or not entirely significant, exhibit powerful affirmations to reassure Muslim students of their entitlement within social, academic, and practical facets within the university space, despite structures that may exist, albeit inadvertently, restricting Muslim students using their voices (Islam, 2020).

Supporting Muslim students within university spaces, an indirect nod to Fatima Al Fihri, the female Muslim founder of what we acknowledge as the contemporary university, supports this international legacy she founded. It is also argued by scholars that inclusive practice in the history of education, as well as contemporary practical applications, would be bolstered



by acknowledging Al-Qarawiyyin and Fatima Al-Fihri's fundamental significance (Mohamed et al, 2026).

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