Exploring 'Sense of Belonging' – Muslim Students at the University of Winchester

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The University of Winchester

Change Agent Network Conference 2018

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Introductions

Maisha Islam

▶ First Class Honours in Sociology

▶ Outstanding Result in Dissertation and Overall Grade in Sociology Prize Winner (2017)

▶ Centre for Student Engagement Intern

Tom Lowe

▶ Centre for Student Engagement Manager

▶ Programme Leader of Postgraduate Certificate in Student Engagement in Higher Education

Dr. Gary Jones

▶ Head of Department for Politics & Society

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The University of Winchester

- Values-driven

- Gone from strength-to-strength recruiting students

- Student population of 8,000 approx.

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Background to the Research

Catalyst for the research:

▶ Muslim students' experiences are not always positive within higher education institutions.

▶ Feeling uncomfortable raising issues around religion.

▶ Alienation within campuses

▶ Muslim student population - 2%

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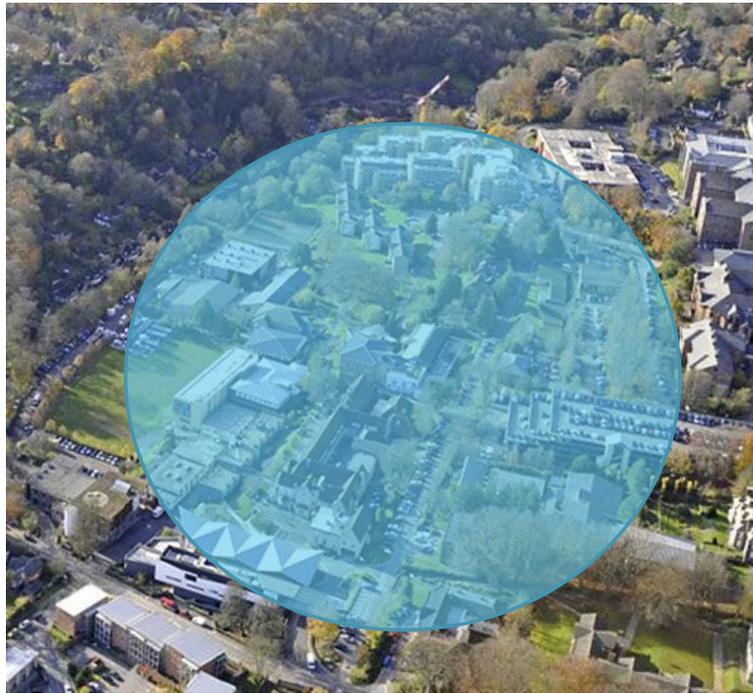CENTRE FOR STUDENT
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Student Engagement at Winchester

▶ Whole institutional approach to raise student engagement and sense of belonging across the entire student body inspired by the work of REACT (Sims et al, 2017; Warren and Luebsen, 2017).

▶ After two years exploring the term 'hard-to-reach' and reviewing the accessibility to student opportunities (Lowe and Dunne, 2017, Thomas, 2016), Winchester has formed a *Centre for Student Engagement* to conduct the following activities:

- Create a signposting service for student opportunities

- Conduct further research into student engagement & belonging

- Validate a PG Cert Student Engagement

But we know there is plenty of room for development:

▶ '*All students should be viewed as partners in the educational journey and systematically involved in the design and implementation of inclusive learning, teaching and assessment activities'* (Stevenson, 2012).

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Belonging in Contemporary Higher Education

- **Target 1:** All students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake higher education are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, Higher Education (Office for Students, 2018).

- Universities ensure opportunities to enter Higher Education, and as a result campuses have become more diverse (Denney, 2017), however how inclusive are these institutions?

- University campuses and the services they run can often operate in an exclusive 'campus bubble' to cater for the 'traditional student' excluding non-traditional students from accessing the full higher education experience (Lowe, in press).

- An individual's 'sense of belonging' to an organisation (such as HEI) can come from membership within groups of that organisation, which in turn can improve self-esteem and confidence (Brown, 2000).

- Students can attain a sense of belonging through involvement, spaces and initiatives where they feel valued and that they matter to the community (Beniston & Harris, 2017; Thomas, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012).

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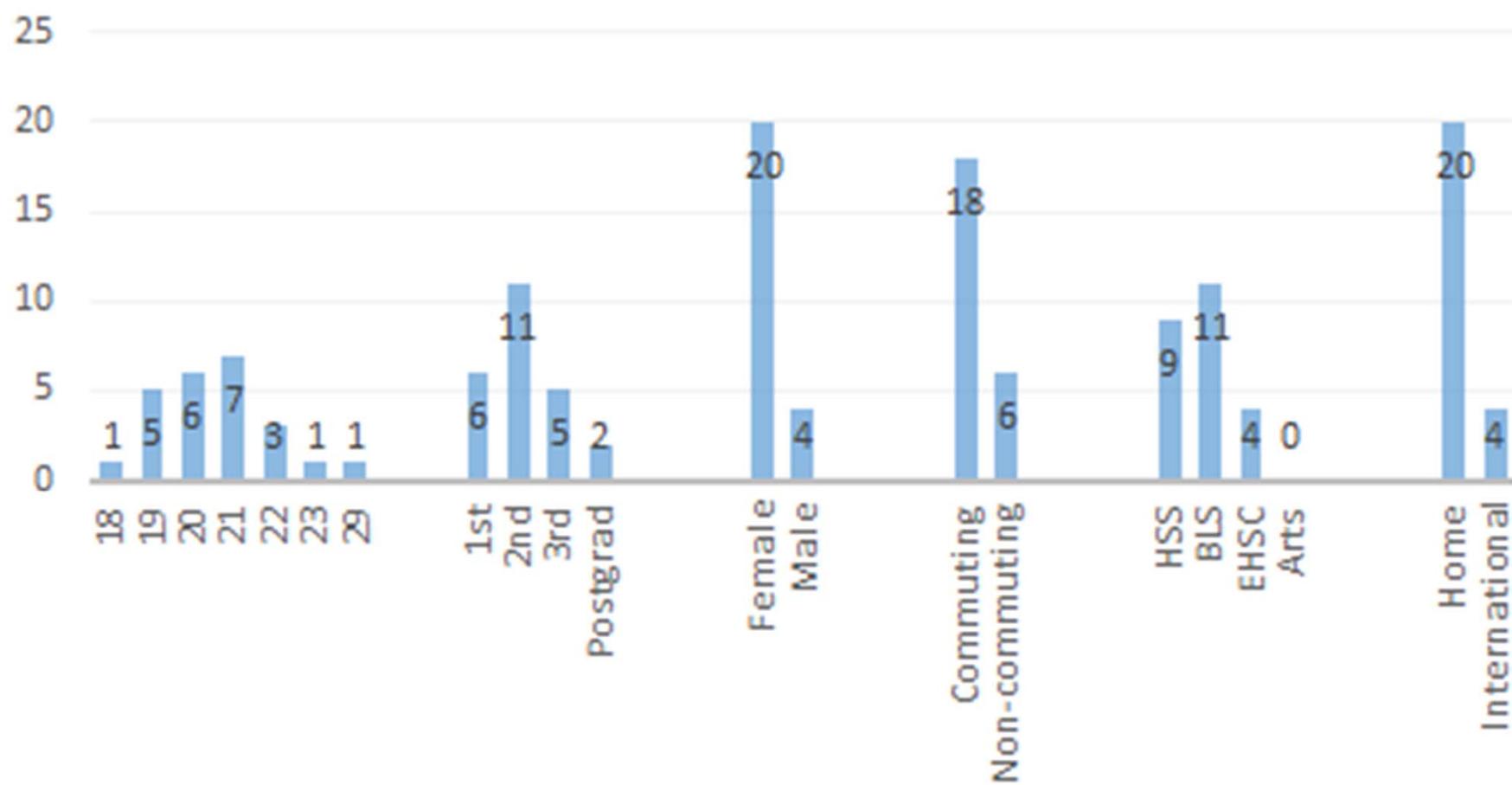ENGAGEMENT

Muslim students and Higher Education

▶ In general, there is a scarcity of literature, policy and practice that deals with religious students (Stevenson, 2013:38-39).

▶ Muslim students entering HE are slowly rising (especially for young Muslim women) (Doward, 2016).

▶ Research states that students of Muslim faith can often feel a hostile environment, feeling of isolation, being overlooked, disregarded in UK HE and low sense of belonging (Stevenson, 2017; Nasir and Al-Amin, 2006).

▶ Institutions are still struggling with interventions to improve confidence and belonging of BAME students in order to address the apparent attainment gap, finding few tangible solutions or one size fits all approaches (Austen et al, 2017).

▶ 'There needs to be a greater understanding of how the practices of the university work to exclude religious students from full participation on campus' with plenty of room for improvement (Stevenson, 2013:40).

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Research Method
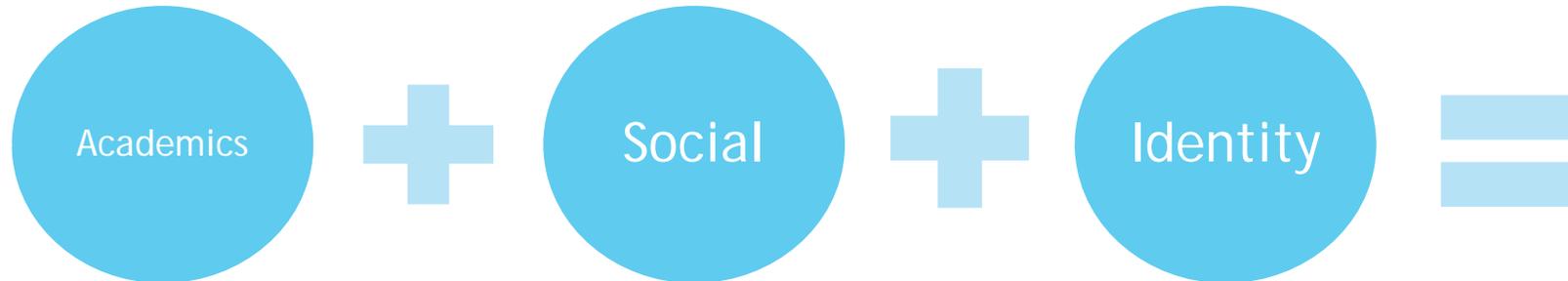
- 120 Muslim students → 20% of population = 24 students (saturation point)

- Methods of recruitment:
  - Weekly intranet posts
  - Posters and flyers around both campuses
  - **Muslim Prayer room**
  - **Snowballing through referrals**

- £25 Amazon voucher incentive and choice of male/female interviewer

- Semi-structured interview (11 minutes – 55 minutes)
  - Gauging Belonging and Engagement
  - Barriers to Belonging
  - Enhancing and Improving 'Sense of Belonging'

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Student Demographics

	Value
18	1
19	5
20	6
21	7
22	3
23	1
29	1
1st	6
2nd	11
3rd	5
Postgrad	2
Female	20
Male	4
Commuting	18
Non-commuting	6
HSS	9
BLS	11
EHSC	4
Arts	0
Home	20
International	4

'Sense of Belonging' understood through:

Academics + Social + Identity = '...being comfortable and having people around you that you identify with...' (NH)

Academic experiences – lecturers and course content/delivery

'...I love my teachers, they are very supportive of me...' (SZ)

'...they introduce different learning techniques and I think that's really effective.' (AA)

Friendliness and welcoming atmosphere

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

Prayer Room and religious respect

'...if that wasn't there I don't feel like I would belong here...' (HA)

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

2/3 of participants felt they belonged at UoW

BUT

...

One sided 'sense of belonging'...?

A lacking social experience and Muslim community

'I really haven't seen the social side of Winchester, I feel there isn't a lot of things that you can do as a Muslim on the social side.' (AH)

'...in my first year we spent a lot of our time in the Prayer Room because that's where we felt there was a few of us, we could just meet and there it was...' (HA)

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

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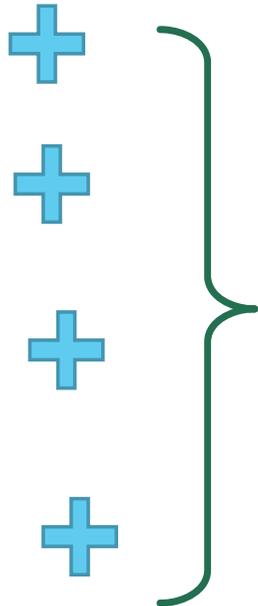
Group identity and understanding

'...because I'm commuting I don't really spend much time here.' (RU)

'...when you go to uni everyone is all about drinking and going out...' (NB)

'I would want to improve my social experience here...' (HA)

'...I wanted to talk about you know how I wanted to join a sports team, I was thinking obviously as a Muslim student I dress in a certain way so I don't know how it would pan out...' (MH)

- ▶ Age
- ▶ Commuting
- ▶ Work
- ▶ International
- ▶ Drink culture
- ▶ Lack of interest
- ▶ Lack of activities/choice

+ + + +

Multiple barriers to engagement

Demand for engagement is prominent, yet it is not being met!

'We find that there's not really anything on campus for us...' (IR)

'...you can't really find many people who you identify with, in terms of religion...' (NH)

'...they do not take into account that there are Muslims that would be there, maybe considering drinking, that would be very considerate of Muslims and I can participate when I am relieved...' (SA)

University bubble

'...there is a reason why I didn't really join many [societies]...every single email I got was "if you want to join, you have to come to the pub"...and all of these things, it was all very surrounded by like alcohol and that lifestyle...I feel like that is quite unfair [to both Muslims and non-Muslims]...if you're not in that bubble, they brush you off...they're very "you either do it, or you're boring"...' (SZ)

(Lowe, in press)

Enhancing and Improving 'Sense of Belonging' and Overall Engagement

Inclusive Events

'...social events which weren't specifically for Muslims but they felt comfortable attending, and then that way they would feel like they belonged more...' (AK)

Islamic Society

'...I would definitely be a part of it, I and it would give me more people, I would try to make my way there...' (WKB)

'...but also for them to make better relations between Muslim students and other students of other faiths or no faith at all ...' (MH)

Halal food

'That's one of the main reasons I don't go to the canteen because there's not halal food...that's like the main difficulty I've faced.' (SH)

Automatic disengagement

'...I would be more willing to stay if there was actually something to eat because to me being social involves something around eating...' (AH)

A 'Satisfied Settling'...

A mechanism in which (Muslim) students have justified (unconsciously) not having access to a richer and more fulfilled university experience in relation to religious needs.
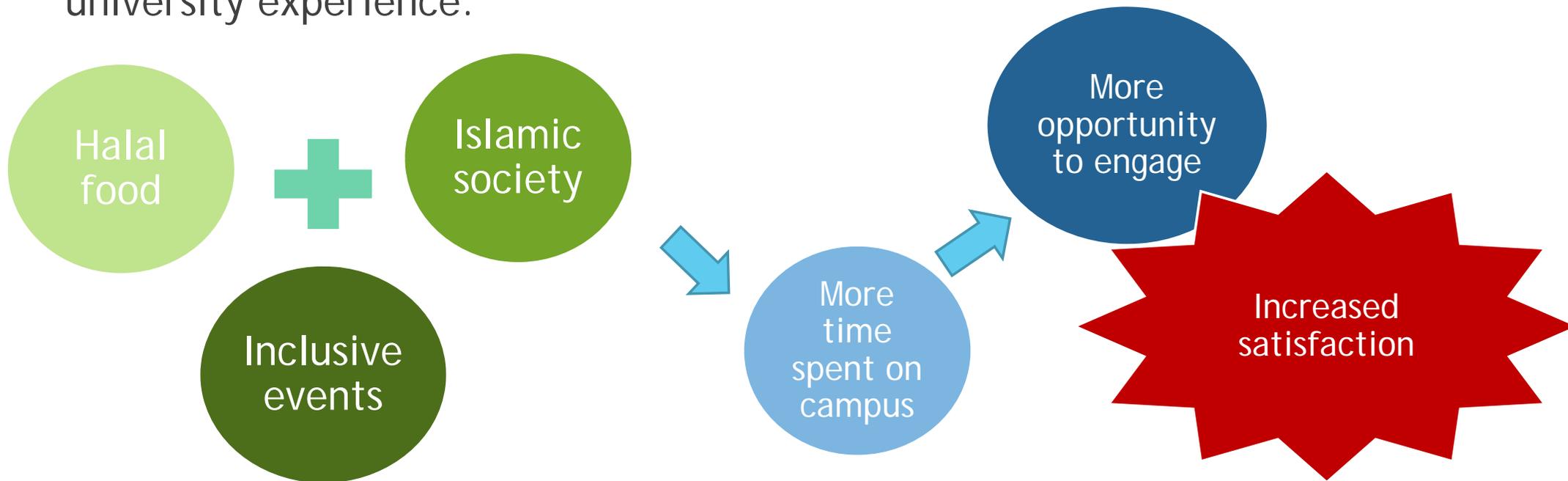
'...the university canteen doesn't serve Halal food and once, when I spoke about it, they [a canteen manager] were like "there's not that many Muslim students" so they don't feel like they need to do it...so I was like "that's fair enough".' (SH)

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

'...if there is a option for Halal it would be quite useful, but then again there are quite a few students so it would go against their profits in a way.' (AR)

Conclusion

▶ Clear that the majority of Muslim students interviewed did 'belong' and have had enjoyable experiences – contrasting to existing literature around Muslim students' university experience.

▶ However, small changes could certainly lead to a more holistic university experience.

Halal food + Islamic society + Inclusive events → More time spent on campus → More opportunity to engage → Increased satisfaction

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