



Visitors from Other Cultures: Views of Muslim Overseas Students in Britain

Thomas Hawes^{1*}; Sarah Thomas²

¹ Sprachenzentrum, University of Augsburg, Germany

² Department of English Language Education, Centre for Open Learning, University of Edinburgh, Germany
Email: tomhawes2004@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

The UK is currently the second most popular destination for international students worldwide yet there is very public uncertainty as to whether Muslim students should be encouraged to come here. There has been much discussion in the media but, apparently, no one has thought of consulting these students themselves, with the result that there is relatively little available research on students from the Islamic world as a whole. What are their common motivations for studying in UK? What if anything do they admire in British culture and what do they find difficult here? Our general conclusion is that our participants make sense of their sojourn in UK as a learning and growing experience, ultimately empowering. For Britain these students and their families are a particularly lucrative source of income, but their presence could be made (even) more beneficial if our universities are prepared to invest extra time and money in engaging with them. We need a shift to a bidirectional exchange model where overseas and local students can all benefit. Muslim groups on campus should be helped to raise their profile to counter feelings of rejection and dispel the potential impression that the Islamic community is secretive or unwelcoming. We believe that such cultural exchange can only be positive and this study has shown that there is probably more goodwill than many imagine.

Keywords: Muslim Overseas Students; Cultural Exchange

Introduction

“The United Kingdom (UK) is a global leader in international education, the second largest destination for international students” (Newsome & Cooper., 2016: 195). Yet, as a result of the EU’s ‘refugee crisis’ and recent Islamist attacks in several EU member states, there is widespread scepticism as to whether it is a good thing that a growing number of overseas students from the Muslim world are currently choosing to study at British universities (e.g. Altbach et al., 2009; Bhandari & Blumenthal., 2011). At the same time, “Acts of Islamophobic abuse are on the increase throughout the West and in the UK” (Brown., 2009: 57). This situation is therefore both crisis and opportunity. Do the cultural challenges that Muslim students face, if any, reduce the viability of their British sojourn? Do their difficulties cancel out their strengths? What specific problems do they face, if any, and how can university staff in Britain best help them while they are here?

Though Germany, for one, welcomed in huge numbers of largely Muslim refugees in 2015, many of its citizens have since demonstrated against what they see as this ‘naivety’ in so-called PEGIDA (translatable as Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) protests and its Parliament now includes a new far right party, the A.f.D. What stance should Britain adopt? A similar discussion has been conducted in British politics and media, but apparently without anyone thinking of consulting the Muslim overseas students themselves. Are those, for instance, sent to study in UK by oil-rich Arab governments comfortable living in Britain’s rather different culture? Are they perhaps fearful of reprisals in the wake of Islamist atrocities worldwide? Do they fear potentially negative stereotypes that locals may hold, not to mention being blamed by proxy for all and any Islamist attacks? Can they even find the necessary peace of mind to study successfully in the UK?

While quite a few studies have focused on overseas students from specific countries, there is relatively little research on students from the Muslim world *as a whole*, or which investigates the thoughts, hopes and fears peculiar to Muslim students (Gardner et al., 2014: 327). If we are to reach a balanced view and help these young people, we need to learn about their common motivations for studying in UK, what if anything they admire in British culture and what they find difficult here. Only then will we have any chance of improving their experience and making the whole deal more positive for all concerned. In order to find answers to these questions we set out to gather both quantitative and qualitative data through questionnaires and in-depth semi-structured interviews, respectively. First we surveyed the literature on overseas students at Western universities for an overview of the main issues, then we created the best research tools we could to elicit frank comprehensive feedback. The latter was then thematically analysed with the aim of producing useful conclusions and recommendations.

Literature Review

According to Brown (2009: 58), “There has been almost no research on the interaction patterns of Muslim international students”. She finds this surprising, firstly because these students represent a large and growing proportion of tertiary-level students in Britain and, secondly, because increasing Islamophobic incidences suggest these students probably have unique needs and experiences. To Brown’s first reason could perhaps be added the fact that Muslim students, especially those from the Arabian Peninsula, are particularly likely to bring family members with them for the sojourn, i.e. as consumers they contribute disproportionately to the UK’s economy. Hotta & Ting-Toomey (2013: 551) confirm a lack of “interpretive-qualitative studies that dig deeper into the international students’ meaning-making perspectives”. To address this the same authors provide the following analytical categories, which are worth considering: identity security-identity vulnerability; identity inclusion-differentiation; identity predictability–unpredictability; identity connection-autonomy; and identity consistency-change. A further weakness in the literature is that studies rarely situate their subjects in context, other than superficially. Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern (2015) are a helpful exception, referring *inter alia* to government financial policy in Saudi Arabia and recommending qualitative methodologies such as grounded theory for projects like ours.

One of our starting points for investigating potential cultural issues for Muslim students, was Jackson Fahmy & Bilton (1992), which researched TEFL students from Oman. Bearing in mind that this study predated the watershed of 9/11 and the US-led invasion of Iraq, this study found that most Omanis held a positive attitude towards English, which was seen as beneficial to economic development. However, there were nationalistic and Islamocentric aspects to this view, namely that better competence in English might eliminate the need for foreign teachers of the language and bolster Omanis in defending - or converting to-Islam (ibid: 282). A more worrying subsequent claim was proffered by Brahim (2008), whose posited ‘oppositional motivation’ amounts to a quest to learn the despised language of Islam’s enemies—the ‘West’? - and use it as a weapon against them (p. 71-72).

By no means all researchers harbour such a pessimistic view, however. McDermott-Levy (2011) contends that any intercultural problems will generally not be due to an ideology such as that described by Brahim, but are more likely to arise from unfortunate early experiences in the host country, particularly perceived and/or actual racism and religious bigotry on the part of locals or in the media. These may additionally be compounded by difficulties experienced in the daily practice of Islam and alienating factors in the host culture. An individual may feel trapped between, on the one hand, a desire to fit in and not look different and, on the other hand, pressure from her/his co-nationals to exhibit those very symbols (e.g. a beard or particular clothing) that mark them out as Muslims. Crucially, McDermott-Levy's (2011) research reveals that Muslims who display the outward signs of their religion tend to have more contact with locals than those who hide them. This finding implicitly calls into question the received wisdom that success demands total immersion in the host culture, or maximal adaptation on the part of the overseas student. It arguably suggests that we ought to provide more, not less, facilities for Muslim students to practise their religion.

Perhaps even more surprisingly, on the question of whether international students “need to develop social and academic exchange with UK students to get the most from their university experience”, Montgomery & McDowell (2009) affirm that contact to other overseas students may provide “a more positive and active international student experience, with international students as the providers of support and knowledge within a supportive and purposeful student community” (p. 455). A related question is then how closely overseas students must identify with their own group in order to feel at home in the host country. Do they need to *look* like their co-nationals or fellow Muslims, or does it suffice to privately profess the same beliefs? Sussman (2000) claims that people are typically not conscious of their own cultural identity, at least on a day-to-day basis. Perhaps many only really feel their ‘difference’ when insulted for it or challenged to defend themselves? Are cultural icons in terms of outward identifiers more important for Muslims than for others? Sussman (2000: 363) considers that these symbols may only truly become salient in a context of intercultural conflict. Most unfortunately, our era appears to have replaced the politico-economic ideology of the Cold War with religious and/or nationalistic struggle. Various studies (e.g. Saïd., 1997; Bake.r., 2010) show that our ‘Western’ media have frequently reduced the multifaceted practice of a billion and more Muslims to what Richardson (2004: 5) calls “an essentialising caricature”, lampooning them as sexist terrorists who pose a threat to democracy.

A claim we were especially keen to investigate comes from Geeraert et al. (2014), who argue that friendships are key and that a student's 3-5 closest contacts have a predominant influence on her/his mind-set during the sojourn (p. 93-94). This same article contends that, although initial close contact to other students from their own country may help with settling in, “over time... extensive contact with co-nationals may be at the detriment of cultural learning and adjustment” (p. 88). So, while all researchers would probably agree that “...our cultures of origin are centrally important to our private and personal sense of self” (Brown & Brown., 2009: Abstract) and therefore that “multicultural training needs to be offered to counsellors at universities” (ibid: 410), the debate centres on precisely how culture of origin affects attitude and motivation to learn. Marginson (2014: 7) advocates a paradigm shift “from understanding international education as a process of ‘adjustment’ of foreign students to local requirements... to understanding international education as *self-formation*.” For him the very notion of one's own culture as a hindrance smacks of racism (ibid: 8).

Marginson's view of culture and identity is flexible, building upon Bourdieu's (1993) notion of self-positioning human subjects. He cites Kashima & Loh (2006): “Students mix and match identities in complex and variable ways in an often deliberate fashion”, implying that identity is something we may play with, adopting and discarding identities to suit the current situation (Marginson., 2014: 10). From this perspective, an international student is far from being a helpless creature who needs to be freed from the set ways of her/ his home culture but, instead, a “strong agent piloting the course of her/ his life” (ibid:

12-14). In short, our universities should abandon their ethnocentric policies and accord equal respect to international students and their cultures!

With this in mind, we set out to interview Muslim overseas students to find out what they could teach us about their stay in Britain and how they might help us to help them in future. Our chosen methodology was ‘thematic analysis’, as outlined particularly by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis need not employ any established theoretical framework and may therefore be used within various frameworks to do various things (Boyatzis., 1998; Attride-Stirling., 2001; Tuckett., 2005; Braun & Clarke., 2006). Braun & Clarke explain:

“Thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants, or it can be a constructionist method, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. It can also be a ‘contextualist’ method, sitting between the two poles of essentialism and constructionism, and characterized by theories, such as critical realism... which acknowledge the ways individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of ‘reality’” (Braun & Clarke., 2006: 81).

Methodology and Data Collection

Research Design and Methodology

The aim of this research project was to obtain an understanding of the effects the study sojourn might have on international postgraduate Muslim students’ cultural identity and sense of self. The meanings that the students create from their own perspectives were of especial interest to us. Therefore, we adopted a primarily qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews, within a thematic-analytical framework, which would hopefully permit access to the participants’ subjective experiences and allow their unique voices to emerge. Our overall Research Question could be summed up as: How do our participants interpret and make sense of their lived experiences in UK?

Procedure and Participants

Our investigation was conducted at the language department of a Scottish university, where one of the researchers teaches. We contacted Muslim overseas students from a range of countries in various departments who fulfilled three criteria: 1) post-graduate status; 2) residence in UK for at least a year and 3) a Muslim background. Potential participants were identified from registration lists for university courses and through programme directors and supervisors of post-graduate students, as well as the Islamic Society. Additional participants were found through snowball sampling by asking the initial contacts to refer others who met the criteria, but avoiding using more than two from any one country.

Ten postgraduate students were identified (6 females and 4 males) from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Libya, Malaysia, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. All were on PhD programmes with one exception, who was doing an MSc in TESOL. Their disciplines included Applied Linguistics, Architecture, Education, Engineering, Environmental Engineering, Landscape Architecture and Nursing Studies. All except two were married and accompanied by spouses and, in some cases, children, their UK stays ranging from 18 months to 7 years in length. All participants had lived in the UK for at least a year at the time of the interview. Ethical considerations were respected, including confidentiality. Thus participants are referred to below using pseudonyms.

Data Collection: Interviews

The interviews, lasting approximately an hour each, were conducted informally but guided by semi-structured questions. After obtaining demographic information, an initial opening question asked for general comments on their experiences in Scotland. Subsequent questions explored the following areas: 1) essential elements of their cultural background; 2) expectations regarding their life in UK; 3) socio-cultural adaptation experiences; 4) social interaction and friendship groups. Finally they were asked to reflect on any changes they felt they had undergone during their stay. Each interview was recorded but the researcher also took notes and asked probing questions, when necessary, to clarify or elaborate the responses.

Data Analysis

The tape recordings were transcribed verbatim by a support team, the transcriptions' accuracy then verified by the researchers. A major aim was to provide a description without falling into the trap of adopting pre-assumed labels, but relying instead on the themes emerging directly from the data and highlighting significant issues as potential categories. These were then coded with labels or identifying terms and grouped into 'thematic networks' (Attride-Stirling., 2001). Categories comprised three levels: Basic Themes, Organising Themes and a Global Theme, the latter summarising the overall meaning of the data.

Results

Our analysis revealed the following issues: firstly the Global Theme, 'Negotiating a dynamic fluctuating identity' (which of course was, chronologically, the conclusion and not the starting point), secondly, this breaks down into three Organising Themes, namely 'Identity dissonances', 'Coping strategies' and 'Self-actualising changes', which in turn comprise a number of Leading and Basic Themes, viz. 'Lack of religious facilities', 'Oppositional pulls', 'Media misrepresentation' and others. The full list is shown in the diagram below.

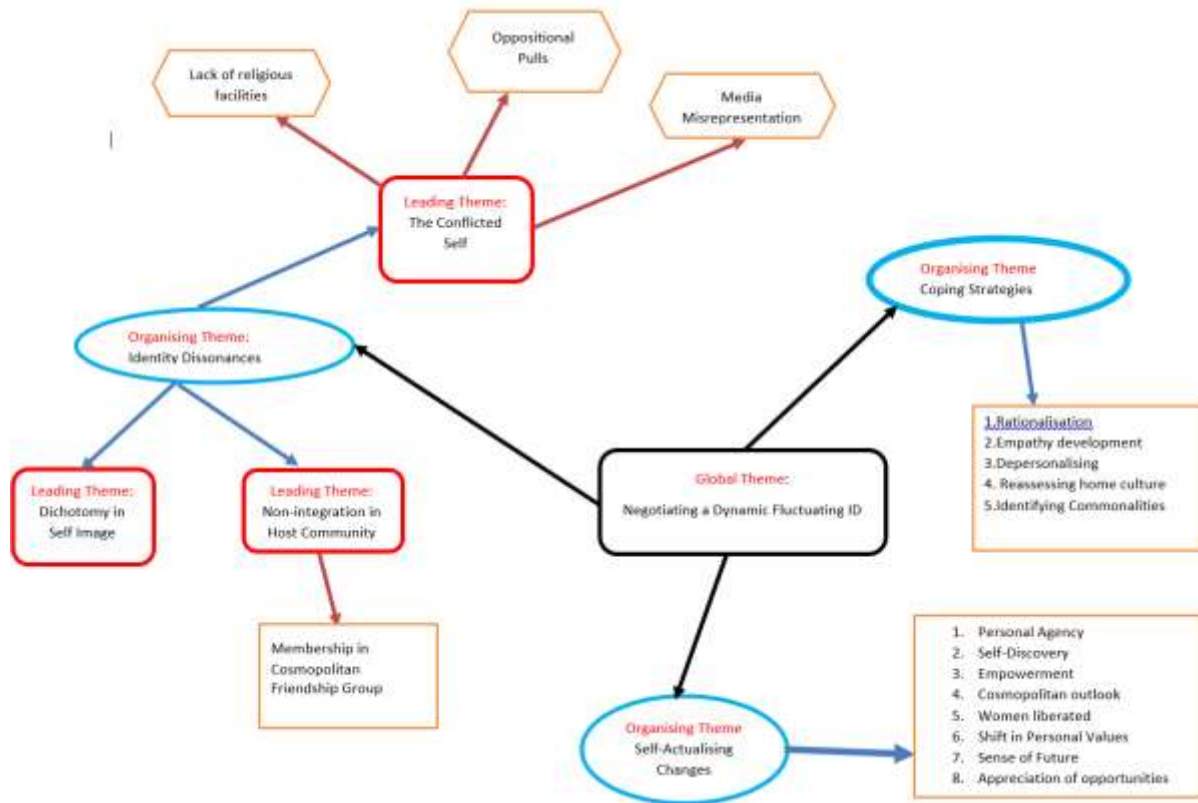


Fig. 1 Issues of the research analysis

Discussion

Negotiating a Fluctuating and Evolving Identity: Our Global Theme

Individuals in any context develop a sense of personal self, a self-concept with what James (1890) long ago described as having three components: the material aspects (physical characteristics, family and possessions), the social self (how one is perceived by others in society) and the spiritual element (how one understands one's feelings). As people interact with the world around them, this sense of self is constantly influenced by societal and environmental factors and, in line with the phenomenological approach to the self described in Luzio-Locket (1998), it is embedded in the individual's perceptions of situational factors in time and space. If an individual is immersed in a particular cultural context from her/his formative years into adulthood s/he develops a self-identity with a degree of stability, or which is 'established'. The sudden transition for academic study purposes into a different socio-cultural environment can then put enormous strain on this previously stable self, as revealed in our participants' narratives.

The central claim of this study is nevertheless positive, that the transition experience is a dynamic evolving process of recreating and redefining an integrated identity. There is progress along a bumpy but exhilarating trajectory, which produces reflection and self-discovery. Personal agency determines the directions taken as these students attempt to manage both challenging and enriching experiences in optimal ways. Though some of these experiences produce dissonances- i.e. circumstances provoking inner disequilibrium or loss of harmony - what is significant is that there is an underlying strength of character and a core of existential confidence which enable coping mechanisms to come into play. The

result is self-actualising and empowering development, such that it is a changed, multi-faceted individual who eventually returns to the home country.

Identity Dissonances

Research has amply documented the range of factors which affect overseas students' adjustment generally, including language difficulties, financial and accommodation issues, dietary differences and loneliness. Our participants were not spared these difficulties. More relevant to the present study, however, they constitute a clearly visible sub-group within the minority group of international students, identifiable by external features associated with their religion: "...in the street you can clearly understand that we are Muslim because she [his wife] has a headscarf and I have the beard... I can say that... being here took me out of my comfort zone" (**Aziz**). As such there was evidence of strain relating to these students' identity and their attempts to function within the cultural norms of a liberal western society. How they dealt with this strain is fascinating.

Our participants were generally older and more mature than the average school-leaver home student and they brought with them a fairly strongly defined sense of self and group identity, governed by the frames of reference of their Muslim heritage, in which the support of family and community are paramount. These individuals were immersed, often with very little preparation, in a significantly different cultural environment with individualistic modes of thinking and behaviour. The need to accommodate rapidly into this new reality with alien and clashing values inevitably lead to phases of great identity dissonance. Our study provides evidence for a range of these problems. To cite Aziz again: "...here I am the minority, I am the [one], who is different..., who talks different, who thinks different, who has a different culture... There are some people – not everybody – ...staring at you for a long time when you go about and you don't feel so comfortable...". We thus refer to one Leading Theme as 'The Conflicted Self'. Its component issues follow.

Media Misrepresentation and Harassment

Brown, Brown & Richards (2015) highlight the belief of Muslim students that the British media present negatively biased views of Islam and Muslim countries. Our study similarly reflects this perception. For instance **Farah**, a Saudi Arabian, describes her reaction to reports in the media about a particular Islamist attack. Although she does not suggest that there is any distortion of the truth, it is clear that such a report may suffice per se to create emotional distress for a Muslim. Farah stated: "...one of my classmates he was talking about the Paris attack and they were talking about the immigrants and the Syrian immigrants and how they were behind this attack. And they are not Saudi, but they are Muslims, and I cried". **Aisha** said: "I find it uncomfortable how people are looking at me. I think that's the main discomfort about the current world situation... associating terrorists with Muslims..." She explained that she herself considers that people everywhere are similar, that moral values are universal rather than peculiar to any one religion.

Muslim students are deeply disturbed by media representations of Islam which they perceive to be distortions. **Khadija** comments on this: "I listen to the news every day, analyse what they say. It's all negative things about Muslims. Imagine you [are a local and] listen to news every day and every day you hear negative things about Muslims. With time, you just build this image that they are bad people...". This may lead Muslim students to feel that the public are prejudiced, sometimes accompanied by a sense of being constantly under scrutiny. As a result, their narratives often reveal undertones of fear and anxiety, feelings of being 'other', of exclusion and rejection, reinforced by hearsay or personal experiences of harassment and verbal abuse.

Fatima describes her fears that media stories about the actions of individuals lead to negative feelings among the public who, in turn, vilify the whole religion and all its adherents: "...because what is happening around the world now... it is not Islam at all, not relevant to Islam; but people they don't know, they just watch the media and they get this bad image about Islam and I feel so bad about it of course...". **Mohamed**, for one, was shouted at from a passing car, presumably insulted though he couldn't make out the words. **Fatima** mentions friends' experiences: "My friends who use the buses, they got offended many times from the bus drivers; some people in the bus [shout]: 'go to your countries'..." She vehemently rejects the tendency to judge Islam itself and all Muslims on the basis of the terrorist acts of particular individuals: "Those few terrorists are people who tarnish the image of Islam. They don't represent us." There is also a sense in which Muslims visiting Britain are carrying the weight of all this personally, feeling that the onus is on them to present a truer picture of Islam and Muslims: "...when I'm dealing with anyone I'm trying to... ask about their country and their identity, and then I'm starting to tell him about our identity and culture in Palestine and in the Arab world and the Muslim world. So I'm trying to just deliver this message to my friends and to my colleagues through chatting" (Hassan).

Oppositional Pulls

All participants are attracted by certain aspects of Scotland, or UK, most often of all mentioning the friendliness of the locals. Says **Hassan** for instance, "I think that the British people have a glorious past and I would like to meet these guys and to know how they are thinking". **Fouad**, for her part, particularly appreciated the fact that shopkeepers would extend her a hearty greeting, something she said does not happen in her native Malaysia. On the other hand, several people, including Fouad, commented on the problem of wishing to socialise with roommates or fellow students in the evenings but finding it difficult due to the omnipresence of alcohol, something forbidden to Muslims. As for contact with non-student Scots, all participants, sadly, confessed to having little.

Fouad also mentioned that because she went to clubs with non-Muslim friends in the evenings her Malaysian compatriots would consider her disloyal to their home culture. When she told them she felt at home in Scotland, happy and accepted by the locals, her compatriots suggested this was only because she did not wear traditional Muslim clothing. Clearly she was pulled in two directions over several issues. **Aziz** revealed: "there is some indirect pressure to adapt. Being in a minority... you don't feel you are complete... Sometimes you just don't do something because you just don't want to get into trouble, to express yourself, because some people don't want to accommodate themselves to understand you..."

Various participants wanting to eat out with others came up against the Muslim pork interdiction. They mentioned that non-Muslim fellow students were generally very understanding about this, some even specially shopping for halal meat. **Hassan** stated: "I'm trying to taste international food... but... because I cannot eat non-halal food it makes some restrictions on me, but the beautiful thing is my flatmates [are] international students from different countries, one of them from Italy, one from Switzerland, one from Washington and one from England. So they are making their own food...and we are sharing food together... because I am not eating non-halal food they are bringing some halal meat, or some halal chicken... We [can] eat together". Nevertheless the respondents were typically caught between wishing to join in (and show good will) and religious rules making it difficult to do so.

Lack of Religious Facilities, Knowledge about Islam

The most common complaint of all related to the lack of enough designated prayer rooms, though many participants praised the University for their concern for Muslim students and for providing some facilities. One even stated that (he) was impressed at this goodwill and didn't believe it would have been

so pronounced if the situation were reversed, i.e. if non-Muslim students were studying in Muslim countries. Solutions our overseas students found to the lack of facilities included praying in all kinds of corners and even a disabled toilet (until told not to do this). Their willingness to pray in almost any available room was not always crowned with success, however. One participant who prayed in a postgrads study room was told by a fellow student that this made her uncomfortable and asked not to do it. As for religious food rules, while **Rachida**, for one, had expected a problem here, in fact Muslims could readily buy halal food in the near-ubiquitous Pakistani and Bangladeshi stores.

Related to the lack of religious facilities is perhaps a deficient knowledge and understanding of Islamic customs amongst the local teachers. One supervisor inadvertently upset Fouad by suggesting she might not be able to work well during Ramadan as she would be fasting. The student, long since used to fasting, considered she would have no difficulties and felt belittled by what was here probably well-intentioned concern. She sometimes shocked flatmates by forgetting to eat in the British way and using her hands as she would back in Malaysia. This she regretted as she felt it was for the visitor to adapt to local customs. In general she had great respect for the British ways, especially for what she saw as superior tolerance and respect for others. Ironically she experienced bigotry from her own co-nationals, however, when she wished locals Happy Christmas on Facebook, unleashing protests from fellow Malaysians. The locals' tolerance also had a downside in that, as well as grateful, she felt guilty at obliging her friends to eat at halal restaurants for her sake. Similarly, whereas her non-Muslim friends were willing to treat her as one of them, she felt sad at having to ask men not to hug her, even when it was intended as a harmless hug, due to the Muslim prohibition of touching the opposite sex.

Non-Integration into Host Community

All participants expressed the desire to integrate, at least up to a certain point (one should not forget that they pay for services in UK; they are not candidates for British nationality!). For example, **Hassan** insisted he was not here to talk to Muslims but to learn about Scotland or the UK: *“Now it is my time to communicate with other people, to learn from them and give them some of my identity to deliver some message for them to know something about Muslims and Arab people”*. Unfortunately, all our Muslim students encountered barriers. **Aziz** explained: *“To some extent I can't do everything that people do here... I don't want to go into a pub... My religion advises me... Maybe I want to... I am trying to prevent myself from doing things like that... I want to try haggis but I can't... [it's] not halal”*. So, despite a great deal of goodwill, the barriers are two-way. The same student admitted that, as a result, he continued to live as if he were in his country of origin: *“Basically, I still continue my Turkish and Muslim identity here... It isn't much changed”*.

Nationality Overrides Religion

Having detailed these—sadly rather predictable—intercultural difficulties, we now come to one of the most interesting, and perhaps significant, findings of this study, namely that, however central Islam may be in a person's subjective identity, the primary determinant may well be nationality. **Hassan**, a believing Muslim, explains why his Palestinian culture and Arabic language override the religion when it comes to friendship and confidence: *“My roommate, he's not Muslim, the Palestinian guy who is living with me is Christian but we came together from Palestine. So I am also spending a lot of time with him. Because it is easier to communicate with him in Arabic and I need some time relaxing... speaking in Arabic gives me some kind of relax[ation]... [If I have a big problem] I prefer to go to one of my Arabic or Muslim friends. Not necessarily Muslim. So maybe my roommate who came with me from Palestine. He's the closest person to me right now. So we are sharing everything. If we have any problem, anything we need help [with]. Always he's the first person that has to know that”*. **Aisha** provided further

clarification: “no matter which religion are you from, it’s really important which country are you from and which culture. So culture doesn’t really associate with religion, in a way. Because the students from Malaysia are also from Muslim background. But the Muslim people from Bangladesh and the Muslim people from Malaysia are totally different”.

Dichotomy in Self-Image

Participants clearly had mixed feelings about the two cultures and this ambiguity played on their sense of wellbeing. **Aziz** mused: “[the Scottish and Turkish culture are] very different, but also [share] so many similarities... Which side of the glass are you looking at? Sometimes I do that, focus on the empty side, the differences. Why do they do that? I want to do the same as in my country. Most of the time I am trying to look at the full side of the glass. I can see many similarities”. This optimistic stance, which Aziz consciously cultivates, translates into a psychologically healthy motivation. He explains: “Here I am the minority, I am the [one], who is different... But all in all, I can say that it’s enriching. It’s a fruitful experience for me. I find it quite useful. Because you get to learn about yourself and also the people and when I go back to my country... you can keep your identity and you can adapt yourself here... They are both possible at the same time... I see this experience abroad as a very cultural experience which will make me even a better even a multicultural person”.

Self-Actualising Changes

This brings us to the empowering aspect of the overseas students’ stay, with certain participants exploring their philosophical beliefs and creating new, more complex, international selves. “For me, coming here and a new culture is quite interesting because it allowed me to learn about new things which I didn’t have access to back home” stated **Mohamed**. He continued: “[I am] socialising more with people from non-Muslim than Arab background. And the flexibility of PhD allowed me to try new things... [The university] organised these events, it was an interfaith event. So I’ve been to that and I found it interesting to learn from different traditions. And I got more involved with it because I learned stuff out of it. I’ve been to this event and I’ve been to the second and they held also the third. It’s something called ‘Breaking Barriers’”. This was most positively expressed by **Hassan**: “My thinking is like people in my country, but I get some new ideas, new ways of thinking from people here because I am living and studying with many students who are not Muslims. They have very good behaviour, way of thinking and we are always chatting and interacting. I am trying to take these positive things [home]. So, there are some changes... It is important just to be faithful or thankful for any identity you have...to search for the good part of this identity and try to encourage yourself about this” (Hassan).

Empowerment

To end on a positive note, we should cite participants who affirm that they have grown and increased in self-confidence: “It make me stronger and more flexible... In the beginning I was afraid from a lot of things, afraid from speaking English with people, afraid from dealing with non-Muslim people, and dealing with any other issues. Now I am not afraid of these things and this is kind of powerful. And also I am more flexible because I am accepting people more than before” (**Hassan**). “I think I’ve changed. Well, because I used to be a super shy girl, like I don’t have an eye contact with anyone I talk to, find it very difficult to talk to men. But when I came here I became more confident, like it’s OK to have eye contact now, it’s OK to talk to men, it’s OK to have conversation with strangers... I like to meet new people... That’s why I like to go to the different societies... I am stronger, maybe. I can express my ideas and things easily now compared to the past” (**Shahara**).

In short, our findings corroborate those of Marginson (2014) and Kashima & Loh (2006), providing additional evidence that overseas Muslim students can be autonomous, thinking individuals, capable of confronting and overcoming the challenges of their stay abroad, as well as growing into stronger, better individuals. Their above testimonies should encourage our planners to have confidence in them, in their personal worth for our universities, as well as for our home students, and – rather than misguidedly attempting to coax them away from their national and personal cultural identities—to have more respect for these latter, to facilitate the practice of their religion, to encourage them to be open and confident in this religious practice (which would involve providing more and better facilities, such as prayer rooms/spaces) and to exchange ideas more freely with those from other cultures. This is, according to the results of our study, the best way forward for everyone. Therefore we call for a reversal of the tacit policy which views Islam as a ‘necessary evil’, evident in the experience of Aziz’s friend who, when he “*emailed his personal tutor requesting a change to the timetable because of a clash with prayers, was told by the Programme Director “that the university doesn’t do those kind of things. She didn’t want to understand that”*”.

Conclusions

To return to our overall research question (how do our participants interpret and make sense of their lived experiences in UK?), we can say that they generally interpret them very positively and make sense of them as a learning and growing experience, returning home after their stay wiser and stronger. From Britain’s point of view, especially bearing in mind that the great majority of these students are accompanied by spouses and/ or children, these overseas Muslim students are a particularly lucrative source of national income. Whether they are culturally equally enriching for the country is a political and ideological question. We would argue that, whatever one’s stance on this question, their presence as visitors could be made (even) more beneficial if our universities are prepared to invest extra time and money in engaging with them.

We therefore ask, with Mubarak (2007, online), “What responsibility, if any, do universities have to accommodate the religious needs of their students? How does a secular academic institution [such as a university] maintain a balance... fulfilling students’ requests for religious accommodation without displaying favouritism towards one religion over another?” Our study’s findings suggest that we should discontinue the facile tradition of looking down on our visitors’ cultural differences and attempting to make them into token locals. In a report by the Guardian International Edition Online (2014) a Danish student exposes the local complacency which holds that ‘we’ are friendly and open, whereas ‘the foreigners’ culture stands as a barrier between us! “*I have experienced a Berlin wall of prejudices from UK students-something that everyone knows about but no one dares talk about because it is sort of a taboo-which in turn results in... a minimum of [contact] between UK and international students”*”.

For instance, where ‘we’ may have tended to assume that Muslims have difficulties because of their prohibition on alcohol, we should face the fact that our local drunks do not always behave like perfect gentlemen. As a Malaysian man pointedly remarks in the same Guardian article, British people are good company “*when they are sober*”. In other words, our universities need to admit that their ‘own’ culture may be as much the problem as that of the visitors. Clearly Britain will not change its culture to please Muslim overseas students. But, as Will Macfarlane, the general secretary of the LSE’s student union, says, “I think we can do things to improve [international contact], providing a cultural shift in university activities away from the drinking cultures, to providing more activities for more groups”.

O’Reilly et al. (2013: 370) similarly point to a “need for HEIs to reconceptualise their idea of a unidirectional exchange, wherein it is only international students who bear the burden of adaptation in order to reap the reward of their sojourn. Instead, consideration needs to be given to the value of a shift to

a bidirectional exchange model where both international and host students are helped to profit from enhanced cultural diversity and horizon-broadening opportunities to interact with each other at a variety of levels". What should be done in practice? Mostafa (2006: 36) recommends greater cooperation between the university and Muslim cultural and religious organisations. There is little doubt that this is sound advice. Perhaps our universities could start by considering conational/co-religious friendships among foreign students as helpful, and attempt to incorporate them into broader contact programmes rather than discouraging them. In this vein, Gresham & Clayton's (2011) recommendation of a social integration course, like the Community Connections programme at the University of Newcastle, Australia, is useful. Apparently this programme has been successful since 1998 in obtaining commitments from home and overseas students to hold regular meetings with each other. Naturally, such programmes (which imply hiring extra staff) involve a financial investment by the institution.

Secondly, we should consider warning the overseas students, in introductory information sessions, about potential Islamophobic bias in the UK media. Our findings concur with those of Brown et al. (2015), not only in so far as Muslim overseas students similarly viewed the media as portraying a biased picture of Muslim countries, but also in that "in order to correct misrepresentations portrayed by the media, some students took on the role of ambassador to promote the true face of Islam" (Brown et al., 2015: 50). We should make more use of students willing to invest time in this way, asking them, or perhaps paying them, to present Muslim themed events – not hidden away, but in mainline student union venues at accessible times. This is because our results clearly suggest that Muslim overseas students are likely to be happier if allowed to publicly take pride in their religious traditions and that this, in turn, could be of benefit to the home students. In any case, opening additional possibilities of self-expression for the Muslim groups on campus should raise their profile, which should counter feelings of not being accepted and also dispel the potential impression amongst non-Muslim students that the Islamic community is secretive or unwelcoming. It should also help to show non-Muslims that Islam is not a monolithic block but that, as with any religion, there are numerous different shades of opinion and variations in practice.

Cultural distance, in itself, is not usually a major hurdle for young people, who are arguably generally willing to at least respect each others' cultures and sometimes even to go the extra mile (as did the non-Muslim friends of our participants, who cooked halal food for them). As Tan & Liu (2014: 186) explain, "it is discrimination rather than cultural distance that shapes acculturation orientations, particularly for ethnically visible students". Countering the insecurity caused by this discrimination, again, requires the creation of special programmes for overseas students, especially those from Muslim countries, who are possibly more affected than others. Certain writers (e.g. Lombard., 2014) propose professional psychological counselling, but we suspect that overseas students would be wary of psychological techniques employed by older people from disciplines they may not be familiar with. No doubt it is preferable to employ similar aged home students—perhaps Muslims themselves – so that social bonding is facilitated.

Finally, one aspect such information programmes could certainly help with is the semiological significance accorded to various cultural signifiers. **Jang & Kim (2010)** explain: "One of the core processes in dealing with another culture is to recognize that the assumptions, symbols and meanings may fundamentally differ among people... implying that the student in an exchange program should question their assumptions and understanding of symbols and meanings in the host country" (2010: 363). For example, one could well imagine that certain strains of British humour could easily be misconstrued as intended to be more offensive than they really are. We believe that such cultural exchange can only be positive and this study has shown that there is probably more goodwill than many imagine.

Reference

- Altbach, P.G., Reisberg, L. and Rumbley, L.E. (2009). Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution. UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education Executive Summary. i-xviii.
- Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic Networks: An analytic Tool for Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Research*. SAGE: London, 1(3): 385-405.
- Baker, P. (2010) Representations of Islam in British Broadsheet and Tabloid Newspapers 1999-2005. *Journal of Language and Politics*. Benjamins, 9(2): 310-338.
- Bhandari, R. & Blumenthal, P. (2011). *International Students and Global Mobility in Higher Education: National trends and new directions*. Palgrave Macmillan:USA.
- Bochner, S., McLeod, B.M. & Lin, A-L. (1977). Friendship Patterns of Overseas Students: A Functional Model, *International Journal of Psychology*, 12(4): 277-294.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The Field of Cultural Production*. Prime.
- Brahim, A.N. (2008). Oppositional Motivation: Insights into a new psychological predisposition in facing the other in Arab societies. *Philologia (Serbia)*, VI: 69-76.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2): 77-101.
- Brown, L. (2009). International Students in England: Finding Belonging through Islam. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 29(1): 57-67.
- Brown, L. and Brown, J. (2009) Out Of Chaos, Into A New Identity: The Transformative Power of the International Sojourn. *Existential Analysis*, 20(2): 341-361.
- Brown, L., Brown, J. and Richards, B. (2015). Media Representations of Islam and International Muslim Student Well-Being. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 69: 50-58.
- Gardner, T.M., Krägeloh, C.U. & Henning, M.A. (2014). Religious Coping, Stress, and Quality of Life of Muslim University Students in New Zealand, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 17(4): 327-338, DOI: 10.1080/13674676.2013.804044.
- Geeraert, N., Demoulin, S. & Demes, K. A. (2014). Choose Your (International) Contacts Wisely: A Multi-Level Analysis on the Impact of Intergroup Contact While living abroad. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 38: 86-96.
- Gresham, R. & Clayton, V. (2011) Community Connections: A programme to Enhance domestic and International Students' Educational Experience, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 33(4): 363-374.
- The Guardian (International Edition Online). (2004). Overseas Students 'not Making British Friends', 29.11.2004. Accessed 17. 2. 2017: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2004/nov/29/internationals-tudents.students1>.

- Hotta, J. & Ting-Toomey, S. (2013). Intercultural Adjustment and Friendship Dialectics in International Students: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 37: 550–566.
- Jackson Fahmy, J. & Bilton, L. (1992). The Sociocultural Dimension of TEFL Education: The Omani file. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 13(3): 269-289.
- James, W. (1890). *The Principles of Psychology*. Henry Holt & Company.
- Jang, D. & Kim, D.-Y. (2010). The Influence of Host Cultures on the Role of Personality in the Acculturation of Exchange Students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 34: 363–367.
- Lefdahl-Davis, E.M. and Perrone-McGovern, K.M. (2015). The Cultural Adjustment of Saudi Women International Students: A qualitative examination. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 46(3): 406–434.
- Lombard, Catherine (2014) *Coping with Anxiety and Rebuilding Identity: A Psychosynthesis Approach to Culture Shock*. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 27(2): 174–199.
- Luzio-Locket, A. (1998). The squeezing effect: The Cross-Cultural Experience of International Students. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 26(2): 209-223.
- Marginson, S. (2014). Student Self-Formation in International Education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(1): 6–22.
- McDermott-Levy, R. (2011). *Going Alone: The Lived Experience of Female Arab-Muslim Nursing Students Living and Studying in the United States*. Unpublished Manuscript.
- Montgomery, C. and McDowell, L. (2009). Social Networks and the International Student Experience: An International Community of Practice? *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(4): 455-466.
- Mostafa, G.M.M. (2006). *Learning and Cultural Experiences of Arab Muslim Graduate Students in a Canadian University*. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*, 1(1): 36-53.
- Mubarak, H. (2007). *How Muslim Students Negotiate Their Religious Identity and Practices in an Undergraduate Setting*. Social Science Research Council. Brooklyn, New York. Online only at <http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Mubarak.pdf>.
- Newsome, L.K. & Cooper, P. (2016). International Students' Cultural and Social Experiences in a British University: "Such a hard life [it] is here". *Journal of International Students*, 6(1): 195-215. Accessed 17.2.2017: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1083255.pdf>.
- O'Reilly, A., Hickey, T. and Ryan, D. (2013). Higher Education Professionals' Perspectives on International Student Experiences of Life and Learning in Ireland: A qualitative Study. *Irish Educational Studies*, 32(3): 355-375.
- Richardson, J. E. (2004). *(Mis)Representing Islam: the Racism and Rhetoric of British Broadsheet newspapers*. John Benjamins.

Saïd, E.W. (1997). *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. Vintage.

Sussman, N.M. (2000). The Dynamic Nature of Cultural Identity Throughout Cultural Transitions: Why Home is not so Sweet. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4(4): 355-373.

Tan, S.-A. & Liu, S. (2014). Ethnic Visibility and Preferred Acculturation Orientations of International Students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 39: 183–187.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).