Documents

Islam at Universities in England: Meeting the Needs and Investing in the Future

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Here we are reproducing Executive Summary of the report submitted to Mr Bill Rammell, MP, Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education, UK, on 10th April 2007 by Dr Ataullah Siddiqui, Director, Markfield Institute of Higher Education, Leicester, UK.

Introduction

I was invited by the Minister of Higher Education, Bill Rammell MP, to write a report on ‘what measures can be taken to improve the quality of information about Islam that is available to students and staff in universities in England. The report should serve as a resource that individual institutions can pick up and apply to their own individual circumstances, as well as something the Government can support.’ The following terms of reference were set: What measures can be taken to

1. improve the quality of information about Islam that is available to students and staff in universities in England, in particular to ensure that students have access to material on how the teachings of Islam can be put into practice in a contemporary pluralist society.

2. improve the quality of spiritual advice and support that Muslim students can access in universities in England.

3. identify gaps between the needs and aspirations of Muslim students and the programmes of study presently available at universities in England.

* Executive Summary as well as the Full Report are available at the official Website of Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, Higher Education Section: <www.dfes.gov.uk/publications/pdf/Updated%20Dr%20Siddiqui%20Report.pdf>.
facilitate effective joint working by Government, local communities, the funding council and educational institutions to support the recommended improvements.

This project began formally from mid-August 2006. I was seconded for three days a week for this project from the Markfield Institute of Higher Education. The project also appointed a part-time administrator and, to hold it within its objectives and provide guidance on critical issues, an Advisory Board. The Board members, who joined in a personal and voluntary capacity, were invited on the basis of relevant experience and research.

The investigation began by meeting the stakeholders—academics, community leaders and students. The following broad themes were explored during my conversations with them. Not all of the themes were explored with each interviewee, nor in equal detail.

1. The definition of Islamic Studies and the place and role of ethnographic and sociological studies of Muslims.
2. The types of general information on Islam that students have access to on and off campus.
3. Major gaps, if any, in the teaching of and research on Islam in today’s pluralist society.
4. The relations, if any, that universities have developed with local Muslim communities to build up their skills and intellectual capital.
5. The training measures in place for university staff to address the specific cultural and faith needs of local and foreign Muslim students.
6. The measures in place at universities to meet specific cultural and faith needs of their Muslim students.
7. The measures that Government, local communities, funding councils and educational institutions can take to support and improve the current situation.

The Changing Context of Islamic Studies

Interest in Islam and the Middle East can be traced back to the reign of Henry II in the twelfth century. However, Islamic Studies as an academic subject-matter in England dates to the establishment of Chairs in Arabic in Cambridge in 1632 and in Oxford four years later. Academic interest in the field has been sustained ever since, and its value and impact periodically assessed, notably in the twentieth century.

The Reay Report (1909) considered Islamic Studies provision from the perspective of those looking to go to the Islamic world in a civil service,
military, business, medical or missionary capacity, as well as those interested in scholarship in its languages and cultures.

The Scarbrough Report (1947) took note of the post-War world when former British colonies were moving towards independence, its priority being to maintain influence in those colonies and in international affairs generally.

By the time of the Hayter Report (1961) most of the colonies had become independent. Hayter rightly emphasised that the ‘universities have, a duty to meet in their own way the needs of the society in which they live’ and recommended that 6 to 8 new ‘area studies’ centres be set up in different universities, and that ‘the School of Oriental Studies in Durham and the Middle East Centre in Cambridge […] be supported and expanded as centres of Middle East or Islamic Studies.’

The Parker Report (1986) looked from a commercial and diplomatic perspective that had not been directly addressed in the two previous reports. It regretted the absence of a clear, coherent policy, particularly in the area of expertise in Asian and African languages.

These four reports work from different perspectives reflecting the socio-economic and political situations of their time. The points, on which they are in broad agreement as to what is required, are that:

a. Britain’s economic and political influence can be maintained abroad, and academic study can and should be strengthened to serve that objective.

b. Whatever is needed, Britain is not doing it.

This report and its context are substantially different. It reflects the growing Muslim population in England and its growing interest in Islam as a faith and civilisation. Following the 9/11 and 7/7 bombings, the changed dynamics of relations between Muslims and policymakers in Western countries have added urgency to the need to ensure that the growing Muslim population is an asset to the country and not a liability. Though Britain’s influence abroad has to be maintained for its economic prosperity and diplomatic edge, it is now equally important that different experiences and expressions of Islam are explored outside the needs of diplomacy and the exigencies of the situation in the Middle East. This is necessary for at least two reasons:

a. The young Muslims in this country and in Europe are looking to express Islam in a context that their parents’ generation can hardly have experienced, namely living in a modern secular culture grounded in Judaeo-Christian traditions. The majority Muslim expression and experience of Islam in England is inherited from the culture of South Asia, with
significant minority strands from Africa and from Europe — especially the Balkans and Turkey.

b. With the exception of a few individual initiatives, the study of Islam and its civilisation remains anchored in the colonial legacy and mainly serves the diplomatic and foreign services. Teaching and research programmes need to be re-oriented. Britain could give the lead to Europe in such a re-orientation if there were sufficient commitment from Government, funding agencies and universities, and from the resident Muslim community. Properly directed investment in resources and energies could turn relations between Muslims and Islam in this country into a sustainably positive direction.

The Current Debate

Much recent debate about the provision of Islamic Studies in the universities has moved appreciably towards the recognition that it needs to be more aware of its responsibilities within the country. This debate notes the fact that postgraduate courses are successfully recruiting students from abroad. It also notes the relative failure to attract local students, which is leaving a significant gap in terms of quality Muslim leadership within the country. Interest in Islamic studies has been growing at various levels, with pressure building at ‘grassroots’ level from students searching for appropriate programmes. However, this has not been picked up by the universities; instead provision for Islamic studies (with varying degrees of formal programmes) is being offered by institutions other than universities. The post-War shift in focus at the universities from ‘Islamic’ to ‘Middle Eastern’ studies may also be a factor affecting the priorities of university departments and their intake.

Motivations for the study of Islam vary considerably. No doubt the perceived resurgence of Islam, its socio-economic and political impact and its significance in world politics, is a strong factor. But individuals are also motivated by career opportunities in social services, health and psychology, public finance and politics, and the media. Students are increasingly looking to courses with an ‘add-on’ Islamic Studies element so that they have an edge over others in the job market. However, current syllabuses are so tightly defined that it is difficult to find a department willing to take an interested student of, say, psychology or medicine who wants to take a module on Muslim history: Islamic studies as an ‘add-on’ is just not available.

A quick overview of the current debate suggests that relatively little research has been done on Islamic Studies in higher education, and even less on its relation to the wider community, in particular the Muslim community. It is also revealing that in general the Muslim communities in England have given some support to higher education institutions run from within the community, but have put almost nothing into the universities.
A number of reports and conferences on Islam in higher education have highlighted the need to review the overall provision of Islamic Studies, ranging from a complete shift in orientation to building onto existing provision better relationship with the Muslim community. The key arguments may be summarised as follows:

1. The Arabic and Islamic Studies departments are concentrating ‘on out of date and irrelevant issues'; there is a lack of clarity on ‘where and how the subject ['Islam'] should be taught'. Strong emphasis is placed on the multicultural context and the need to 'adjust' understanding of Islam to it.

2. A major shift of the focus of Islamic Studies from an Arab and Middle Eastern perspective to that of a plural society in Britain is needed.

3. How and how far social science methods are appropriate to the study of Islam needs to be more vigorously questioned than it has been.

4. The academic institutions and their staff need to ‘connect’ with Muslim institutions.

5. As the issues relating to the future of Islamic Studies assume greater importance, both on university campuses and in the areas of funding and public policy, it is important to take account of and respond to the variety of interests involved in this subject.

6. Discussion over the years about Islamic Studies in higher education has been conducted quite separately from, and probably in complete ignorance of, the Muslim community and their patterns of belief and practice. Equally, the teaching of Islam and the mentoring of students as mediated by the madrasas is, to a very large extent, oblivious of the realities around them.

7. University life has a lasting impact on, in particular, Muslim women students, and most notably on their employment outcomes. Their time in university helps them ‘to rationalise and think through their gendered, ethnic and religious identities.’

8. Important strands in the debate, of special interest to policy makers and community leaders, are (a) how far Islam can be ‘integrated’ within the ‘secular/humanist’ ethos; and (b) how future leadership of Muslims can be formalised at higher educational levels so as then to provide a ‘controlled position’ for Islam. There is unease, for different reasons within the academic world and the Muslim community, about too much authority to define and direct Islam in the country.

A more general, widely expressed concern was that Islam has for too long been studied from ‘outside in’ while there is a need for and much to gain from looking ‘inside out’. This failure of perspective — to the predictable annoyance of many in academia — is strongly indicated by the findings of the Student Study. However, as interviews with several religious and community leaders
made clear, Muslims’ own house needs to be set in order in this regard, so that, as a discourse, Islamic Studies must indeed look ‘inside out’ and not just ‘inside in’.

Defining Islamic Studies

There are marked disagreements about what Islamic Studies does or should cover. There are those who see Arabic language as the core of Islamic Studies, and who do not consider anthropological and ethnographic study of Muslim societies as a necessary or proper part of the Islamic Studies syllabus. There are others who believe that the teaching of Arabic and textual analysis does not address the issues facing Muslims in contemporary societies in different parts of the world. There is some consensus amongst the interviewees that while the knowledge of Arabic could form the basis for the understanding of the Qur’an and sunnah, some knowledge of other sciences has to be part of Islamic Studies.

There is also disagreement whether one should call Islamic Studies a ‘discipline’. The Islamic Studies, some argue, has ‘emerged from a melange of several disciplines into one well-defined discipline...’ Others disagree and highlight that it does not have the required ingredients to be called a discipline.

Who is Providing the ‘Islamic Studies’?

Validation/accreditation

Both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, students are attracted to the basic ethos of Muslim-run institutions that offer a range of accredited academic and vocational courses. These institutions are largely run by Muslim charities, with the offered courses placed under the supervisory scrutiny of affiliated universities. Students want and expect their education at such institutions to be different from what they get in either secular university departments or a dar al-‘ulum.

Madrasas and dar al-‘ulum

These institutions offer traditional courses on Qur’anic interpretation, hadith, fiqh (jurisprudence) and kalam (theology). The subject matter is typically presented in an atmosphere of reverence, not critical scepticism. Nevertheless, these institutions are important resources for Islamic studies and, one way or another, play a significant role in the life of the Muslim community in England. The universities have paid little attention to the need that these institutions are catering for. Dar al-‘ulum are keen to develop a bridge to
degree level studies with universities. A small number of ulama have completed MPhil/PhD courses in Islamic Studies related subjects.

**Online and distance learning.**

With very few exceptions, increasing demand for such courses is being met from outside the British Isles. The objective of the courses, assessment, fees and curricula vary considerably.

**University and Communities**

Universities provide a physical place of meeting between staff, students and communities. People interviewed, both Muslim community leaders and university staff, would like to see a closer relationship between them develop.

1. There are some examples of good practice. In Birmingham, the University has provided the intellectual, and the community the financial, resources to teach a B.Ed. programme. Similarly, Leeds University has proactively engaged, at the initiative of the local Muslim community, to provide a ‘Certificate Course in Islamic Studies’. More recently, some universities, such as Gloucester University, have engaged with the Muslim community to provide academic support to various Muslim institutions in England. Such engagement needs to be widened and involve more of the departments that teach Islamic studies.

2. Co-operation between a university and a madrasa or dar al-‘ulum has yet to be tested out. Such providers and disseminators of ‘Islamic knowledge’ in Muslim communities have functioned independently and validated their work by their own criteria. What is required is a clear formal link between such institutions and higher education qualifications. It is essential that those qualifications enable opportunities in the job market.

In general, the sense is that a university has a moral obligation to serve its local community. There is a need for the Muslim community to focus on making use of the good university facilities available in the country. However, misunderstanding of the role of a university remains, as well as doubts about the ability of the community to rise to the challenge.

**Chaplaincy and Muslims**

The Muslim ‘chaplain’ or ‘advisor’ is seen as someone able to give guidance and support not based solely on religious doctrine, and able to listen with moral attentiveness while not being ‘judgemental’. The chaplain is often the only sustained link between students and university authorities, and makes a
substantial difference to students’ social and spiritual well-being. One chaplain from a Post-1992 university explained his role as helping students difficulties and anxieties (economic crises, relationship and family problems, etc.) ‘in [such] a way that they can focus on their education’.

The chaplaincy role is the more significant as, by all indicators, the number of Muslim students will continue to rise. There are now some 30 Muslim chaplains/advisors working in universities in England, almost all of them volunteers, whose understanding of their faith and their pastoral role varies widely. They are the least supported individuals providing chaplaincy, but still expected to advise university authorities, and to face occasional media outbursts on issues relating to terrorism, fundamentalism, government policies and student activities.

An overwhelming number of serving chaplains, academic staff and community members would like to see chaplains/advisors appointed and paid by the university for their work. Interviews with Muslim chaplains and community leaders suggest four broad areas of chaplaincy work:

**Spiritual needs:** Muslim students, whether partly or fully practising, have religious obligations that require basic needs — such as halal food and prayer facilities (especially for Friday prayers), to be catered for. In one Post-1992 university for example, according to the chaplain/advisor, out of some 4 to 5,000 Muslim students, about 400 students require prayer facilities they do not have.

**Counselling and emotional needs:** A Muslim chaplain/advisor with over twenty years experience in a Civic university says accommodation, halal food, a place to worship, and problems with the student supervisors, are commonplace issues. In addition, there are relationship problems and instances of mental illness. All of these need a cultural and religious specific counselling.

**Educational (religious specific) needs:** In some universities chaplains, with the help of the student Islamic society, provide basic Islamic education such as the Qur’an, Arabic language, and jurisprudence in response to students’ requests.

**Continuity and point of contact:** University students are a transient population. The chaplain/advisor serves as the point of contact for newcomers and continuity for those still finishing their education, and as the link between the university and the local Muslim community.

**Difficulties of Inter-faith Chaplaincy**

Working in a team is not easy and working in an inter-faith chaplaincy may sometimes be particularly trying. Being too close to the Christian-dominated
chaplaincy can pose problems for Muslim chaplains. If the Christians are seen to be too ‘liberal’ in their religious tradition that has an effect on Christian as well as Muslim fellow-chaplains who might disagree with that approach. If the Christian chaplaincy leader or team is strongly inclined to a fundamentalist/exclusive approach, this can lead to the exclusion of the Muslim chaplain from the wider workings of chaplaincy.

Training of Staff

Public awareness among non-Muslims about Muslims and their faith has not progressed, despite the voluminous public attention given to ‘Islam’. Departments where Islamic Studies is taught have rarely been approached by their universities to provide generic training about Islam to their own staff. However, there is increasing demand, from agencies outside university — social services, police, media — on any department that has even a vague link with teaching Islam to provide instant answers to some problem of the moment — the expectation is that they will get an ‘academic’ or unbiased view, as opposed to what they expect to get from the local Muslim community.

Findings from the Student Study

The Student Study recorded discussions with focus groups of Muslim undergraduates and postgraduates from eight universities in England, using.

Information about Islam

1. The main criticism was lack of depth of information about Islamic teachings and lack of relevance for Muslims. The courses on offer were generally viewed as the study of Muslim communities rather than of Islam.

2. All students saw the value of studying Islam in a formal university setting. However, when asked about learning Islam in order to inform their everyday practice of their religion, the overwhelming majority agreed that they would not go to a university for this purpose, but would prefer to study under a Muslim scholar or at a Muslim centre of learning.

3. The option of universities in England employing competent Muslim scholars was therefore popular among the students. ‘Secular’ aspects of learning such as Islamic history or Middle Eastern politics should remain as part of a comprehensive Islamic Studies programme with the theological elements of the course being taught by Muslim scholars.
4. Students’ main source of information about Islam came from the student Islamic society — through organised seminars, books etc. — rather than from attending university courses. The internet was also cited, with caution, as a key source for information about Islam.

**Muslim student care needs**

Having a Muslim chaplain/advisor was seen as important for all universities, regardless of the size of the Muslim population, because of the specific needs of Muslims and the discrimination that Muslim young people and students encounter.

1. As student Islamic societies shoulder the main burden of caring for the needs of fellow students, a number of students were so over-stretched their studies suffered. The care needs should therefore be met by the university through appropriate student services provisions.

2. All students in the study agreed that the Muslim chaplain/advisor should have an understanding of student issues and university life, be approachable and have a certain level of training in counselling, and a good knowledge base about Islam. More particularly, a key factor emphasised by students is that the chaplain should be independent of the wider Muslim community and accountable to university administration.

3. Lack of prayer facilities, especially for the Friday prayer and *halal* food, were the principal care issues raised. *Halal* food provision was particularly problematic on those campuses located away from town centres and with few Muslim outlets.

4. There were examples of how students felt their concerns about faith issues were not fully appreciated by staff, and instances of students being picked on by staff because of their faith. There was also strong anxiety about the prospect or reality of being spied just because they were Muslims.

**Student-community relationships**

Links between students and the local community were not described by students as being strong. Even so, there were examples of how students had benefited from such links. Students in principle approved links with local communities but believed this could be difficult because of conditions and dynamics internal to the community.

1. Establishing links with the community was seen as a potential role for a Muslim chaplain/advisor.

2. University students should forge links with young people in their local Muslim communities and encourage them to go to university.
Recommendations

1. Given the growing number of Muslims inside the country, the Islamic Studies syllabus needs to look beyond philology/classical texts and area studies (particularly the Middle East). The underlying unity and the evident diversity of Islamic culture and civilisation in different epochs and different regions of the world (including Europe) deserve proper attention. Muslims in this country should be helped to understand their faith as practised in different contexts, perhaps especially contexts of minority existence, and not just to somehow rehearse — in an insecure alliance with Britishness — the local customs of their parents’ communities of origin. Unfortunately, there are very few scholars qualified to teach the core Islamic subjects and relate them to different social contexts.

   i. The relevant departments of Government, funding bodies such as the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and the Muslim community, should invest in a long term project to establish intensive language courses, research studentships, postgraduate awards, collaboration with universities abroad, and appoint suitably qualified staff.

   ii. Universities should be encouraged to work in partnership and share funding and, if need be, jointly establish a separate centre.

2. The provision of Islamic studies should be linked with job opportunities — chaplaincy and counselling, teaching, ‘Islamic banking’. Appropriate courses in the past attracted significant number of participants, including imams and also women. Courses that addressed the culture-specific needs of likely participants would undoubtedly be well subscribed. The Department of Education and Skills could and should facilitate meetings between Universities and Further Education Colleges, the social service sector, and Muslim charities, in order to assess the needs and methods of delivery.

3. Islamic Studies syllabuses should focus better on theological and civilisational aspects of Islam relevant to contemporary practice of the faith. Such courses would provide non-Muslim students with insight into issues within Islamic doctrine that are pertinent now. Also, universities should be advised and resourced to provide add-on modules on Islamic studies for those whose main speciality is some other subject.
4. Students should be given the opportunity to learn from competent traditionally trained Islamic scholars in at least those parts of the syllabus that directly inform everyday practice of Islam.

5. All universities should consult and consider the appointment of full- or part-time Muslim chaplains/advisors. The number of Muslim students will grow very considerably in the future, and their cultural and religious specific needs should be catered for.

6. A generic qualification in pastoral care skills, and an overall understanding of the workings of higher education must be a minimum requirement for future appointments of Muslim chaplains/advisors. The standard of Muslim chaplain/advisors’ training needs to be raised, especially in the long term. The ‘five qualities’ highlighted in the report should help direct and improve the training process. The Muslim student body should be represented on the committee handling the selection process for chaplaincy appointments. This would prevent misunderstanding, and help in the smooth running of university and student affairs.

7. The Muslim community should use their resources to strengthen the chaplaincy/advisor service, by (for example) producing relevant guides and reading material. Pastoral care should also be included in the training of future religious leaders, especially in madrasas, in the community.

8. Muslim chaplains/advisors should meet regularly to share experience and concerns. There should be provision for participation of other faith communities, student services and other concerned agencies.

9. On campus student Islamic societies should be acknowledged as key providers of peer-led support for Muslim students, and properly supported by universities (through human resources and by student services), by the local Muslim communities and other relevant parties.

10. Generic guidance should be available throughout the country to serve as a reference point for all university staff when dealing with issues such as prayer times, the significance of Friday prayer, halal food and Ramadan. Such guidance would lighten the burden of responsibility on students and help to universalize the best practice.

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