

MUSLIM WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION: IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES AND PROSPECTS

A SUMMARY REPORT

Dr David Tyrer, Liverpool John Moores University
Fauzia Ahmad, University of Bristol

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A summary report of research supported and funded by European Social Fund (ESF) and Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) under ESF funded research into Muslim women students' experiences of higher education, equal opportunities and graduate employability.

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Liverpool John Moores University
Clarence St
Liverpool
L3 5UG

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INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the findings of a qualitative study of Muslim women's experiences of studying in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) across the UK.

This report highlights how Muslim women, through their participation in university, challenge dominant stereotyped assumptions prevalent in both the literature and institutions, about the lives of Muslim women and their families. It documents how their participation not only acts to de-mystify university life, but in focusing on Muslim women as academic achievers, shows how Muslim women can act as role models for other women. It also documents a number of areas of concern around careers advice and recruitment into higher education and the ways racist stereotypes of Muslim women impact on their daily lives.

Previous research on South Asian families in Britain has already shown that education and the securing of academic qualifications is highly valued (refs). However, the relatively lower rates of higher education participation amongst Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in comparison to women from other South Asian backgrounds have led some commentators to conclude that 'culture', religion and patriarchal constraints (or 'purdah') play instrumental roles in restricting Muslim women's educational and economic participation. Recent research exploring these discrepancies suggest that the issues are more complex and cannot be reduced to single, monocausal factors (Brah, 1993, 1996; Dale et al, 2002; Archer, 2002; Ahmad et al, 2003).

The work outlined in this report therefore seeks to address a significant gap in the literature on Muslim women in Britain. The stories outlined here are inspirational and serve to challenge dominant stereotyped assumptions prevalent in both the literature and institutions, about the lives of Muslim women and their families.

Previous work by Ahmad (2001, 2006b) with Muslim women studying in London was among the first to explore the motivations, experiences and identities of Muslim women in higher education and the impact of these experiences on Muslim women's religious and cultural identities, their subsequent relationships with their families, and personal attitudes towards relationships. This work also sought to problematise the reductionist discourses of 'modern' and 'traditional' often used to frame accounts of Muslim women.

This ESF funded study based at Liverpool John Moores University and led by Dr David Tyrer, has explored a number of similar themes at a national level, but in addition has sought to explore the implications of Muslim women's experiences for the development of 'joined-up' Equal Opportunities in higher education, and the impacts of these experiences on their future employability. This work was funded in particular to explore the impact of institutional issues such as routine institutional activities on the experiences of Muslim women students and their subsequent employability. It also involved exploring Muslim women's motivations, experiences, and identities, from pre-enrolment (for example, recruitment and admissions) through to post-graduation (such as job-seeking or further study). This was based on work with students studying in universities in

Liverpool, Manchester, Bradford, Birmingham and London. This work illustrates the extent through which universities and their various routine functions, impact on the lives of Muslim women students in a range of ways including their employment outcomes and contribute to the wider racial gendering of the labour market. It also points to the ways in which Muslim women students seek to centre their own agency and resist the institutionalised discourses that structure their experiences of university and the graduate labour market. Finally, the work underlines the need for clear 'joined up' strategic work on Equal Opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology was divided into three inter-related stages and spanned the period September 2004 – March 2006.

Stage One involved the distribution of 900 questionnaires distributed to ethnically diverse students at Freshers fairs and direct approaches across universities based in the regions under study. These sought to ascertain basic demographic details such as degree studied, family background, pre-school experiences for example. Despite providing self-addressed envelopes, the questionnaires yielded a very low response rate (less than 100 completed returns) and were poorly completed.

After small modifications, the questionnaires were administered to 60 Muslim women students across the ten universities under study identified by a small team of interviewers. The questionnaires were used to inform Stage Two of the research which involved a series of detailed semi-structured interviews with Muslim women students. These interviews lasted between 1 hour to 75 minutes and were transcribed.

The interviews covered details such as Muslim women's pre-university experiences at schools and Further Education (FE) colleges and levels of encouragement and expectations from institutions and families towards higher education and employment. The presence of role models and peer groups, attitudes towards marriage and employment, and personal aspirations were also covered. In addition, the interviews explored experiences of higher education, including any instances of discrimination, expression of identities, and perceptions of university ethnic monitoring and equal opportunities schemes.

Respondents ethnic origins ranged from South Asian ethnicities (Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi) to African, African-Caribbean and Arab.

Respondents were aged between 19 and 26. The majority were under-graduates studying for a wide range of degrees. A small proportion were post-graduates or in employment.

Stage Three represented a further layer of interviews with 12 women from Stage Two and a further 33 Muslim women, including some already in employment, making a total of 45 interviews. These interviews focused on identifying obstacles in the graduate labour market, unpicking attitudes towards barriers to accessing careers services, employability issues, Muslim women's perceptions of their roles in terms of domestic obligations, the labour market, and the impact of marriage on their employment. These interviews asked women to describe positive and negative experiences of education and the workplace including any experiences of sexism, racism and Islamophobia. Women were also asked to respond to a number of 'culturalist' explanations (based on examples from the published literature) for Muslim women's performance in education and the labour market.

Stages Two and Three then resulted in a total of 105 interviews with Muslim women.

The majority of women interviewed in both projects came from what were described as 'working class' backgrounds where both parents had received school level education in the country of origin or came from predominantly rural backgrounds. A few however, spoke of extended families in the UK and country of origin where several relatives possessed degree level qualifications and where female relatives in particular, were in professional employment. For many women and their families, higher education held both personal and social significance regardless of social class or parental background.

A small selection of interviews (30) were also conducted with practitoners employed in the HE sector in areas such as service delivery, careers, equal opportunities and recruitment for their views on university equal opportunities policies and practice. A particular emphasis was placed on speaking to those with designated responsibilities related to equal opportunities.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Routes into Higher Education

Muslim women students in this study entered HE through a variety of routes. A large number resided in areas of high Asian and Muslim concentration that were socially deprived across all social indicators and attended comprehensive schools. Schools and colleges in these areas on the whole, lacked resources to prepare students for university or make them aware of educational opportunities.

A few women in the study had not entered university through the 'A' level route, but had pursued vocational routes through studying for BTEC Diplomas for instance. Muslim women as a whole in the study were also likely to attend local post-1992 'new' universities (Modood, 1998; Shiner and Modood, 2002; Archer, and Leathwood, 2003; Connor, Tyers, Modood, and Hillage, 2004; Modood, 2006).

As several other studies are also highlighting, the presence of Muslim women in higher education and the diverse routes they follow in order to enter university, contradicts problematic discourses that suggest that Muslim women's educational choices are limited due to cultural or religious reasons. In a similar vein, as Archer (2002) notes, the issue of Muslim young people's post-16 choices is one that is located within the production and reproduction of gendered inequalities that are inextricably linked to gendered and racialised Muslim identities.

Expectations from schools and colleges

Basit's (1997) research on young Muslim women in schools and their career and personal aspirations discussed education as a vehicle for social mobility, but also noted how the stereotyped attitudes of many teachers and careers advisors towards Muslim women schoolgirls influenced the nature of the advice they gave. Respondents in this study from areas of high Asian concentration where schools and FE colleges were poorly resourced, also spoke of little encouragement and preparation for higher education. This, coupled with student's lack of awareness of educational opportunities contributed to an environment within some schools and colleges of under-achievement. For instance:

Umm, I know my dad, he wants me to be a teacher, because he thinks it's a really good job and I agree with him because it's like, it's not just about getting money and everything. You are teaching other people and coz I know in the secondary school that I went to, there was no encouragement that much, I mean apart from a few subject areas, there wasn't that much encouragement. And especially kids, when they all have the same mentality and they're all speaking to each other, if they don't want to go to college, the other friend might think, 'oh I'm not going to go either'. But if someone is there to explain to them you know, this is what options are available to you, even if you don't want to study, you can go into training or you can go into this scheme and do this, you know there are these other training options

available where you can go to college one day a week and work the rest of the time.

(Sadeeqa, 20, Business Economics and Multimedia, Bangladeshi)

However, some women were able to cite one or two teachers or FE lecturers who demonstrated high levels of commitment towards students or pointed to examples of university outreach programmes geared towards Muslim women which have proved to be influential as Sadeeqa highlighted while at FE college:

I went to this, kind of like a summer programme. It was for 2 weeks, the people it was aimed at were Asian Muslims to go onto higher education, and to encourage us to think about going onto higher education. It really motivated me because they actually brought in a couple of Muslim women who actually graduated or who were in university in their 3rd year and they talked about their experiences and how it was like at university, and also what motivated them to go onto university, and I just thought to myself you know, if I stop here now I'll probably just work and then what would I do? I wouldn't have that many options. If I go onto university, maybe I can become a teacher or take on a masters or do a PhD or something like that and take my studies further and then probably, because that way you know that you've got the knowledge to pass it on to someone else as well.

(Sadeeqa, 20, Business Economics and Multimedia, Bangladeshi)

Students from schools in deprived areas spoke of their experiences of university in terms of 'difficult transitions' and described how they felt unprepared by their schools for the independent study required at degree level. They also felt a 'lack of support' from some university lecturers who did not appreciate how their socioeconomic circumstances impacted on their experience of higher education. Examples cited were lecturers who would not take the time to explain poor assignment results adequately.

The gendered and racialised nature of Muslim women's pre-university experiences are therefore linked to routes taken into higher education. These are significant in influencing how Muslim women experience higher education and their expectations of university. They are also likely to influence the choices students perceive as available to them in terms of subjects studied and universities attended (Modood and Shiner, 1994), further post-graduate study options and future career and labour market prospects.

Caring Responsibilities

A few women had additional caring responsibilities that they learnt to work around while studying for a degree, or as one respondent put it, 'learn how to juggle and lead a dual life'. For some married respondents this represented care for young children and could act to temporarily delay entry into higher education. Other women spoke of having to care for elderly or ill parents. In these circumstances, women's choices around university location and mode of study were influenced by the extra care demands on their time.

It is significant to note that care responsibilities, marriage, and the presence of young children did not prevent Muslim women from taking up degree courses. As Ahmad et al (2003) show in their London-based study, many women with child care responsibilities waited until their children were old enough to be cared for in crèches or left their children in the care of close relatives while they attended university. Again, for many women interviewed in these situations, their families and husbands were keen to support their higher education aspirations.

This re-iterates the need for educational and career professionals to re-evaluate mis-conceptions about Muslim women, marriage and motherhood that suggest that married Muslim women's movements are restricted by husbands and inlaws. It points instead to a need to recognise diverse needs and to look towards ways of improving university facilities and provisions to better assist and encourage students with caring responsibilities from all backgrounds to take up higher education opportunities.

The role of family in Muslim women's higher education

Some existing discourses of South Asian and Muslim family structures situate them as inherently oppressive and as presenting barriers to women's participation in higher education and the labour market. These rely on discourses of 'degradation and despair' and tend to present racialised and pathological accounts of ethnic minority families, especially 'arranged marriages' (for a detailed critique see Ahmad, 2006a). However, echoing some other studies, the empirical data gathered here demonstrates how many Muslim women cited their families as key sources of encouragement and motivation towards higher education study and in thinking about future careers. As one of the respondents, Noor, said in identifying her family and school teachers as being important sources of advice, 'We have enough fun!'.

Women also discussed how higher education acted to enhance social mobility and status for themselves and their families, but also how degree status influenced other personal factors such as marriage and work choices.

Parental encouragement

The research found that Muslim women spoke of their parents as often sharing in their educational and career aspirations. Women cited several reasons for entering higher education; these ranged from personal interest, career aspirations, financial stability, personal independence, and greater respect and choices when thinking about marriage.

Although for some there may have been disagreements over the choice of subject studied at degree level and the university (not prestigious enough, or disagreements over location), the core aim of degree attainment was shared by many women and their parents. This represents one of the report's key findings and is supported by other research on Muslim women where educational

aspirations were shared by parents who promoted a 'family expectation' to achieve academically (Afshar, 1989a, 1989b; Brah and Shaw, 1992; Brah, 1993; Basit, 1997; Ahmad, 2001, Ahmad et al, 2003):

I think my parents tried to give us what they didn't have so they would, I knew kind of they'd like me to do 'A' levels and like me to do degree. I think they'd probably like me to do like a degree where I'd have a good job and this and that, but I don't think I'm mentally capable anyway of like doing anything like medicine or stuff like that. So yeah, probably that's why I wanted, but not really no, they don't really mind what I do, if I said like I want to leave uni and have a job they'd be fine or anything really yeah.

(Latifa, 20, Arab and Islamic Studies student, Moroccan-English)

Oh yeah you've got to have a first no less, you know it's like it's how it's always been at GCSE, you've got to have all 'A' star's at 'A' level you've got to have all 'A's' and it's just that element.

(Jehan, 19, Geography student, Pakistani)

As several other studies have highlighted, parents were keen to see their children achieve in high prestige professions such as medicine, dentistry, pharmacy or law and, as noted by Modood et al (1997), Dale et al (2002) and Ahmad et al (2003), have potential for self-employment:

Family, er, typical Asian mentality, you know, obviously their first choice was for me to be a doctor, so was not happening, never interested in it from day one. I don't think they recognise - my parents, not my brothers and sisters - I don't think they recognise like careers beyond the main domain, like doctors, dentistry, optometry, ok if you've not got that, at least pharmacy, but I think they got used to it because none of my brothers or sisters, they didn't go into these fields so they kind of learnt ok we have to live with this. As long as, to be honest, if I have got a stable career they don't mind.

(Aisha, 22 Accounting and Finance Bangladeshi)

In some instances, parental and family expectations were perceived by some women as 'pressure' to achieve academically.

Earlier work by Ahmad (2001, 2006b, and Ahmad et al, 2003) has previously highlighted the significant and encouraging role many South Asian Muslim women attributed to *their fathers* in their higher education aspirations. The LJMU study also found a large proportion of Muslim women citing their fathers as key sources of motivation and encouragement:

I think it's, I suppose it's just from my dad, I think he just, I think he feels coz I've been through so much in education that it would pay off if I had a really

¹ Older, alternative forms of education should also be acknowledged. For instance, while older women (mothers and grandmothers) may be academically illiterate, most would be able to read the Qur'an in Arabic (though not necessarily understand it). Similarly, learning at seminaries or madrahsahs may equip people with critical and analytical skills, which can be passed onto children.

good job that pays really well, things like that, but umm, that's about it, it's just from my dad. ...I suppose my dad, I think he encourages me to study, I think with my dad, it's like what would I do if I didn't study? Which is fair enough...

(Zubeda, 20, Mathematics with Business Management student, Bangladeshi)

The nature of encouragement from parents is indicative of the high symbolic and practical value many had for higher education, which contrast with a number of stereotyped notions about Muslim families.

Role Models and Peer Groups

Several women cited a number of female family members as role models when thinking about educational and personal success. For instance Razia, who identified her Army Colonel aunt in Pakistan as a key female role model, spoke of a complex mixture of expectation, support, motivation, and pressure from her family to do certain things:

Well with my family I'm really lucky, my family are very educated, I mean they are all in Pakistan but you know, there's doctors, there's ladies in the army and there's my auntie, she's a Colonel and although she's now moved to America, she's still working there. ...My dad's siblings are doctors; this came to me that in that sense there is a little indirect pressure (laughs). It's like you know, everybody in my family are so educated, highly educated so it did feel that all...

(Razia, 19, Psychology student, Pakistani)

Other role models frequently cited were sisters or female relatives who had graduated and were in professional employment, and teachers and lecturers.

Peer groups and localities were also found to be influential. Schools and colleges in areas which were described as 'relatively impoverished' were less likely to prepare young people for higher education entry. In areas such as Bradford and Manchester where a number of respondents received their schooling, many women highlighted how little support they received from their schools or FE colleges with their degree aspirations and how few students considered university as a viable option. Amongst familial networks, where a 'culture of academic achievement' was not already in existence, the entry by one or two women into university could act to encourage and motivate other young women and their parents into considering higher education. In this sense, the entry into higher education of women who, as Ahmad et al (2003) and Ahmad (2006b) describes as 'pioneer women' acted to demystify the university experience and signalled its accessibility to Muslim women.

Marriage Choices and Employment Prospects

Previous work by Brah and Shaw (1992) and Brah (1996) has indicated that some employers may be hesitant about employing Muslim women because of assumptions that Muslim women are only likely to be temporary employees before getting married or having children. During the research interviews, students were asked whether they thought marriage would impinge on their employment choices and prospects. The majority responded by stressing their right to choose whether to work or not after marriage.

Shagufta's attitude to formal employment echoes several other women in this study and earlier studies on South Asian women and employment (Dale, et al, 2002; Ahmad et al, 2003). In viewing work in the formal economy as a choice, Shagufta highlights instead, the value and meaning her education carries. In the following extract, she stresses her primary desire to exercise her right *not to work* and to use her education instead for the benefit of her future family, citing the economic independence of the Prophet's wife as an example:

I think personally, I'd rather do the housewife thing because it's very rewarding actually raising children and teaching them about Islam. For me I think that would be the best thing, but if need be financially, if we needed a 2nd income then yeah I'd work, I wouldn't have a problem with that. I mean if you look at, you know how I was mentioning earlier on the role models and why our role models can't be Muslim, if you look at Khadija, the wife of the Prophet [Muhammad, pbuh], she was a business woman, so there's nothing wrong with me being married and working. It's just a stereotype that people have that once you're married you're automatically a housewife, that's it you're bound by that.

(Shagufta, 20, Islamic Studies student, Pakistani)

This extract illustrates some of the subtle but clearly articulated ways in which Muslim women, well aware of the power of stereotypes, chose to subvert certain restrictive representations. In Shagufta's case, she refused to let stereotypical representations of her as a Muslim woman, define her identity and life choices.

Few women spoke of any 'pressure' to get married from their families, but as Ahmad et al's (2003) work has shown, women spoke instead of how the attainment of a degree could enhance their marital prospects and choices. Some women did express concerns that they risked becoming 'too educated' for prospective suitors and pointed towards difficulties experienced by other women looking to get married (Ahmad, 2001 and ibid).

A small proportion of women experienced difficulties or tensions from their families in entering higher education but as detailed analysis of their accounts show, these cannot be attributed to any single factor and need to be viewed in terms of familial dynamics and local social contexts. Tensions tended to exist instead around parental expectations for their daughter's careers (a feature shared by parents from all backgrounds not just Muslim) and expectations around university experiences.

Experiences of higher education

Respondents' experiences of universities were extremely diverse, although there was a shared emphasis on the complex interplay between the role of institutionalised factors in shaping their experiences, and their own agency in seeking to resist this and make something of university life for themselves. For example, Aisha noted that she felt other people tended to categorise her in very specific ways that impacted on her social experiences of university life by describing how she felt she was perceived as 'alien':

How do you think people perceive you at the university? From lecturers to classmates to other students?

As an alien on my course.

What about people from the same ethnic or religious background?

That's also alien, but a different type of alien (laughs). Like a certain, the Muslims on my course, like they are mainly guys and you can't really tell from the outside if the guy is a Muslim or not, with me you can because I wear the *hijab* and I think they think they have got to behave different to me, like be on their best behaviour, and even though they might be talking to girls out on the street and on the course, they won't want to speak to me because 'oh she's religious, stay away from her'.

(Aisha, 22 Accounting and Finance Bangladeshi)

To Noor 'race' again figured as significant since "people do tend to stick with their community" and noted:

Sometimes I do feel like going and saying 'hi' but then you, they would think I'm the most weird person on the planet... the fact that there are no Muslims on my course makes it even worse. I think it should be more easier to actually go, if you see someone you think, 'yes, they might be friendly', then just go up and say 'hi' and not have the 'get away from me' thing.

(Noor, 19, Disaster Management and Technology, Indian)

It was unsurprising, therefore, to find that one of our respondents had selected her university when applying because of its reputation for having a large and vibrant student Islamic Society organising and holding events. The Islamic Society proved therefore to be more than just about organising Friday prayers and holding religious talks but actually an important social network that enhanced many respondents' experiences of life in university. To Shanaz, the centrality of bars and pubs in university social life created some barriers although the diversity among her fellow course mates made it easier to mix and be accepted:

In tutorial groups we have different members of people from different backgrounds, so in that case it helped me to interact.

(Shanaz, 19, Psychology, Pakistani)

In other instances, respondents who had been treated more inclusively by course fellows were generally eager to report their good experiences, particularly if these

had seen them included in various social events including some that were modified so as not to exclude them.

With their wide range of courses of study, and their differing backgrounds and preferences, respondents presented a picture of their lives at university as a complex interplay of factors, balancing and negotiating their positions and responsibilities as students, daughters, friends, classmates. Respondents experiences of university life were gendered and racialised by these diverse experiences but also by the ways in which university structured their access to space provisions, networks and opportunities.

However, it must be emphasised that despite this, respondents did present a 'victim' focus to their experiences, but rather illustrated their agency and, in many cases, strength of character. A number of interviews were extremely rich in irony and humour as respondents spoke about their lives in university. Interviews were also rich in detail about respondents' social lives, particularly about the importance to them of mixing with a diverse range of people.

To some of our respondents, being understood and accepted for their social preferences often came to mean finding other friends from minority backgrounds who would accept them without expecting them to justify or explain themselves. For example:

Most of the people which I interact on a daily basis are Muslim coming from similar backgrounds. My mum's friends and my friends come around and therefore we've got a nice community, where you feel safe.

(Nasreen, 24, Kashmiri, Social Policy)

For other respondents, finding white British friends who were able to understand and respect the social choices they make (particularly if these choices involved rejecting alcohol), was also something they appreciated. Respondents also reported a range of social activities open to them which did not revolve around 'pubbing and clubbing': going for meals — and a number of respondents demonstrated considerable in-depth knowledge of *halal* city centre restaurants to visit — or cups of coffee, general conversation and relaxing, attending Islamic Society events, going to the cinema, going shopping, or just 'hanging out'.

Very few respondents raised student fees as a significant issue for them during the course of the interviews. Some practitioners were asked about the impact of top-up fees on students from poorer working class backgrounds, ethnic minorities and Muslim women in particular. While some practitioners highlighted greater financial hardship for some students, the responses were mixed.

Students' perceptions of racism

The research provided ample reasons to believe that racism persists within the Higher Education sector, and that it continues to structure many people's experiences of university. There was evidence of far-right white racist activities in some universities (along with claims of institutional inertia in dealing with the

problem), allegations of racist discrimination by universities (including some which made the national press), and localised instances of racist behaviour (ranging from examples of graffiti through to classroom incidents).

During interviews, we uncovered a number of further examples specific to universities in which respondents were studying. In one example, a staff member based in a university careers service, reported an informal policy of denying service to international students enacted through a process of checking the names of students signing up for appointments and workshops and weeding out those with "foreign" sounding names. It was unclear whether this arrangement was management-led and service-wide, or restricted to the staff member who reported it and her close peers.

Other instances reported included incidents such as verbal harassment, racial abuse against a university staff member by a colleague, and a range of subtle forms of institutionalised discrimination and favouritism. What remains to be seen is how our Muslim women student respondents perceived and experienced racism and its cognates such as Islamophobia, and what structures exist within universities for combating these problems.

During the first stage of the LJMU fieldwork, respondents were asked to indicate whether they felt racism and Islamophobia respectively would be tolerated in their university and, separately, whether they felt that these would be tolerated in their students' unions. Two clear patterns emerged. First, very few respondents reporting feeling that Islamophobia would not be tolerated either in their university or students' union. Second, students were more likely to report feeling that racism, rather than Islamophobia, would not be tolerated by their universities and student union's (see below).

Respondents in universities with good records of well-supported Muslim involvement in students' unions (for example, with Muslim elected officers) were most likely to report feeling that Islamophobia would not be tolerated in their students' unions. Similarly, respondents who reported having been consulted by their universities in the development and delivery of Equal Opportunities work, or who reported greater levels of knowledge of institutional Equal Opportunities work having been provided to them, were more likely to report feeling that Islamophobia and racism would not be tolerated in their respective universities.

Therefore, respondents' abstract perceptions of vulnerability to racism and Islamophobia were related to their experiences within and outside university. For example, Yasmin's feelings of being at risk of racism were related to incidents she had been subjected to. Institutional factors such as timetabling, had an impact on these incidents:

Early lectures and late lectures were very hard for me because I feel I have to think of my own security and my own safety, and there is a high risk of me being attacked and I face verbal abuse every day. ...It's not to do with the colour of my skin, I don't think - it's only since I've been looking like a Muslim. The way I dress, that's what triggers it off.

(Yasmin, 24, Sociology and Public Policy Management, Pakistani)

This illustrates the extent to which routine institutional activities such as timetabling can severely impact on the experiences of students, particularly those at risk of racism and other hate crimes.

Experiences of Islamophobia

Experiences of Islamophobia reported by respondents varied very greatly, and covered many aspects of university life. By far the most common manifestation reported by respondents was verbal abuse and harassment although other variants ranged from: regularly facing irritating racist questions; being expected to act as spokespeople for Muslims and Islam; reading racist representations of Muslim women in set course texts, to being subjected to a wider general atmosphere of hostility particularly in the wake of 9/11.

While almost two-thirds of our respondents reported feeling that racism and sexism respectively would not be tolerated in their universities, only one in three reported feeling that Islamophobia would not be tolerated in their universities. At the same time, Muslim women's narratives highlighted the extent to which those who wear hijab are immediately more recognisable in the university as Muslims, and thus more vulnerable to racialised and gendered stereotyping:

I think that a lot of people, a lot of Muslim women are intimidated when they come to campuses because a lot of people just sort of jump into your face because either they have never seen women before or a woman in a headscarf before and they wanna know what's going on and it's quite intimidating, you know. I think it's quite intimidating because I find that you have to be defensive quite a bit, you know. You are meeting someone and generally the first that they ask is 'how do you do?' or 'what's your job?' or blah blah, but with me it's, you know, 'hi, how do you do?' and 'what's that thing on your head?' So I expect it and it's absolutely fine, but you know on the odd day when you just don't want to deal with it, and somebody comes out with it, it's like, 'God man, it's a piece of material, just get used to it!' (laughs)

A significant number of accounts highlighted experiences of anti-Muslim racism linked to the *hijab*, which was seen by some respondents to mark women who wear *hijab* as alien, non-liberal, or oppressed in the eyes of racists.

Instances of the forms of anti-Muslim racism and harassment reported by respondents covered subjection to verbal abuse travelling to and from university, abuse within the university, in teaching situations, and during a job held by one respondent while studying. During the period of the research, the project team

was also made aware of two examples of Muslim university staff members whose relatives had been subjected to humiliating and degrading treatment by the police when using public transport. One of these cases involved a blind Muslim man being hauled off a train and interrogated.

Respondents' accounts illustrate how gender inflects anti-Muslim racism. While Islamophobia is frequently discussed in gender-blind ways, the emphasis placed on *hijab* by many of our respondents in their discussions of Islamophobia suggests clear gendered dimensions to anti-Muslim racism. *Many respondents reported feeling that men and women experience Islamophobia in different ways* and this was linked to their greater visibility as Muslim women wearing the hijab. To many of our respondents, this marked Muslim women as particularly vulnerable to anti-Muslim racism while, to others, stereotypes about Muslim women's passivity (particularly if wearing *hijab*) was seen to render Muslim women as ideal subjects against whom to enact anti-Muslim racism.

To others, hijab-wearing Muslim women could also be targeted because they were seen as more visually "threatening" than Muslim men as it was more difficult for the 'Muslimness' of such women to be mistaken, denied, or concealed. Finally, while Muslim men may often be represented as being more overtly criminalized or violent, respondents felt that Muslim women would be more likely to be represented as oppressed and subservient.

University structures for combating anti-Muslim racism

Despite the plethora of examples of Islamophobia offered by respondents. serious problems have emerged around university structures for combating anti-Muslim racism. These reservations cover three areas. First, interviews with university and students' unions staff raised issues and concerns about general Equal Opportunities structures. Some respondents felt that many universities prefer to structure Equal Opportunities work through their Human Resources departments and "fob off" students to their Students' Unions. While the commitment of union staff was noted by a number of respondents, concerns were raised that the turnover of elected officers may undermine the consistency of services provided, while resources and experience may also be lacking. Given the historically mixed relationships between unions and Muslim students in some universities (see, for example, Tyrer 2004), further difficulties could emerge. Concerns were therefore raised about university Equal Opportunities work being treated by some institutions as primarily a staffing-related issue and being structured in ways that prevent Equal Opportunities practitioners from fulfilling their universities' responsibilities towards students.

Second, concerns were also raised about broader approaches toward Equal Opportunities work that emphasise cultural diversity but fail to pay adequate attention to the problem of racism. These concerns manifested in reports by Muslim women of being subjected to anti-Muslim stereotyping and treated unequally even in universities that have gained attention for the supposed quality of their provisions for Muslim students. Based on the accounts of some of our

respondents, university policies covering religious needs were not always capable of guaranteeing 'bare minimum' standards of treatment let alone countering anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination.

Third, concerns were raised by some about a reported unwillingness of universities to acknowledge and address racism by name. This was most clearly exemplified by the absence of any reference to Islamophobia in any of the Equal Opportunities policy documents of all the universities attended by respondents.

Meeting Muslim women students needs

The importance of meeting Muslim women students' needs should not be reduced merely to providing prayer rooms or *halal* food, although these are very important provisions (see below). Not all Muslim women practice their faith in the same ways or to the same extent; whereas to one person access to a prayer facility may be particularly important, this may not be a concern to another person who may choose to pray elsewhere or, indeed, not pray at all. The most important factor to take into account when meeting the needs of Muslim women students is that there is no singular way of understanding or categorising Muslim women students and their needs. Muslim women students should be understood based on the needs that they express rather than being assumed to present with the same range of needs as other Muslim women. Some areas worth considering are described below.

Residential field trips can pose certain issues around the organisation of accommodation and fieldtrip team activities (single- or mixed-sex), availability of food, access to facilities for prayer and ablution (wudhu), and even in some cases whether or not mahram or 'chaperone' can attend with a Muslim woman student. Universities have a responsibility to sensitively identify the needs of all students in advance in such a way as to ascertain students' needs. Wider practices through which disability needs are established can be adapted to ensure that particular religious needs are also identified and met.

Student accommodation may also raise a range of provision issues and needs including whether individual students may prefer, for religious reasons, single- or mixed- sex flats, staircases, or halls, and whether *halal* food is available in catered halls. Needs such as these may well vary from individual to individual but can also vary according to the time of year. For example, it was suggested during fieldwork that *Ramadan* can present additional responsibilities for some students who may have extra domestic responsibilities such as cooking throughout the month. Students may also be required to break their fasts at specified points in the day and in many cases say a short prayer at the same time. They might therefore legitimately request that lecturers permit them some flexibility to ensure that they are able to meet these responsibilities. Major religious festivals also pose their own challenges; for example, students should be permitted to rearrange assessments scheduled to clash with *Eid* and to miss lectures falling on these dates. Best practice in meeting diverse needs such as these would involve the development of policies on religious and cultural diversity to delineate the

particular needs and responsibilities of students and the university, and clarifying the stages through which particular provisions can be claimed (Gilliat-Ray, 1999).

Universities can also undertake capacity building work to good effect. A strong example of work such as this is offered by one northern university, which in the 2006-2007 year has continued to actively participate in the 'Outlook' mentoring project. The university has organised a residential weekend for Muslim schoolgirls to raise awareness and confidence about university. It has also organised a three day training programme on management skills for Muslim students involved in Islamic Societies in partnership with the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS). In another example of flexible and proactive practice, one university counselling service publicises the availability of Black and Minority Ethnic women counsellors for any woman from a Black and Minority Ethnic background who feels that they would prefer to speak to staff members with experience, empathy and cultural sensitivity. Similar practices were reported in several careers services; respondents highlighted very positively careers services that they had access to in which specialist projects were running to work with Black and Minority Ethnic students to help address the barriers they face to graduate employment. Again, the key to the success of practices such as these is not to assume that a Muslim woman student would necessarily wish to access a particular provision, but rather to acknowledge the differentiation among Muslim women students by making particular provisions available and publicised so that individuals can choose for themselves whether to access a particular service.

Working to better meet the needs of Muslim women students arguably involves reinforcing the flexibility of the university and could be argued to improve the university for *all* people. Moreover, it also helps to recognise in both symbolic and practical ways the presence of Muslim women students and the legitimacy of their support needs. More effectively meeting the needs of Muslim women students can also break down barriers and misconceptions and counteract the experience of being Othered that many women spoke of. It can reinforce the legitimacy of their needs, debunk assumptions, myths and stereotypes, and send out the message that the university is committed to ensuring that Muslim women students are treated equally.

Prayer facilities

Access to prayer facilities varies greatly across the higher education sector. In some institutions, prayer rooms are specifically for the use of Muslim students, whilst in other cases they are designated as multi-faith facilities although in practice tend to be used predominantly by Muslim students. Some universities have made multiple prayer rooms available to their students whilst others have failed to offer adequate praying facilities at all. There are still cases of some universities asking Muslim students for large sums of money, in some cases in excess of £100,000, in order to fund their own prayer rooms. Finally, in some institutions, Muslim students have been reported to be left responsible for the

cleaning and general maintenance of prayer rooms, whilst other universities have been more willing to meet their responsibilities towards cleaning, maintenance, and health and safety in university prayer rooms.

The problems posed by this inconsistency across the higher education sector are exacerbated by further complexities emerging from localised institutional politics, with the official institutional version of events in terms of prayer room provision in some cases at odds with what was actually happening. For example, a Students' Union executive officer in one institution with a written commitment to provide prayer rooms highlighted that in reality a member of management was known to be leading attempts to remove all university prayer rooms, and that he had done so by playing to racist stereotypes about Muslims. In another case, a prayer room was reported to have been closed down due to lack of demand by students. However, it emerged that there was plenty of demand for the closed prayer room, albeit that this demand came primarily from Muslim women students rather than men. The closure of this prayer room left Muslim women reportedly finding a range of ad hoc solutions that included a particularly accommodating lecturer agreeing to vacate his office at prayer times for use by the women who had been disadvantaged by prayer room closure. Again, this less than ideal situation contradicted official institutional policy toward provision of prayer rooms. One respondent from another institution noted that while a prayer room was available to men, no provision was made to enable Muslim women to pray. Again, this suggested institutional practice that privileged Muslim men and paid less attention to the needs of Muslim women. Another respondent from the same institution recalled students taking action themselves to claim a disused space, negotiate its use as a prayer room with the institution and turn it into a prayer room. There was little institutional support despite the obvious dangers of them having taken on a project of some magnitude in a room reported to have broken tiles and hanging wires exposed.

During the fieldwork one university in the north of England was commented on a number of times by staff members from across the sector as being particularly well equipped to meet the needs of Muslim students, being situated in a city with a very large Muslim population and apparently having a well-developed system of provisions for faith diversity. In contrast to this reputation, some respondents from the university highlighted a number of difficulties and inadequacies with their treatment. One respondent noted that while the prayer room provision was useful, it was too small and as a result she no longer attempted to use it. To another respondent, while a prayer room was available, no washing facilities had been provided in which to perform *wudhu* prior to prayer. This meant women had to perform *wudhu* in normal toilets, a practice that was felt to be undignified and as causing disruption to other users that could also lead to tension or conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Prayer room provision is therefore extremely important; to many of our respondents it was not only about whether or not they were able to pray during the university day, but also about having access to a space in which to end daily fasts during *Ramadan*, as well as a sign that their presence was recognised by

the university. Providing adequate facilities also removed sources of unnecessary tension and hostility toward Muslim students who may otherwise have to use other facilities not designed for the purpose. Although policy statements covering religious needs do not necessarily guarantee that appropriate or adequate praying and ablution facilities will be provided, best practice identified during the fieldwork involved developing clear policies that spelt out an institutional commitment to meeting legitimate faith needs. Most importantly, in assessing demand for prayer rooms, universities should ensure that they consult with Muslim women directly.

Availability of halal food

Alongside prayer rooms, halal food availability is a particularly significant provision for Muslim students, as well as being a very symbolic means of recognising the presence of Muslims on campus. Halal food provision emerged as extremely inconsistent; some institutions with large and very visible Muslim student populations still do not offer halal food. Students found it difficult to ascertain whether halal food was available in university canteens and refectories due to inadequate publicity. In one university, halal food was available from any refectory so long as those requiring it attended in advance to place an order allowing sufficient time for a pre-prepared meal to be defrosted and heated. In practice, few Muslim students appeared to know of this provision, and not a single notice highlighting its availability or the steps necessary to obtain it was seen on display in any of the university's catering outlets. Some questions also emerged over the sense of quality and freshness of this provision; whereas other foodstuffs were marketed and displayed as fresh, it appeared that the halal option was in contrast being sold to students as a frozen ready meal, with no pretensions to improve its marketability. Unsurprisingly, many Muslim students chose to eat in local halal food restaurants rather than eat a re-heated ready meal, or be tied to pre-selecting and ordering lunch early in the day.

Problems of inadequate publicity of *halal* food provision also emerged in another institution, in which one respondent reported that its availability had been inadequately publicised, causing considerable reluctance on her part to try it for the first time:

Mainly the people who use the canteen are white people - someone's got to say it's halal and they didn't actually put up a sign saying 'halal' so I was a bit more sceptical about that. I was saying "no it's not", and my friends like, coaxed me, they were like, "stop worrying, it's halal...", so I think if it hadn't been for my friends I wouldn't [know]...

(Halima, 21, Social Policy Pakistani)

A number of other respondents from the same university provided contradictory reports of whether or not *halal* food was available. One respondent even went so far as to bemoan what she felt was the unavailability of *halal* food, reporting that

this disadvantaged Muslim students and pushed them toward what she described as unhealthy and fatty fast food options from local takeaways.

In large institutions capable of delivering increasing ranges of courses to meet the needs of a very diverse range of learners, policies covering religious and cultural diversity can again be particularly helpful in structuring the ways in which halal food provision can be offered. When provided, halal food should be positively identified and its availability publicised. Positively marketing halal food removes uncertainty in the minds of consumers, challenges stereotypes and misapprehensions about provision needs and dietary requirements of Muslims, and improves its marketability. However, halal food should be of equivalent quality to other food available in catering outlets. Finally, universities should be aware that demand for halal food is not restricted only to refectories and canteens, but also has implications for the provision of food in catered halls of residences.

Muslim women's identities and higher education

Religious and ethnic identities

Throughout the fieldwork respondents dispelled stereotyped assumptions of Muslim women at university as 'rebels' and tearaways' leading 'double lives' and experiencing 'cultural clash' that have featured in some media accounts (cf., Malik, 2005,'; Coleman, 2005). These representations rely on reductionist stereotypes about the alleged 'backwardness' of Muslim families and the incoherence of gendered Muslim identities (Tyrer and Ahmad, 2005). They also suggest that 'Muslim women' – a term that is highly contested – suffer from a distinct lack of individual agency to create alternative subjectivities and articulations.

Muslim women respondents rejected notions of an essential, authentic primordial ethnic identity which they should adhere to and instead, stressed the dynamic, contingent and fluctuating nature of their identities.

While they acknowledged their formal ethnicities, or the ethnic identity that was 'expected of them' through the hegemonic workings of 'race' such as university ethnic monitoring forms, women were also clear that parental or ancestral heritage did not determine who they were. Instead, they asserted their own agency in defining their identities in their own terms and subsequently displaced these in favour of a notion of 'Muslim' identities, which were highly subjective and felt to be more inclusive of other aspects to their identities.

Well I would say that I'm a Muslim first, for me that is the most important, my religious beliefs come first with me, so I'd say that yeah I'm a Muslim, that is how I'd identify myself.

How about British Muslim or British Pakistani, what about that concept?

For me, nationality doesn't really play a major role. If you want to categorise me as a British, then yeah I guess I am a British citizen, but to me where I

originate from doesn't really play a crucial role to me. I just see myself yeah I am British but for me I'm a Muslim first, then the nationality comes into place because of course now its standard to actually have a formal nationality, so yeah I'm British, my parents originate from Pakistan which makes me a British Pakistani.

(Shagufta, 20, Islamic Studies student, Pakistani)

Almost without exception, respondents emphasised 'being Muslim' when discussing their identities in clear, coherent and confident terms, while also highlighting the subtle racialised expectations they faced from others vis-à-vis their identities.

I did my degree in Social Policy and in that, within what we looked at, gender, we looked at inequality and equality, so when I looked at those subjects it did make me think 'what does it mean?' But I mean identity is one of them things where you don't sit there and go 'what am I? Who am I?'... You just define yourself as the person that you are from experience that you've had and not the colour of your skin. You might do, but that might be because of an event or something such as you go into an all-white area and someone calls you a 'Paki', you know... I mean, that's what might lead you to thinking about things like that or reading about them things, like 'all these Asian people that are between two cultures', you know? Like it's a big deal, almost like it's restraining or negative and I think that's always extremely negative, whereas I don't see myself torn between anything.

(Leila, 22, BA Social Policy, Pakistani)

The expressing of Muslim identities by many respondents not only served to reject hegemonic definitions based on racial classifications, but also presented a radically different and less exclusionary way of constructing identities and envisioning social relations.

Impact of higher education on Muslim women's identities

For many Muslim women respondents, the expression of Muslim identities represented an emancipatory experience based around radically different ways of envisaging and structuring social relations without recourse to the grammar of 'race'. This supports the the findings of several other studies (eg, Brah, 1996; Butler, 1999; Dwyer, 1999, 2000; Jacobsen, 1998; Modood et al, 1997; Ahmad, 2003, 2006; Ahmad et al, 2003).

One student emphasised how her academic success could challenge stereotypes about Asian and Muslim women:

I suppose Asian-wise, people have, like, 'maybe they won't do so well' and this, that and the other. So it's nice to show them that look, as an Asian women, plus Muslim as well 'cause I am obviously Muslim, and if I do well that they can see like we're not oppressed or whatever they, like, say we are, so I think in that sense it's good if I do well [in university].

(Zubeda, 20, Mathematics with Business Management student, Bangladeshi)

In contrast to some studies which suggest that higher education acts to 'dislocate' South Asian and Muslim women students from their religion and culture (cf., Bhopal, 1997), respondents felt that their time at university had instead, helped them to 'rationalise' and think through their gendered, ethnic and religious identities. This is backed up by recent work by Ahmad (2001, 2006b) on Muslim women, identities and higher education.

Ethnic monitoring, labels and need for transparency

The interviews highlighted ways in which defining racial categories were interpolated through routine university functions and discourses of university life. These were manifest through Muslim women's contacts with individuals across the university at student, academic and administrative levels. Recognition of this helped explain the largely ambivalent attitudes of respondents towards routine practices such as ethnic monitoring undertaken by universities. The disinterest shown by respondents in ethnic monitoring initially came as a surprise given the discussions of racism and Islamophobia during the interviews, and of the centrality of ethnic monitoring to improving university equal opportunities practices.

This key tension in ethnic monitoring was reflected in the accounts provided by respondents of ethnic monitoring practices. Few women knew who was responsible for equal opportunities in their respective universities, nor had they felt that they had been consulted in any way in the development of Equal Opportunities policies. There was similarly little understanding of why universities were even carrying out ethnic monitoring and why Muslim identities were not accounted for in these processes. Consequently, ethnic monitoring was itself problematised with many respondents feeling that it serves little purpose and is not linked to action by the university.

The categories used were themselves central to the ways in which certain identities could be represented as being more or less worthy of being recognised and formalised, as Latifa noted:

What I find strange about them is, I don't know if I'm answering your question, is that they always say things like, you know, 'white', 'Black', mmm, this, that and 'Asian'. But they never say, like, 'Arab'. It's really weird they never put 'Arab'...it's really weird 'cause I have to tick the 'Mixed' one or the 'Other', d'you know what I mean? It's like 'Reject' (laughs)...the only box

I tick is ever, is 'Other' or 'Mixed', and then I just write, there's no space to write it but I just write what I am 'cause I never really know what to tick.

(Latifa, 20, Arab and Islamic Studies student, Moroccan-English)

Respondents' assertions of Muslim identities then were based at least in part on claims that to be categorised through a range of racialised markers of ethnic difference was not helpful. These assertions of Muslim identities were also based in part on a rejection of the explanatory and disciplinary powers of 'race'. It was significant, for example, that Maria explained that that Islam appears to be increasingly important to young people (especially women) in articulating their identities because "it's giving them their rights".

Such responses represented a major theme in the interviews. It suggests a need for *greater transparency* for the reasons and uses of ethnic monitoring by Equal Opportunities departments to enable students to understand how monitoring is used in universities. It also suggests a need to re-evaluate current forms of monitoring based on racialised classifications, which were felt to be unhelpful by many respondents in this study, to one that allows students options to self-identify, for example as 'Arab' or 'Muslim'.

Muslim women's personal and career hopes

Muslim women reported a diverse range of career hopes and aspirations that disrupted the popular stereotypes of Muslim women as being relegated to the domestic sphere, and the stereotypes of South Asians as generally preferring to work in particular fields such as medicine, accountancy and law. Certainly, among our respondents were aspiring doctors, dentists and accountants, although not in sufficient proportion as to dominate our sample or serve as a useful basis for characterising their career aspirations. We also interviewed respondents interested in careers in teaching, IT, self-employment, clinical psychology, Civil Service management, and graphic design among the huge array of different preferred career fields. Many of our respondents were very focused in their career aims. For example, Noor (19) studied Disaster Management and Technology with a view to working in local government emergency planning and for an aid agency. Leila summed up the general emphasis of many respondents on the value of studying and having clear career aspirations:

Education is something that everyone says is once they finish, they go 'I'm never gonna go back to that... But I'm one of them people, I said that, but I would like to go back and study something now, I still would, I would love to keep studying, I really did, I really enjoyed studying, I'd love to [go back to study].

(Leila, 22 BA Social Policy, Pakistani)

The clarity of respondents' career aspirations was matched by the resolve reported by respondents towards achieving these ambitions. Respondents also

reported a similar clarity around their personal hopes of marriage and parenthood and how this would impact upon their careers. Many stressed the importance of a work-life balance that also involved taking into account what they looked for in prospective partners and also the need to negotiate and compromise.

Muslim women and labour market employability

Muslim women student's attitudes towards finding work were extremely positive, demonstrating that they had a very clear awareness of the resources available to them in seeking work. They were also generally extremely clear about the type of job search behaviour likely to bring them the greatest success in their chosen career field.

Women also provided a great deal of evidence that challenged culturalist readings of their employment hopes and statuses. According to our respondents, the greatest obstacles and barriers that they would face in the labour market would be general experience of racism and Islamophobia shaping perceptions of them as job applicants, and gendered and racialised expectations of what constitutes 'ideal' employees and what constitutes 'problematic' Muslim women workers. Significantly, many respondents highlighted familial support for them in relation to career aspirations. Even those who did not report strong familial support demonstrated themselves to be strong, clear-headed respondents with sufficient agency of their own to decide on their own employment outcomes, negotiating with spouses and parents to fulfil their own ambitions.

However, racist and gendered expectations of Muslim women as oppressed and subservient were cited by respondents as being central to shaping wider expectations of them as workers, and thus defining to a large extent the barriers and obstacles they face in the varying contexts of the labour market. Respondents tended to link these attitudes directly to their experiences of higher education including teaching practices, underlining the need for joined-up equal opportunities practice.

Employability outcomes could equally well be functions of the type of university that Muslim women enrolled in, with the greater likelihood of many Pakistani and Bangladeshi (in particular) students enrolling in 'new' universities. This was highlighted by some as a potential barrier to labour market success with several women in pre-1992 universities highlighting having attended a 'good' university as making them more employable. This is supported by other published research (Shiner and Modood; Ahmad at al, 2003).

It is therefore important to view Muslim women graduates' labour market performance not through the distorting lens of culturalist explanations of 'disadvantage' but rather in the context of the complex and contingent array of factors that combine to shape their experiences of education throughout their studies. These also work to inform and shape wider perceptions about Muslim women and influence their experiences of the labour market.

Barriers to Muslim women graduates seeking employment

Respondents were able to identify a range of barriers to Muslim women entering the graduate labour market. Respondents highlighted the particular issues that they would face as women. This theme was reiterated by a number of respondents, who pointed to the difficulties of balancing a career with a family life and highlighted the extent to which as women they would be affected by this. Noting that work-life balance issues posed particular challenges to medicine, one medical student further added that her experience as a medical student had prepared her for the ways in which gender might structure her labour market opportunities following qualification. This respondent noted that the changing demographic of medical students was posing new challenges for the medical profession to deal with, and spoke at length about work-life balance issues faced by those in medicine. These problems of gender were reinforced and exacerbated by the working of 'race':

If you think about, like, clinical scenarios and settings, it depends on what degree and how strict you are as a Muslim woman. Like I have in all honesty, the only problems I really had are people's perceptions of me wearing a headscarf in hospital. But getting asked some silly questions by lecturers actually and by other kind of healthcare professionals, nurses and so on, doctors tend to be fine, but in particular nurses, which can be viewed as very ignorant and quite hurtful at times. Sort of like, 'why are you wearing that thing on your head, are you going to wear it into theatre?' The general misunderstanding about my faith and that really can have sometimes very negative manifestations and can make you feel a bit low, but I tend to just deal with those situations there and then so I try and speak to the people about it. I don't like walk away from the situations but I know that that's not the case for everybody, and sometimes people do struggle in kind of clinical settings when that kind of terminology is expressed.

(Mariam, 24, Medicine, Pakistani)

Some women spoke of perceptions of Muslim women as less productive due to stereotypes about Muslims in general. General perceptions of women workers as under-productive were felt to be exacerbated by the workings of 'race'. For example, one woman related the racial gendering of higher education to that of the labour market, noting:

I have a Muslim friend who just recently graduated and she's a doctor and she wears the whole outer garment, which is the *jilbab* and *hijab* and stuff, and people look at her and they think she is a nurse. They don't assume

that she could ever be the doctor. So these are, like the appearance straight away puts her into a category that has got to be of a lesser status in the degree than what she actually is, they want to place a lesser role upon her because they probably see her as a woman incapable of rising above.

(Fareeda, 19, English Language and Literature, Pakistani)

If women were represented as incapable of rising above certain statuses in some professions, then this respondent also noted that behaving in an Islamic manner would, far from hindering her in her career, assist her in remaining "adamant on working" and balancing work-life balance. These perceptions would continue pervading society on a range of levels as another respondent noted when asked about attitudes towards Muslim women employees:

They [the media] sort of assume that Muslim women are just very docile, subservient, stay at home, don't have any external responsibilities, but I know that in my family that's not the case. ... I think it's just because we are so distinctive, not just in terms of colour but the physical, you know, wearing the *hijab*, it's so explicit. You can't hide away from it and I think, you know, from my experience, people do have a lot of presumptions and it's trying to overcome that.

(Jaihan, 20, History, Pakistani)

As these quotes demonstrate, Muslim women were sensitive to the ways in which gendered and racialised stereotypes of Muslims were likely to impact on their labour market employability. In addition, as several other studies have shown, ethnic penalties in the labour market have a direct impact on the opportunities and experiences of Muslim men and women (for example, Modood et al, 1997; Strategy Unit, 2003).

Experiences of university careers services

A number of women reported finding formal careers services helpful but felt that careers advisors did not fully understand the specific barriers facing Muslim women graduates in the labour market, or the needs of Muslim women accessing careers services.

In stage one of the research, a number of respondents highlighted having access to good quality university careers services as a positive factor, and some had specifically sought to draw attention to careers service projects focusing on the specific needs of, and barriers facing graduates from minority backgrounds. Others who had not had access to such projects reported feeling 'disappointed' with the advice they received and felt that their needs and barriers faced had not been understood.

The findings support the importance of specialist interventions, highlighting the importance of careers services having staff with specific training in and understanding of the specific barriers facing Muslim women in education and the labour market, and in specific fields of employment.

Women's views about careers advice and support varied, but a consistent theme was that despite a willingness to acknowledge good quality support from well trained careers staff, respondents were also critical of the levels of understanding that they felt careers staff had of the barriers facing Muslim women and of their needs. A considerable number of respondents also acknowledged the importance of accessing careers services while simultaneously noting that it is important not to overstate their significance. This was particularly so for students and graduates with very specific careers aspirations and who felt that the more generic approach of the careers services they had accessed was not necessarily useful.

CONCLUSION

The findings that emerged from this research interrupt and challenge dominant stereotypes about Muslim women, and in doing so point both to the need to recognise the diversity among Muslim women students and their agency, but also to foreground the centrality of institutional factors in influencing their experiences of higher education. These institutionalised factors impact not only on experiences in university but also contribute to the ways in which the graduate labour market is racially gendered. The ways in which Muslim women students disrupt dominant stereotypes illustrates the inadequacy of approaches to graduate employability that focus on essentialist, culturalist explanations of Muslim women's differential rates of success in the labour market. An example of this can be seen in the Department for Work and Pensions discussions about Muslim graduate employability, which speculates about the ways in which Muslim graduates may be the cause of their own lower employment rates. This, it is argued, is through Muslim graduates choice of degree subjects, job search behaviour and poorer academic performance. It is vital therefore, that institutional factors and culturalist explanations that serve to construct Muslim women in particular ways and reinforce racism and sexism in both education and the labour market, continue to be challenged.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Consultation Processes

Universities should ensure that they consult with Muslim women, both in the development and delivery of provisions likely to have disproportionate impact on them and in the development and delivery of specific Equal Opportunities related work. In particular, universities can take note of the following observed best practices in working with Muslim women students:

- 1. University practitioners should be mindful when consulting with students that merely involving a Students' Union officer to represent students' interests and views may not necessarily provide a picture that reflects the needs of all students.
- 2. Mature students and those with childcare responsibilities may not necessarily have as much opportunity to be involved in students' union activities as other students; consulting with union officers and student societies alone may exclude such individuals.
- 3. The fieldwork also suggests that Muslim women students' access to key university and students' union provisions remains patchy and far more developed (largely through processes of political struggle by Muslim women students) in some universities than in others.
- 4. When consulting with Students' Union officers, universities should stipulate the requirement to proactively engage with all union members so that any views reported by the respective officers specifically include needs of Black and Minority Ethnic groups, those with disabilities, and women from different groups.
- 5. Best practice identified so far centred on a consultation about Equal Opportunities in one English university in which the university specifically sought to engage with students from a range of backgrounds and take into account the views of women when developing a religious diversity policy.
- 6. University practitioners should also be mindful when consulting with Muslim students to ensure that Muslim women are also included in the process. When consulting with Islamic Societies universities should stipulate requirements to meet both men and women members.
- 7. It is essential that, where possible, universities also offer alternative forms of consultation which can engage with as wide a range of Muslim women students as possible.

Representations of Muslim women

The fieldwork highlights a number of challenges for universities in the ways in which Muslim women students are represented. In many ways these permeate the whole of this report. The following may be a useful starting point for universities:

- 1. Teaching staff should ensure that set readings for courses do not only include those which represent Muslim women in problematic ways, and should work with library staff to ensure balanced library holdings.
- 2. Universities should ensure that they acknowledge the presence of Muslim women students through the provisions that they offer such as halal food options and sensitivity in timetabling.
- Universities should proactively acknowledge and market the provisions they make for Muslim students such as clearly marking the availability of prayer facililities.
- 4. To ensure best practice, universities should thoroughly review all publicity material to ensure that it reflects diversity and represents as natural the participation of people from a range of Black and ethnicised minority groups (such as Muslim women) in all areas of university life.

Ethnic monitoring

The fieldwork highlights a number of problems and issues with dominant models of ethnic monitoring. Findings arising from the data recommend that:

- Categories used in ethnic monitoring should be reviewed to ensure that
 they recognise as many as possible categories likely to be used by
 individuals in the institution. Ethnic monitoring categories should not be
 unnecessarily broad; for example, respondents highlighted as best
 practice a university that had broken down its 'Pakistani' category to allow
 students to identify themselves as 'Kashmiri'.
- 2. Ethnic monitoring forms should include an opportunity for respondents to clarify by self-identifying in their own identifications, and not marginalise this as an either/or section or conflate it with existing 'other' categories.
- 3. Ethnic monitoring should also include monitoring of faith.
- 4. Ethnic monitoring forms should include a brief statement explaining why the data is being collected and how its collection will improve life in the university.

Racism and Islamophobia

The fieldwork highlighted a number of experiences of racism and Islamophobia on campus and a distinct lack of awareness on the part of key staff throughout the university. Recommendations from the research therefore emphasise that:

- Islamophobia be specifically acknowledged and addressed within university Equal Opportunities work. This should include training interventions designed to raise awareness of how Islamophobia can be recognised on both individual levels and in its institutionalised manifestations and how it can be combated.
- 2. University staff should be trained to be aware of the factors within university that can render people more vulnerable to racism and Islamophobia, for example, failing to challenge racism, arranging lectures

- at very early or late times or in buildings with poor security (a security issue for all students).
- 3. University staff should be trained to be aware of the different ways in which men and women may experience Islamophobia, and how it can be combated and challenged.
- 4. As a matter of urgency universities should ensure keeping race equality policies up to date and relevant, and according race equality policies their proper weight alongside other Equal Opportunities policies such as religious and cultural diversity. Race Equality policies should therefore be updated to include reference to Islamophobia or anti-Muslim racism.

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MUSLIM WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION: IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES AND PROSPECTS

A SUMMARY REPORT

This ESF supported research aimed to explore Muslim women students' experiences of higher education, equal opportunities and graduate employability. It found that while higher education was greatly valued by Muslim women and their families, their experiences of higher education and the provisions available for their needs as Muslim women students, were in need of 'joined-up' thinking on the part of equal opportunities professionals and the higher education sector in general. The research identifies a number of recommendations spanning the consultation process of student needs, ethnic monitoring, representations of Muslim women in university, and recognising experiences of racism and Islamophobia on campus and in post-graduation services and provisions.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Tyrer is a sociologist based in Liverpool John Moores University specialising in 'race', ethnicity and racism, Muslims in Britain, and equal opportunities. In addition to his research and teaching interests, he has also previously worked in equal opportunities.

Fauzia Ahmad is Honorary Research Fellow at the Department of Sociology, University of Bristol. Her research interests focus on Muslim women in higher education and employment, social welfare, identities and representations. She is joint author (with T Modood and S Lissenburgh) of 'South Asian women and employment: *Britain: the Interaction of Gender and Ethnicity.*', London: PSI (2003).