AZIZFOUNDATION

Loughborough University

LIVED EXPERIENCES AND IMPROVED FUTURES FOR MUSLIM STUDENTS, DOCTORAL RESEARCHERS AND STAFF AT LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY

By Rafia Arshad, Ellie Moore and Line Nyhagen

Research report
Department of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy
Loughborough University, 2025.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

This report, and the research it is based on, is the result of a collaborative effort.

The core research team has consisted of Dr Line Nyhagen, Lead Investigator and Professor of Sociology at Loughborough University (LU), Rafia Arshad, Research Associate and Doctoral Researcher (LU), and Ellie Moore, Research Associate and Doctoral Researcher (LU). As the report's authors, the team members are listed in alphabetical order.

A wider project team at Loughborough has supported the research and/or the *Five Pillars* exhibition, including Dr Kerri Akiwowo (Senior Lecturer, School of Design and Creative Arts), Professor Neil Budworth (Director of Health, Safety and Wellbeing), Veronica Moore (Director of EDI Servies), Revd Elizabeth York (Lead Chaplain), Ust. Safra Razeek (Muslim Chaplain), Mahmut Akpinar (volunteer Muslim Chaplain), Maillem Al-Rawi (volunteer Muslim Chaplain, Receptionist and Student Support Assistant), Marwan Abdelwahab (Islamic Society member and bioengineering student) and Eliza Masroor (Islamic Society member and chemistry student).

We wish to thank the Aziz Foundation and Loughborough University for their generous funding of our research into the lived experiences of Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff at LU. We also wish to thank Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Vibrant and Inclusive Communities, Professor Emily Keightley, for additional funding for the *Five Pillars: Lived Experiences, New Futures* exhibition in collaboration with LU Arts.

Our Advisory Board has a mix of members from external organisations and Loughborough University. We wish to thank them for constructive suggestions and feedback: Professor Kristin Aune (Coventry University), Professor Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor (Coventry University), Professor Mathew Guest (Durham University), Tim Hewes-Belton (International Student Experience Manager, LU), Ruqaiyah Hibell (Head of Chaplaincy Programme, Markfield Institute of Higher Education), Charlie Wheeldon (Director of Student Services, LU), Dr Tina Byrom (Head of Enhanced Academic Practice, LU), and Maira Tehseen (Doctoral Researcher, LU).

We wish to extend our warmest thanks to Dr Kerri Akiwowo for her outstanding work as Curator for the *Five Pillars: Lived Experiences, New Futures* exhibition; to Lead Chaplain Revd Elizabeth York and Muslim Chaplain Ust. Safia Razeek for their boundless support for this project; to LU Arts for their excellent support for the *Five Pillars* exhibition; to Adyan Ammantoola for his support as President of Loughborough Islamic Society; to Equality Action Charnwood for providing community links; to Professor Emily Keightley for financial support for the *Five Pillars* exhibition and to Dr Zain Sardar, Programme Manager at the Aziz Foundation, for his steadfast support.

Last, but not least, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the participants who generously shared their time and experiences for this study. Their willingness to take part in the survey and/or focus groups provided invaluable insights, without which this project would not have been possible.

Foreword

Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh
– May God's peace, mercy and blessings be upon you all

This report opens a window into the everyday realities of Muslim life on campus; stories that resonate deeply, are quietly spoken or sometimes just silently perceived. The study gives voice to students, doctoral researchers, and staff who strive not only for academic and professional success but also for the freedom to live their faith with dignity.

As the Muslim Chaplain, I have the privilege of walking alongside members of our community on their spiritual, personal, and academic journeys. From juggling prayers between lectures, to fasting through exam periods, to gently educating others about their values, these are not small feats. They reflect a quiet strength and a deep sense of purpose.

Challenges are not simply documented; the findings honour lived experience. The study recognises the joy of finding community in the prayer room, the relief of being understood, and the power of visibility. Conversely, it shines a light on the weight of exclusion; when events revolve around alcohol and further marginalise, where prayers feel logistically difficult, and the resonance of faith eclipse to a stereotype.

Central to this work is a simple yet profound question: how can we create a university culture of acceptance where Muslim students and staff feel included and truly belong? The answer begins with listening deeply; and this report is a momentous step in that direction. It reflects an ethos rooted in equity, compassion, and accountability. It invites us to build a campus where our Muslim community can feel a sense of belonging, being true to who they are.

My sincere thanks go to the researchers, participants, board members, well-wishers and supporters who made this report possible. Your courage in sharing these stories will, *Insha Allah* (God willing), chart a path to meaningful change, not solely for Muslims, but for all who cherish justice, dignity, and inclusion.

May this heartfelt work generate positive transformation, where recognition of religious identity, accessibility of spiritual resources, and inclusion in all aspects of university life are not adjuncts, they embrace our shared goals and aspirations, our common humanity.

May Allah bless this work with lasting impact and make it a source of untold benefit to unify our university community as it continues to grow and flourish.

Ameen.

Usthada Safra Z. Razeek

Muslim Chaplain, Loughborough University

Institutional Response

I proudly welcome this important and timely research examining the lived experiences of Muslim students, doctoral researchers, and staff across both campuses of Loughborough University. The outcomes of this project offer not only crucial insights into how Muslim members of our university experience campus life but also identify clear pathways for creating a more inclusive environment.

The research demonstrates what is achievable through recommendations that are grounded in evidence based, lived experiences. These cover key themes such as, prayer and ablution facilities, support during fasting, non-alcohol social opportunities, inclusive curriculum development, equitable workplace policies, and the university's role in addressing Islamophobia. In so doing this work shows how we can effectively put the commitments made in Loughborough's EDI strategy into action.

Also addressed is the need to tackle potential barriers created by our institutional culture – barriers which are typical across the Higher Education sector - through the creation of clearer internal communications, more inclusive policy and proactive community engagement. The research highlights how addressing these barriers is central to the success of anti-discriminatory initiatives.

Most commendable is the timeliness of this work, I am acutely aware that we are in a period of heightened sensitivity and complexity for Muslim students, researchers, and staff. The broader social and political context marked by the ongoing conflict in Gaza and beyond happening at the same time as the introduction of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, has polarised public discourse and created new social tensions around identity, belonging, and expression. For some members of our university community, these tensions are not only a geo-political issue, but a personal matter tied to family and faith, which unless mitigated, can have a direct impact on the sense of safety and belonging on our campuses. By centring the voices of Muslim students and staff in the context of these wider social issues the research effectively offers a constructive model for more anti – discriminatory practice that has the potential to be replicated across the sector.

I appreciate the contributions of the participants and the authors for producing this work and thank the Aziz Foundation for their support of this research and, more broadly, for promoting the invaluable contribution Muslim communities make to British society.

Veronica Moore

Executive Director of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Loughborough University

Executive Summary

Muslims in UK higher education are a 'distinctive minority' (Guest et al. 2020, p. 22) due to their high degree of identification as religious and a high level of engagement with religious practices. Because of unmet needs relating to religious identities, obligations and practices, combined with experiences of stereotyping, microaggressions and Islamophobia, Muslims in higher education are experiencing forms of social exclusion that undermine their equitable citizenship in academia.

This research report examines the lived experiences of Muslim students, doctoral researchers (DRs) and staff at Loughborough University (LU). It also puts forward recommendations about how university policies, practices, services and cultures can best meet the needs of Muslim members of the LU community. The research evidence discussed in this report is based on an online survey of undergraduate students (UG), postgraduate taught students (PGT) and doctoral researchers (DRs) at LU, and online focus groups with UG/PGT students, DRs, and academic and professional staff at LU.

The key findings of the report include:

- Generally, students, DRs and staff who identify as Muslim feel both welcome and included at LU's two campuses in the Midlands and London.
- They are particularly appreciative of the faith-oriented facilities, services and support groups available at the university, including the formal prayer facilities in the Edward Herbert Building (EHB) on the Midland campus.
- The Islamic Society (ISOC) is very important for students at LU who identify as Muslim. For some, ISOC is the only platform that offers a safe and inclusive environment for socialisation, friendship and networking.
- Despite their overall positive attitudes and lived experiences of Muslim-identifying members of the LU community, research participants also raised issues that create real barriers to participation, inclusion and belonging.
- While existing prayer facilities in EHB meet basic needs, the room standards (e.g., heating; carpet on which prayer is performed) can be improved. The size of the prayer room at the London campus is too small. Participants also need access to more localised prayer rooms (e.g., in Schools/Departments) due to logistical challenges (time and distance) in reaching EHB for set prayer times between lectures, meetings, etc.
- More awareness and increased literacy are needed among non-Muslim members of the LU community about Islam and the everyday needs and practices of Muslim students, DRs and staff. This would facilitate understanding across those who identify with different religious faiths as well as those who identify as secular and contribute to breaking down everyday barriers and stereotypes that Muslim students, DRs and staff experience.

- University cultures and practices involving food and alcohol consumption are dominant themes relating to social exclusion of Muslim-identifying students, DRs and staff.
- Activities and cultures that centre on alcohol consumption during Freshers' Week, in student housing and hall life, and in student clubs and societies, marginalise and exclude Muslim students from taking part. Staff activities and cultures that include alcohol impact on the participation and inclusion of Muslim DRs and staff.
- Muslim students, DRs and staff reported challenges in consuming food on campus during events and in university food outlets due to the limited availability of halal food options and the lack of clear food labelling.
- While most of the research participants feel a sense of inclusion and belonging at the university, perceptions of inclusion and belonging were often conditional and layered, shaped both by dominant socio-cultural norms and individual effort. This suggested a surface-level of inclusion, rather than a deeper, sustained acceptance and inclusion at institutional and individual levels. Being a 'quiet and good Muslim' was seen as both expected and required to be met with 'tolerance'. Often, our participants did not feel recognised or acknowledged by university communications.
- Although most participants described LU as a welcoming and supporting university, they also spoke about subtle forms of exclusion which shaped how safe and comfortable they felt on campus. These experiences included marginalisation, microaggressions, stereotyping, racialisation and forms of identity management that point to more complex, layered perceptions of belonging and inclusion.
- Evidence-based recommendations and examples of existing good practice are listed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 1

LIVED EXPERIENCES AND IMPROVED FUTURES FOR MUSLIM MEMBERS OF LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY

1.1 Introduction

This report examines the lived experiences of Muslim students, doctoral researchers (DRs) and staff at Loughborough University (LU). It also puts forward recommendations about how university policies, practices and services (including facilities) can better meet the needs of Muslim members of the LU community. In this chapter we outline the background for our study, briefly describe Loughborough University, and provide relevant statistics about Muslims in higher education. We argue, with Guest et al. (2020, p. 22), that Muslims in higher education are a 'distinctive minority' due to their high degree of identification as religious and engagement with religious practices. Due to unmet needs related to religious identities, obligations and practices, combined with experiences of stereotyping, microaggressions and Islamophobia, Muslims in higher education are experiencing forms of social exclusion that undermine their equal citizenship on campus. This first chapter also outlines the research questions for our study.

1.2 Background and context

Universities, academics, government stakeholders, faith organisations and charities are increasingly paying attention to issues of equity, diversity, inclusion and belonging related to religious identities and practice in UK higher education institutions. Hitherto, research has especially focused on Christian and Muslim students (e.g., Aune, Perfect & Ryan, 2024; Guest et al., 2020; Scott-Baumann et al., 2020; Stevenson, 2018; Sharma & Guest, 2013; Guest et al., 2013). Existing studies include both quantitative and qualitative research designs, with some based on single university case studies (e.g., Alam & Chaudry, 2025; Akel, 2021) and others engaging with research participants from multiple universities (e.g., Peacock et al., 2023; Guest et al., 2020; Scott-Bauman et al., 2020). While these and other studies have identified unmet needs and useful recommendations for universities to implement, further local studies are required to provide the best possible evidence-base for tailored policy responses to unmet needs and provision gaps for specific groups. This report from Loughborough University is in response to the Aziz Foundation's Muslim Friendly Universities Programme and its call for university-specific studies of the lived experiences of British Muslims on campus. As an outcome of our research project, LU will become a partner university in the Aziz Foundation's Scholarship Programme which awards Masters' degree scholarships to British Muslim students.

Loughborough University is one of the UK's leading universities with campuses in Loughborough, East Midlands and at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, London. The university has approximately 20,000 home and international students (2024/25) across undergraduate, postgraduate taught and doctoral programmes ranging from subjects in engineering, business, science and sports to social sciences, humanities, design and creative arts. The current student population consists of 41% women, 58% men and 1% Other. Furthermore, 36% of LU students belong to a racialised minority group, 61% to a racialised majority group and 2% are unknown. The University (in 2022/23) employs a total of 3,880 staff, consisting of both academic-related and professional services staff. The total staff population is 53% women and 47% men, with the academic staff group being 38% women and 62% men. Moreover, a total of 20% of staff belong to a racialised minority group, 79% to a racialised majority group and 1% is unknown. The number of Muslim academic-related and professional services staff is unknown as data is lacking. As noted below, 5.3% of the current student population across the two LU campuses identify as Muslim. On a regular Friday, more than two hundred members of the LU community gather for Friday lunchtime prayer at the LU Chaplaincy on our Loughborough campus. Muslim students, DRs and staff are supported by The Chaplaincy, a part-time Muslim Chaplain, and the Islamic Student Society. LU's effort to support inclusivity in its faith provision towards Muslims is exemplified by the introduction of a paid, formal Muslim Chaplain role from 2024 onwards.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is a core element of the Loughborough University Strategy Creating Better Futures. Together. The university has a commitment to 'prioritise activities that identify and remove systemic inequities, associated with protected characteristics and marginalised groups, as well as promote and embed anti-discriminatory practice' (EDI at Loughborough 2025). A key performance indicator in the EDI Core Plan is to increase the levels of belonging and inclusion for staff, DRs and students, while key objectives include the improvement of levels of diversity at the university and the creation of 'a vibrant and inclusive community where all belong' (EDI Core Plan, 2025). The core plan has a clear focus on the protected characteristics sex, gender, ethnicity, and disability (Equality Act 2010). Religion is not explicitly mentioned as a specific characteristic, but a key action is to '[facilitate a culture in which staff and students feel safe to practice and be identified by their faith or belief on both East Midlands and London Campuses'. This action is

supported via the establishment of the Religion and Belief Working Group in 2025, which is part of the formal EDI governance structure at LU (Working Groups, 2025). The Working Group aims to 'address issues affecting staff and students of various religions and worldviews, and to promote and celebrate diverse beliefs on campus'. The findings and recommendations of this research report will be presented to and discussed in the Working Group. The university has also declared a specific 'responsibility to support Muslim students and staff, to provide a safe and welcoming environment, and to allow them to freely express and practice their faith' (Blogs.Lboro, 2024). Our hope is that the research-based evidence and recommendations presented herein will enable and support Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff in realising their best potential as members of the Loughborough University community.

1.3 Muslims in UK higher education: a 'distinctive minority'

Although a significant minority of students (44%) in UK higher education institutions have no religion or religious beliefs, a majority (55%) have a stated religious belief, as indicated by HESA statistics (2025). The largest religious groups of students are those who identify as Christian (30%) and Muslim (14%). In 2023/24, the total number of Muslim students in UK higher education was 345,370 (HESA 2025), and '[t]he proportion of students with a Muslim religious belief has increased each year, rising from 10% in 2019/20 to 14% in 2023/24' (HESA, 2025). A year-on-year increase in Muslim students is also evident at Loughborough University, where just short of 1,000 students (995) identified as Muslim in 2024/25, equating to 5.3% of the total student population of 18,744. This figure is inclusive of undergraduate and postgraduate taught students and doctoral researchers/PhD students. In their study *Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses,* Guest and colleagues note that '[m]ore than 70% of Muslim students see themselves as religious' (the figure for Christian students is less than 40%) and that '[t]wo thirds [of Muslim students] engage in collective prayer at least once per week (the figure for Christian students is less than 30%) (Guest et al., 2020, p. 16). Moreover, Guest and colleagues report that '75.9% of male Muslim students engage in collective prayer at least weekly; the figure is 58.8% for women' (ibid). Based on these and related indicators, Scott-Baumann et al. (2020, p. 56) note that Muslim students are 'more serious about and more practically committed to their faith than Christian students.' Moreover, Guest et al. (2020, p. 22) argue that 'Muslims emerge as a

distinctive minority' in higher education institutions, as most Muslim students identify as religious and live a religious life. Based on the research findings of our study, we contend that Muslims are a distinctive minority at Loughborough University, due to their religious practices and needs related to obligatory congregational and/or individual prayer, dietary restrictions relating to food and drink, and gender norms about modesty in dress and behaviour. The distinctiveness of their minority position is further accentuated by ideological and structural issues prevalent in both higher education institutions and the wider society, including religious discrimination, hatred and racism directed towards people who identify and/or present as Muslim (Allen, 2020; Easat-Daas & Zempi, 2024; Jones & Unsworth, 2022; Mahmud & Islam, 2024; UUK, 2021). The All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims defines Islamophobia as 'rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness' (APPG on British Muslims, 2018, p. 11; see also The Runnymede Trust, 2024; 2017; 1997). Loughborough University has endorsed the APPG definition of Islamophobia.

Due to perceived need, in 2021, Universities UK issued the briefing 'Tackling Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred: Practical guidance for UK universities' (UUK, 2021). The briefing outlines multiple practical steps that universities can take to welcome Muslims on campus, including the removal of barriers to practising religion, offering events that are more inclusive, increase the general understanding of Islam and Islamophobia, the facilitation of inter-faith activities, and engaging with Muslim student representatives and Muslim Chaplains in EDI initiatives. Some of our recommendations (see Chapter 5) echo these evidence-based recommendations as well as those by other UK academics (Akel, 2021; Alam & Chaudry, 2025; Guest et al., 2020; Mahmud & Islam, 2024; Scott-Bauman et al., 2020). Importantly, our full list of recommendations is rooted in research-based, LU-specific knowledge about the needs and experiences of our university community members. To support the participation, inclusion and belonging of Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff at LU, our report provides research-informed knowledge about lived experiences in the unique institutional contexts of our two campuses. Our study aims to inform, support, and promote an inclusive academic citizenship, understood as the membership, recognition, and belonging of Muslims in UK higher education institutions (Sümer, O'Conner & LeFeuvre, 2020, p. 18).

1.4 Research questions

The following research questions have guided our study of the lived experiences of Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff at Loughborough University. The first two are discussed in Chapter 3 (findings) and the final two are addressed in Chapter 4 (recommendations).

1) What are the lived experiences of Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff across LU's two campuses in London and the Midlands?
2) What are the key opportunities and barriers to participation, inclusion and wellbeing among Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff at LU?
3) What are the current best practices as well as gaps in existing LU policies, practices and facilities that directly or indirectly support Muslims across the two LU campuses?
4) What are the strategies and mechanisms that can best support a set of research-informed, comprehensive university policies that will enable Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff to thrive across our two campuses?

Chapter 2

RESEARCH METHODS

2.1. Introduction

This chapter outlines the research questions and aims for our study of the lived experiences of Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff at Loughborough University. It then briefly describes the exhibition *Five Pillars: Lived Experiences, New Futures*, which was an important part of our project. The chapter then discusses the research methods we used, including a survey, focus groups and individual interviews, and the participant recruitment process. The final two sections of the chapter outline key ethical considerations and offers statements on our researcher positionalities.

2.2. Research questions and aims

As stated in Chapter 1, our mixed-methods project, combining quantitative and qualitative research methods, seeks to answer the following four research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff across LU's two campuses in London and the Midlands?
2. What are the key opportunities and barriers to participation, inclusion and wellbeing among Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff at LU?
3. What are the current best practices as well as gaps in existing LU policies, practices and facilities that directly or indirectly support Muslims across the two LU campuses?
4. What are the strategies and mechanisms that can best support a set of research-informed, comprehensive university policies that will enable Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff to thrive across our two campuses?

To gain both a broad and an in-depth understanding of the above issues, we initially opted for a survey-based approach in combination with a set of focus groups. The surveys and focus groups aimed to explore the lived experiences and views of Muslim students and staff on issues such as:

- Existing and new forms of faith provision for Muslim students and staff on campus delivered through and beyond the University Chaplaincy at LU
- Existing welfare, wellbeing and other support services for Muslim students and staff, and any unmet needs

- Current provision and any unmet needs relating to student housing and catering (e.g., participation on hall committees, 'dry halls', halal food, etc.)
- Classroom cultures at undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate taught (PGT) levels (inclusion and belonging)
- Muslim/Islam-inclusive curriculum content at UG and PGT levels
- Doctoral research supervision and culture (inclusion and belonging)
- Staff workplace culture (inclusion and belonging)
- Awareness and usage of LU's online reporting tool on incidents that may include bullying and harassment and/or hate incidents including Islamophobia
- Experiences of access, participation and inclusion in campus leisure activities such as sporting activities, Student Societies and the Student Union
- Concerns around Prevent, and freedom of speech
- Experiences of financial hardship and awareness of university support.

The findings from our research are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Furthermore, our project aimed to highlight existing good practices and to put forward a set of recommendations for policies that may contribute positively to enhancing the experience of Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff at LU (see Chapter 5).

2.3. The Five Pillars exhibition

An important part of our research design was to highlight the positive contributions that our Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff bring to our campus and local community. To accentuate this, the project included a community-based culture, arts and science-based exhibition entitled *Five Pillars: Lived Experiences, New Futures*, curated by Dr Kerri Akiwowo (School of Design and Creative Arts, LU) and held at Martin Hall on our Midlands campus, in collaboration with LU Arts. The exhibition was open every weekday between 10 March and 3 April 2025 and welcomed both members of the university community and the wider public. It celebrated Muslim identities and Islamic culture at Loughborough University and regionally by bringing together students, doctoral researchers, staff, community members and residents in one showcase, featuring artefacts, imagery, narratives, reflections and propositions for a more inclusive society.

For the exhibition, a commissioning process was launched for an original piece of artwork and a mural design competition was announced in addition to a general call for contributions from the Muslim student, doctoral researcher and staff community at LU and from the wider Muslim community in Loughborough. To facilitate the latter, we also worked with Equality Action Charnwood who distributed information about the exhibition through their member organisations. The exhibition was supported by the Aziz Foundation and Loughborough University. For further info, see https://www.lboro.ac.uk/arts/features/five-pillars/ and Appendix B.

2.4. Survey and focus groups

An online survey targeted at students was administered during the 2024/25 academic year, to gain broad knowledge of the lived experiences and key opportunities and barriers to participation, inclusion and wellbeing facing our Muslim UG and PGT student cohorts and doctoral researchers (see section 2.4.1). A total of forty-eight (48) respondents took part in our survey.

A series of eight (8) focus groups were held with UG/PGT students, doctoral researchers, and academic and professional staff, also in 2024/25, to gain in-depth knowledge of barriers to participation, inclusion and wellbeing and to identify gaps and develop new best-practice policies and practices to support our Muslim population. The focus groups included participants from both the Midlands and London campuses. In addition, two individual interviews were held with participants who for various reasons could not attend the agreed time of the focus groups. A total of twenty-seven (27) participants took part in our focus groups and interviews (see Section 2.4.2).

Draft designs of the student survey questionnaire and four sets of focus group topic guides for different participant groups (UG/PGT students; DRs; Academic staff; Professional Services Staff) were developed by the core research team, together with consent forms, participant information sheets and a risk assessment review. Members of the wider project team at LU were invited to comment and provide feedback on all the draft research instruments. The first Advisory Board consultation was also held, with input requested from advisory board members on the draft research instruments and ethics documents. Advisory board members' recommendations were taken on board and incorporated. The second Advisory

Board consultation asked for board members' comments and feedback on the draft research report and their suggestions were integrated into the final report. This collaborative approach was taken to ensure a diversity of voices were embedded in the design and implementation of the project. A non-hierarchical practice which involved the participation of a range of internal and external stakeholders and a diverse research project team, was important to ensuring Muslim stakeholders and their voices have been integrated at all levels and stages of the project. By including a range of stakeholders (for instance, advisory board and wider project team members) we aimed to adopt a model that actively seeks to reduce bias. Such practices align with approaches that emphasise reflexivity and seek to reduce power dynamics within knowledge generation (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Our intention is for the research process, findings and recommendations to contribute to a 'transformative praxis' which is 'rooted in social emancipation and solidarity with oppressed people', as articulated by Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021, p. 2).

2.4.1 The survey research instrument

The survey included questions designed to capture attitudes, values and perspectives on themes relating to perceptions of inclusion and belonging, awareness of campus provision (including faith-related services) and institutional policies. Of the 48 survey responses, 26 were from UG students, 5 from PGT students, and 17 from doctoral researchers. All 48 respondents were affiliated with the Loughborough Midlands campus, suggesting that the survey recruitment did not reach the London campus (the latter was, however, represented in the qualitative part of our study). Of the 48 survey respondents, 38% were British home students, and 63% were international students. Male participants made up three quarters (75%) of the responses, compared to 25% of female participants. Descriptive statistics about our survey respondents based on HESA's ethnicity student framework are shown in Table 2.1, while Table 2.2 show survey respondents by School.

Table 2.1 Frequency table of survey respondents by ethnicity (HESA Framework)

Ethnicity	Frequency	Percent
Arab	10	20.8
Asian - Bangladeshi or Bangladeshi British	3	6.3
Asian - Indian or Indian British	6	12.5
Asian - Pakistani or Pakistani British	14	29.2
Any other Asian background	5	10.4
Black - African or African British	5	10.4
Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background	4	8.3
Any other ethnic background	1	2.1
Total	**48**	**100**

Table 2.2 Frequency table of survey respondents by School

School	Frequency	Percent
School of Social Science and Humanities	5	10.4
School of Sport, Exercise and Health Science	2	4.2
School of Science	10	20.8
School of Mechanical, Electrical and Manufacturing Engineering	5	10.4
School of Design and Creative Arts	1	2.1
Loughborough Business School	16	33.3
School of Architecture, Building and Civil Engineering	9	18.8
Total	**48**	**100**

2.4.2 The focus group topic guide research instruments

Four sets of focus group topic guides were designed for four different participant groups: UG/PGT students; doctoral researchers; academic staff; and professional services staff. Initially, the plan was to conduct a total of eight focus groups, two for each category, with separate sessions for male and female participants. However, during the recruitment phase, a more flexible approach was adopted which accommodated the availability of participants and ensured a meaningful data collection. Given the contextual circumstances, mixed-gender focus groups were conducted when appropriate. As noted above, a total of 27 participants took part in the eight focus groups and two individual interviews. Among them, 11 were doctoral researchers, comprising four females and seven males. Six participants from the academic and research staff took part, consisting of four males and two females. The professional services staff included three participants - one female and two males. Lastly, seven undergraduate and postgraduate taught students participated in the study; among them, four were females, two were males and one self-identified as non-binary.

The focus group participants were recruited using a purposeful sampling strategy to ensure the inclusion of participants from all the categories across both campuses. The focus groups and individual interviews were scheduled online on MS Teams as per the preference of participants. All focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed using the MS Teams built-in transcription feature which is an accessible and reliable tool for recording data in real time. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis; a widely used qualitative data analysis technique to explore participants' experiences and meanings within an interpretive framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, the codes were identified and discussed by the three members of the core research team; the codes were then organised into relevant themes which were subsequently analysed, reviewed and structured into report sections.

The key themes discussed in the focus groups were as follows: inclusivity and sense of belonging; the practice of Islam on campus; research culture and supervision; curriculum and classroom culture; experiences of faith-based hate; workplace and religious life balance; challenges and barriers for Muslim students and staff in their career and professional development; and the presence of role models within the university to support motivations and aspirations of Muslim students and staff members.

2.5 Participant recruitment

Participant recruitment posters with QR codes for the survey and focus groups were designed, marketed and distributed in multiple ways. Posters were distributed around campus and circulated through several email lists (e.g., for international students via the LU International Student Experience Manager) as well as on social media and WhatsApp networks including for ISOC members. All focus group participants were given a voucher worth £10 for their time and contribution to the project. During the recruitment process we worked closely with the Chaplaincy and posters were distributed in the men's and women's prayer rooms on the main campus. During the research, newly appointed Muslim Chaplain at LU, Ust. Safra Razeek, joined the project team and provided support together with Lead Chaplain Revd. Elizabeth York. Overall, the participant recruitment process for both the survey and focus groups took considerable effort, time and collaborative work. Our publicity and recruitment campaign were extended by several months, with the survey finally closing on 24 February 2025 and the final focus groups taking place in March 2025. While holiday and exam periods were part of the reasons for a slow recruitment process, it was also suggested that Muslim students might be reluctant to participate due to concerns about what purpose the research was for (see also Scott-Baumann et al., 2020, p. 47). Concerns were also raised by Muslim students and staff members during the recruitment process about perceived negative previous experiences with the university in relation to matters of importance to Muslim students. A message that findings would be useful to future cohorts of Muslim students was sought communicated, and support from the Chaplaincy and ISOC was crucial to the recruitment campaign.

2.6 Ethical considerations

Our application for ethical approval was submitted to the LU Ethics Review Sub Committee in August 2024. After an initial review, the Ethics Committee assigned the project for an enhanced review by the full Ethics Review Sub Committee in September. A favourable decision was received at the start of October 2025. All participants were given a participant information sheet about the project and a consent form which they signed. Participants were able to withdraw from the study should they wish to do so.

Protecting our participants' anonymity and confidentiality is of utmost importance to us. Survey participants did not provide their names and each of them are part of a larger group (i.e., Muslim UG students; Muslim PGT students; Muslim DRs) which prevents their identification. The analysis and reporting of survey results is anonymous. Focus group and interview participants provided their names to the core research team to facilitate the scheduling of focus groups. We have opted to not use pseudonyms when quoting evidence from focus group and interview participants. The reason for this is that any cross-identification of more than two quotes from one individual could potentially risk compromising the participant's anonymity. Moreover, we have opted to cite quotes as coming from a group member (student; doctoral researcher; staff), without further labelling. This is particularly important for the two staff groups in our study, as the populations of Muslim academic and professional staff at LU are small. Focus group or individual interview participants from these two groups are therefore simply labelled 'staff member'. We have also sought to further anonymise quotes by not identifying which department or School the participants belong to. We have, however, included the gender of our participants to help humanise them and to demonstrate the presence of a diverse set of lived experiences in our research.

2.7 Researcher reflexivity and positionality

Farhana Sultana, Bangladeshi scholar says, 'to pay attention to positionality, reflexivity, and how this shapes the production of knowledge is to undertake ethical research' (Sultana, 2007, p.380). This implies that researchers need to engage in reflexivity for their research to be conducted ethically.

Rafia Arshad (she/her) is an international student currently pursuing a PhD in Sociology at Loughborough University. She is originally from Pakistan, where she completed all her previous education. Born and raised as a Muslim, her faith has continued to deepen over time and informs both her personal values and academic interests. She engages critically with the cultural norms she was brought up with particularly those influenced by colonial legacies. Through her research and lived experience, Rafia aims to challenge conventional narratives within her own cultural context and contribute to broader efforts to address global misconceptions about Muslims.

Ellie Moore (she/her) is a White, British-born citizen raised in the United Kingdom, currently undertaking her PhD in Sociology at Loughborough University. As an infant Ellie was baptised as a Christian in the Anglican Church in Wales, UK, but as an adult identifies as agnostic and culturally Christian. She is a Research Associate at Loughborough University. As a trained sociologist and academic scholar, Ellie understands that the disciplines in which she's trained (social sciences and academia) have significant histories (continuing to the present) as tools of colonisation. She also acknowledges her positionality, the systems and structures that afford her privilege in conducting her research and accessing resources. Ellie strives to be humble and aware of her own biases, recognising how these may shape her research. She seeks to actively listen and be guided by people with lived experiences different from her own.

Line Nyhagen (she/her) is a White, Norwegian-born and raised woman, who migrated to the UK in the early 2000s. She is a Professor of Sociology at Loughborough University and has studied political science and sociology at universities in Norway and the United States. Line was baptised and confirmed as a Christian in the Norwegian Lutheran Church, and as an adult she identifies as Humanist. Across her research, teaching and scholarly activism, Line seeks to understand social inequalities and promote social justice via an intersectional lens that recognises multiple identities and structural differences, as theorised by Black feminist thinkers (e.g., Collins, 1991; 2019; see also Cook & Nyhagen, 2024, pp. 4-6). Line acknowledges her own privileged position in academia and actively uses allyship to advocate for and support minoritised people and groups.

Chapter 3

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PRACTISING RELIGION ON CAMPUS

3.1. Introduction

In chapters 3 and 4 we outline and discuss the findings from our research, addressing the first two research questions for our study:

1) What are the lived experiences of Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff across LU's two campuses in London and the Midlands?
2) What are the key opportunities and barriers to participation, inclusion and wellbeing among Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff at LU?

Chapter 3 discusses the above questions by focusing on our participants' overall views of LU as a place to study and work and their experiences of practising religion on campus, including access to and use of prayer facilities and the availability of and trust in halal food provision. Chapter 3 also examines issues of social exclusion and marginalisation related to alcohol and drinking cultures on campus. A more in-depth analysis of LU as a place to study and work is offered in Chapter 4.

3.2. Overall views about Loughborough University as a place to study and work

Academic and professional staff, doctoral researchers and students who identify as Muslim largely feel very welcome on Loughborough University's two campuses. They appreciate their colleagues, fellow doctoral researchers and students. Generally, they have very good experiences of working or studying at LU and feel included in the campus community. There was a notable positive attitude towards the university among the participants in our study, and their lived experiences at the university were overall talked about in very favourable terms. Both male and female Muslim staff, doctoral researchers and students feel that the East Midlands and London campuses are safe spaces for them.

> *'With regards to the student body and the faculty, definitely I think I couldn't ask for any better'* (male doctoral researcher).

> *'I feel like when people ask me about work, I'm like, I think I can stay in Loughborough for the rest of my career. I say that, inshallah, so I think campus is safe and I'm very supported, yeah […] I think people say Loughborough is a family … And I agree because I have been working at three universities, and I feel like everybody's really in.*

[….] I think Loughborough is very supportive. They [staff services] listen and take action' (female staff member).

'So far I have seen that we are treated equally with everybody else, whatever their beliefs are' (female doctoral researcher).

'The whole environment of the university is quite conducive to different background cultures and people belonging to different religions' (male doctoral researcher).

'As a staff member, my experience has been that people are generally very friendly. They are very welcoming. And yeah, it's generally been quite positive. I think it's quite inclusive as well … My team is very diverse […] I haven't had any problems being a Muslim' (female staff member).

Muslim staff, doctoral researchers and students were particularly appreciative of the faith-oriented facilities, services and support groups available at the university. This includes both permanent, formal prayer facilities supported by the university, such as the gender-segregated prayer rooms in the Edward Herbert Building (EHB), as well as spaces that are made available by Schools or Departments on a more temporary basis during the month of Ramadan. The space in EHB is a dedicated place for prayer whilst also being a space for meeting other Muslims in a safe and inclusive environment. The research participants conveyed that the availability of prayer spaces on campus reduces barriers to participation and belonging and make Muslim members of the university community feel included and appreciated. Importantly, some staff and students lack awareness of the prayer facility in EHB. Moreover, EHB is not easily accessible to everyone on campus due to logistical issues (e.g., location and time), and a lack of easy access to prayer spaces does at times create barriers when Muslim members of the LU community feel they must choose between their faith commitments and work/study commitments or even choose between working at home (which facilitates prayer) and working on campus (see section 3.3 in this chapter for more detailed findings relating to prayer spaces at LU).

The Islamic Society (ISOC) is very important for students who identify as Muslim at LU. For some Muslim students, ISOC is the only platform that offers a safe and inclusive environment for socialisation, friendship and networking. For example, a female student noted that she could only find sufficient opportunities to meet up and socialise with other Muslims via ISOC:

> *'It was only with the Islamic Society that I was able to find places where there are Muslim gatherings. Other than that, there were no other Muslim gatherings. So, if I missed an ISOC event, then I feel like there is nothing else I could have gone to'* (female student).

The student talked about how she later discovered that there is a prayer room in EHB, and that now, she knows that there will be other Muslims there as well. The availability of prayer rooms and the ability to observe religious obligations including prayer and fasting were seen as key to inclusion and belonging for Muslims on campus:

> *'I like Loughborough so much. It's been supportive. I've just come back from the EHB building. There is a place there where we can say prayer. So, every day I am able to go there to say my prayers. It's been really ok'* (female staff member).

> *'In terms of inclusivity, LU is quite good because in our main campus, we have prayer rooms, and they are big enough. And in our department, we have a small prayer room as well'* (male doctoral researcher).

> *'My managers and the people I work with are wonderful people. Really, really, good people. I have never had any issues. They've all been very accommodating in terms of what side room I can go in and pray there whenever I want'* (female staff member).

> *'[...] regarding the observance of my daily religious obligations ... you know, maintaining my Ramadan, it's like fasting has not been a problem. There's been an understanding that during Ramadan we might be coming in a bit later... I have never felt this comfortable doing anything in my life before as a Muslim'* (male doctoral researcher).

> *'Having the personal freedom to practice your religion properly, that's what matters to us. And not being judged in any way. Yeah, that's all good at the moment'* (male doctoral researcher).

Despite the overall positive attitudes and lived experiences expressed by Muslim staff, doctoral researchers and students at LU in the above quotes, the research participants also raised several issues in and around the campus environment that create real barriers to participation, inclusion and belonging. A dominant theme in this regard was that of events and activities centred on or involving food and alcohol. The participants noted that they feel

included when events do not centre around alcohol and when food provision includes halal, vegetarian or vegan options. Conversely, they feel excluded from, and may choose to not attend, events that include alcohol and avoid food that isn't clearly labelled (see section 3.4 for detailed findings relating to food and sections 3.5 and 3.6 for in-depth findings relating to alcohol). Other themes indicating barriers include limited prayer facilities especially at the London campus but also at the main campus (see section 3.3). In chapter 4, we also report on barriers to inclusion related to non-recognition, microaggressions, racism and Islamophobia, free speech about the war in Gaza, and a lack of Muslim role models.

In our survey of Muslim UG/PGT students and doctoral researchers at LU, we used four attitude measures that would indicate an overall sense of belonging and inclusion at the university. About 2/3 of the respondents (65%) agree or strongly agree that they feel a sense of pride when meeting someone from LU off campus. While 27% of the respondents were neutral on the question of feeling pride outside of campus, a minority of 8% disagreed/strongly disagreed, thus indicating that, for this latter group, LU did not instil a sense of pride when meeting others from the LU community in off-campus contexts. Therefore, while most of the respondents share a sense of pride and community with fellow Loughborough members outside of campus, there is a small minority for whom this is not the case, which may be explored in further research.

A clear majority (88%) of the respondents reported, however, that they strongly agree or agree that they are proud to be a student at LU, with 12% responding with a neutral attitude and none disagreeing with the statement. When it comes to feeling at home on campus, over 2/3 of the respondents (70%) reported that they agree or strongly agree feeling at home. On this attitude question, 13% answered that they had a neutral attitude, while 17% stated that they either disagreed or strongly disagreed. In other words, a significant minority of the respondents do not feel at home on campus. Although our data suggests that this is not correlated with any specific demographic of Muslim students (e.g., home/international; gender) or their level of study, the latter figure is concerning and might indicate that more inclusive spaces are needed for Muslim students to thrive and feel at home on campus. For example, our qualitative data suggest that the availability of clearly labelled halal food and spaces and events for students who do not drink alcohol would improve Muslim students' feelings of inclusion and belonging.

When asking Muslim students if they have found it easy to establish relationships at LU, 2/3 of the respondents (67%) agreed or strongly agreed, while 19% were neutral and 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Again, a significant minority of the respondents reported that they find it difficult to establish relationships at Loughborough University. This is supported by our qualitative data, which indicate that for some Muslim students, spaces like the prayer room and events held by the Islamic Society are the only ones in which they feel comfortable in meeting new people.

3.3. Experiences of practicing religion on campus

The Muslim staff in our study feel that their basic needs are being met when it comes to the provision of and access to prayer rooms, time off for Eid celebrations and the availability of vegetarian food options on campus. In their view, other staff members are conscious of diverse religious views and behave in a respectful manner (e.g. by not swearing). Moreover, the LU workplace is perceived as flexible with regards to prayer obligations. However, more local prayer spaces and improved washing facilities were requested, due to logistical and timing issues in getting to the EHB building, and regular washbasins in toilets being insufficient for the purpose of ritual washing in advance of prayer. There is also a perceived need for a formal procedure that would allow flexibility for Muslim staff (and staff who adhere to other religions) to perform their religious obligations and practices. Some staff teams are viewed as more flexible than others in this regard. Muslim staff's religious obligations are thus accommodated at individual level, which causes different lived experiences, rather than at the institutional level, which would support all Muslim staff in having the same level of flexibility. A new institutional approach, where a formal policy allows staff flexibility during prayer times, would be welcomed as a positive step by Muslim staff.

The focus group participants reported that they use prayer facilities to offer daily prayers when they are on campus. They also emphasised that their daily religious practices are an important and integral aspect of their lives, directly affecting their personal and mental wellbeing. Our survey supported these findings, as 90% of the participants (43 out of 48 respondents) agreed that they use prayer facilities on campus.

As one of the focus group participants said:

> *'If you're not praying, maybe it's related to your mental well-being, because if you're not praying obviously, you can't concentrate'* (female doctoral researcher).

A recent study endorsed the view that performing S*alah* (prayer) helps Muslims manage emotions such as sadness, anxiety, and confusion, with some participants describing the experience as similar to attending a therapy (Ahmed & Yousaf, 2025). Another participant in our research elaborated on how significant prayer spaces are for the Muslim community on campus, because in addition to providing mental peace, they are also used for socialising, meeting new people and making friends.

> *'For Muslims, [the prayer room] is a social space because they don't have access to other social spaces'* (female staff member).

The above quote indicates that prayer spaces provide an important opportunity for Muslim staff to socialise.

3.3.1. Availability and accessibility of prayer spaces - Midlands and London campuses

All participants in the focus groups, which included students, DRs and staff members, were aware of the prayer facilities provided by the university on their respective campuses. This finding complements the survey results as 98% of the survey participants reported that they are aware of the prayer facilities provided by the university.

However, the focus group participants expressed varying level of satisfaction with prayer room facilities across both campuses. Participants on the main campus are very satisfied with the existing prayer room provided by the university for daily prayers, arrangements for the Tarawih prayer during Ramadan and ablution facilities in the Chaplaincy EHB Building.

> *'We have the prayer facility, and the university has been working with us to improve that, slowly but surely. So, I can't really complain about those aspects'* (male staff member).

However, at the London campus, participants reported the absence of adequate prayer room facilities. The existing prayer room on the London campus is very small, with capacity for only a handful of people and with no ablution facilities. Participants also reported that there is a lack of signage and communication about the location of prayer rooms.

'Our prayer room at the London campus is ridiculous. It is tiny. If you are doing a Jumma [main Friday prayer], right, you can't pray with five people. Six people with an Imam' (male doctoral researcher).

The survey results showed that a large majority of participants (91%) rated the existing prayer facilities as either 'fair', 'good' or 'excellent'. In contrast, a small proportion (9%) characterised the existing prayer facilities as 'poor'. This shows that generally most of the Muslim students and staff members are satisfied with the existing provisions for praying on the main campus. However, the small number of participants who denied that prayer facilities are adequate, may reflect concerns discussed during the focus groups, particularly regarding the accessibility and distance of the existing prayer room from other university buildings. Importantly, all survey respondents were based at the Midland campus, as shown in Chapter 2, table 2.2.

3.3.2. Perceptions of prayer facilities and accessibility across Schools

The accessibility of the prayer rooms on campus was highlighted as an important issue by the focus group participants. They shared their experiences and views about the location of the existing prayer rooms in the EHB building as not being sufficiently accessible for staff, DRs and students who are based in other buildings and particularly on the west side of the campus. This was also raised by some of the survey respondents. Although 77% of the survey participants said that the current prayer room facilities provided by the university are either 'accessible' or very accessible', 12% (5 participants) responded that the prayer facilities are 'inaccessible' to them. In addition, 12% (5 participants) gave a 'neutral response to this question. It is noteworthy that among the five participants who think the facilities are inaccessible, three are from the School of Architecture, Building and Civil Engineering, while other two are from the School of Science and School of Social Sciences and Humanities. Except the SSH, the other two Schools are based on or near the west side of campus. These figures also reflect the views of focus group participants where this issue was raised in more detail.

As one participant said:

'... In the current building that I'm working in, there's no sort of prayer facility. So the closest is the Edward Herbert building, which takes me about 10 minutes to walk to and then 10 minutes back' (male staff member)

Another participant reflected similar views:

> *'The thing that I struggle with is prayer timings, especially in winters when they are so close together. And then you have to rush, and you know, like you got back-to-back meetings and then you have to find time. So, it's a little bit complicated or when you are in department and then you have to rush to the other building. Or you don't have time and you're like, oh, what do I do now? What should I do? So, a little bit uncomfortable situation there, but apart from that I think it's been OK. It's been nice'* (female doctoral researcher).

These views align closely with the survey data about the faith provisions on campus. Participants were asked about whether they think the faith provisions on campus meet their needs as a student who is a Muslim. In a response to this, 79% participants agreed with this statement whereas 21% participants expressed disagreement. This indicates that while a substantial majority of participants are satisfied with the faith provisions, a significant minority holds a different view which needs to be explored further.

3.3.3. Separate prayer rooms in other buildings/Schools/Departments

The focus group discussions showed that the overall experiences of the students, DRs and staff members of using the prayer room facility in the EHB building on the main campus are generally very good. However, many participants expressed concern about the distance of EHB from their respective departments. This finding is complimentary to the responses about inaccessibility and dissatisfaction recorded by some of the participants in the survey. Especially those who work in the West Park find it is very difficult to come to the EHB for each prayer. This is especially challenging during the winter when prayer timings are very close, and most participants have to pray at least 3 prayers while on campus. As a doctoral researcher noted:

> *'If you're not praying, maybe it's related to your mental well-being, because if you're not praying, obviously you can't concentrate. It is one of the reasons that I just stopped going to university every single day to be honest. If I don't have any urgent meetings in the university, I just don't go. I just work from home because the prayers are more*

important for me rather than just sitting in the office all day long' (female doctoral researcher).

In some cases, the lack of a prayer room in their buildings led individuals to use stairwells or empty lecture rooms as alternative spaces for prayer. One participant noted that they were provided with a mixed-use room in their department, for collective use. He further shared that the mixed-use room in this case was inappropriate for praying, especially for males, because the same room can also be used for breastfeeding:

'In the current building that I'm working in, there's no prayer facility. So, the closest is the EHB which takes me about 10 minutes to walk to and then 10 minutes back. I've asked if there's a prayer facility, and they've said you can book a room. So, but then I struggle to book rooms because there's always meetings going on. We have a breastfeeding room and prayer room combined into one, but that wouldn't be sort of appropriate because where someone's breastfeeding, you can't really pray in that room' (male staff member).

Another female participant shared how difficult it had been for her to request a separate prayer room in her own building, because the administration did not consider it as an important aspect of a Muslim student's life.

'We were engaging with the administration of the university, and they were quite repulsive about having a separate room for the prayer [in my School]. And I think they just don't understand that our religion stands on it. So, if you are not praying, you are not... Yeah, just consider it as the basic pillar of Islam' (female doctoral researcher).

On the other hand, the participants who had received support from their respective departments/schools for an additional prayer space in their buildings, shared very positive experiences of utilising those facilities. In addition, staff members noted that they have the privilege to use their own private office spaces for prayers.

As one participant shared:

'They took one of the empty offices, they put the prayer mats there and things while we were praying, and they just did a prayer room. And I think this prayer room is only for me in the whole School. So, I did appreciate this so much because it's like every two

hours [that we pray], especially in winter. I will go to the EHB, I won't sit at my desk at the end of the day, so they gave me a prayer room. I did really appreciate that' (female doctoral researcher).

The provision of small prayer rooms in each building at least during winters has also been highlighted in Hopkin's (2011) study as an indicator of an overall inclusive experience for Muslim students in higher education institutions in the UK. Insights from participants regarding the need for local/departmental prayer rooms are also depicted in our anonymised short story for use as a training resource. See Appendix A for details.

3.3.4. Ablution/washing facilities

The ablution facilities in EHB were generally considered to be good by the participants, however, some noted that when having to pray in spaces/rooms other than the EHB, they find it difficult to perform the ablution which is obligatory before the prayer. Some participants mentioned that they use toilet facilities for disabled people because of the availability of water.

Another point raised by a staff member is about the absence of water inside the toilet, which he stated has been a repeat cause for toilet blockages. For any Muslim this can be an important part of cleaning, because the first step for ablution is to clean yourself with water after using the toilet. However, toilet facilities in Muslim minority countries such as the UK differ from those in Muslim majority countries. So, the participant suggested that the university should provide some toilets with 'Muslim showers' so that Muslim students, DRs and staff members can use water in the toilet.

'One of the things may not be very obvious for many people, but the university will save lots of money if they just allow some kind of water [Muslim showers] in the toilet' (male staff member).

Furthermore, 75% of the undergraduate and postgraduate students who took part in our survey are generally aware of and have used washing and ablution facilities, which presumably are the existing facilities provided by the university in the main prayer hall in the EHB building. However, issues regarding ablution and water in the toilet facilities in other buildings were also discussed by our focus group participants, such as the buildings on the West side of the campus which are far from the EHB building.

3.3.5 Awareness among non-Muslim colleagues about daily prayers

The overall experience of students, DRs and staff members regarding having a break to pray daily prayers is satisfactory, however, it was noted by our participants that more awareness is needed about Islam generally and the need for Muslim members of the university community to take a break to pray.

> *'I think because a lot of the people in our university are mainly from White backgrounds, and they don't really know a lot about Islam. I think that it would be important for them to know about Islam'* (female student).

A need for increased literacy about Islam in universities is also emphasised in reports by Guest et al. (2020) and UUK (2021).

Some of our participants also articulated concerns about long meetings or events when it becomes difficult to take a break for the prayer, especially when there is a lack of awareness of the importance of prayer obligations for Muslims:

> *'When you have meetings or long workshops that go over prayer time, that isn't taken into consideration by the organiser. So, I think there needs to be a bit of awareness that some people may need a break to pray because that's not always taken into consideration'* (male staff member).

Another participant expressed,

> *'I think there needs to be a much wider awareness within the university and it needs to be written in something that, you know, this is the kind of policy around that and recognising that, you know, things like prayer is really, really fundamental and it's really, really important and it has to kind of be fitted in around your day'* (female staff member).

Participants also suggested that a general awareness about the timings of prayers is very important because sometimes, the exam or lecture timings clash with the main Friday prayer timing. The congregational Friday prayer at noon has an immense significance in Islam and the lives of Muslims (Esposito 1998). Missing a Friday prayer can impact on a Muslim individual's personal and mental wellbeing out of guilt. It is important that students get a chance to pray Friday prayer in either of the two congregations on the main campus or the London campus.

'I think the university should be mindful that there should be like a two hour [gap] to accommodate for not having anything that falls within the Jummah time [the main Friday prayer] or an hour and a half or something anyway, just to make sure. I mean, have they made sure that exams are not happening during Jummah and that kind of thing?' (female staff member).

In some cases, a lack of awareness about Muslims' practice of daily prayers may lead to conversations that can result in unpleasant experiences for Muslim students, DRs and staff members. For example, a doctoral researcher recounted an incident in which a conversation with her colleague resulted in a micro aggressive experience, she shared that one day when she was using a multi-purpose room for her daily prayers, she came across a colleague and they had a conversation about the five daily prayers, she said:

'I told her, you know, like just to give some information that we are Muslims, we pray five times a day. And she looked at me and she just laughed... And she's like, oh, good luck with that' (female doctoral researcher).

This indicates that the lack of understanding or limited knowledge about practices of Islam can lead to misinterpretations, resulting in unpleasant or distressing experiences for Muslim students and staff members. It also reinforces the above discussions that a designated prayer space for religious purposes is important to ensure that the individuals can practice religion on campus without any fear of misunderstanding or judgment from others.

3.3.6 Ramadan, fasting and Eid experiences on campus

Some staff and DRs noted that religious festivals such as Diwali and Christmas are observed in departments, with office decorations and shared meals. They also said that the Islamic celebration of Eid was not equally observed at departmental level. Some also suggested a lack of recognition of Ramadan by the university itself. These absences were felt as a lack of recognition of Islam and Muslims, and as raising barriers to inclusion and belonging.

'A lot of these small things make a difference. I think it is just, you know, acknowledging these different event and festivals' (female staff member).

Some participants mentioned that they would like to see events organised on a School-level for example, as Christmas, other religious holy days and cultural festivals are celebrated. It would be encouraging if Eid is celebrated in a similar way by Schools in the university.

As one participant explained:

> *'Like they do their Christmas dinner. Whole stuff for the whole School, so there should be like one thing for our Eid [...] arranged from the school or from the university'* (male doctoral researcher).

While with daily prayers and the Friday prayers, there remains a dissatisfaction among some participants as explained above, participants generally reported to be very well supported during Ramadan by their colleagues and DR supervisors. The Chaplaincy's role in facilitating and the ISOC's efforts to organise the daily 'Tarawih' prayer during Ramadan and providing 'Suhur' and 'Iftar' meals for Muslim students, DRs and staff were very much appreciated by the participants.

> *'They inaugurated the Eid day, they used to have like one day where the staff and students, can bring on their families, can have the Mehndi [temporary body art made with henna] on their hands and everything. They can wear their cultural dresses as well and have the Eid lunch'* (male doctoral researcher).

> *'I think like the Eid events and like there was a fasting event as well, that's been really good. I couldn't praise them any more for that'* (male staff member).

Recognising Muslim religious holy days and celebrating them on a par with Christian and other religious holidays is thus seen as a question of equity and inclusion.

3.4. Halal food and trust in provision

The provision of halal food on university campuses is an important aspect of promoting an inclusive and supportive environment for Muslim students, DRs and staff. Food choices may be based on cultural and religious traditions and beliefs, ethical convictions, or health concerns, and the consumption of halal food is a fundamental component of daily life for Muslims around the world (Rahman et al., 2024).

Muslims have a wide range of restrictions relating to the consumption of various ingredients based on the teachings from the Quran and Sunnah which is commonly known as 'halal'.

To reflect the institutional commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, and increasing internationalisation within higher education institutions, it is imperative to ensure the availability of halal food at campus events, in cafes and during other activities.

Focus group participants discussed their views about halal food provision and expressed how important it is in their daily life. For example, this was reflected in one of the participants' experiences of accidentally eating pork at an event organised by the university. She shared how uncomfortable and awkward this experience was for her. Insights from participants regarding halal food are depicted in an anonymised short story for use as a training resource. See Appendix A for details.

The survey results compliment the experiences of focus group participants where a divided perception has been recorded regarding the halal food provisions. Participants were asked about the Halal food provisions in two main questions. In the first question, participants were asked whether they think there are adequate halal food options on campus, in response to which, 37% participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the adequacy of halal food choices on campus, whereas, 40% participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed, while the rest of 23% chose a neutral stance.

A similar pattern is reflected in the second question, where 35% participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the halal food options available on campus. In contrast, 44% participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed, depicting a notable level of dissatisfaction. Moreover, 21% selected a neutral response, possibly indicating uncertainty about the adequacy of provisions.

When asked about the knowledge of catering staff to accommodate religious dietary requirements, there was an overall positive response from the participants. 53% (25 participants) either strongly agreed or agreed that the catering staff are knowledgeable and accommodate religious dietary requirements. Only a small minority of 8% (4 participants) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Notably, a significant proportion of participants, 38% (18 participants) responded 'neutral' to this question. It is possible that they bring their own food onto campus and/or that they have never felt the need to ask catering staff about needs pertaining to dietary requirements.

3.4.1. Labelling of halal food

During one of our focus groups, a staff member highlighted that the cooked chicken served in the University cafes is sourced from suppliers that comply with halal standards. Notably, this information was shared by the focus group moderator in all subsequent focus groups, but all the participants said that they were unaware of this due to the lack of any official labelling. Some participants emphasised that they cannot consume meat if they are not completely sure of halal compliance, which, they suggested, could be made possible through the labelling practices used by food providers. The responses of focus group participants are complimentary to the survey findings regarding a lack of information about whether food served at the university meets halal requirements. It is notable from the focus group discussions that the participants are unaware of halal food available on campus. The issue of food labelling is very important, as illustrated by this participant:

> *'I usually skip the meal when ingredients aren't mentioned'* (female doctoral researcher).

Without any labels or ingredients mentioned on the product, it is inconvenient or even impossible for Muslim students, DRs and staff to consume the food that is offered. The participants also mentioned that they feel uncomfortable when they query the catering staff about it. This shows that the halal food provisions can be improved if the ingredients are mentioned on food items, or the food is labelled as halal.

A participant commented:

> *'If they can display that this thing is vegetarian and this thing is vegan, then why can't they display that this is halal?'* (male doctoral researcher).

Another participant said:

> *'But sometimes we feel awkward asking them if it's either halal or Haram or alcoholic or non-alcoholic. So, like they should prioritise mentioning the ingredients'* (female doctoral researcher).

Another major concern among the participants was to consume any halal food in a place which also cooks non halal food in the same kitchen. However, this also depends upon an individuals' level of self-commitment to being more restrictive towards food choices. Some

participants said they would prefer to eat either vegan or vegetarian food, which has no chance of including non- halal meat, or they bring their own food from home.

> *'I am not aware of any, but if I had to eat from a cafe, I would take just the vegetarian or the vegan option. And I usually bring it from home because there aren't many vegetarian options either'* (female PGT student).

3.4.2. Halal food provision at university-led events

The survey data shows no clear consensus among participants regarding the provision of halal food at events organised by the university. Out of a total of 48 respondents, 48% (23 participants) either agreed or strongly agreed that if they attend an academic event organised on campus (e.g. conferences, workshops, or other academic events organised by the department/School), they are confident that halal food options will be made available. Furthermore, 23% (11 participants) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. These findings highlight that a significant minority of participants perceive that the efforts to accommodate dietary requirements at university-led events may need some improvement. However, notably, 29% (14 participants) have responded neutral to this statement, which may indicate limited personal experience of participants with such events, or uncertainty about the adequacy of current provisions in the events.

This can be reflected in focus group discussions where participants expressed mixed views regarding the halal food provided during conferences and other academic activities. Some of them have acknowledged the provision of adequate halal food choices whereas, others highlighted gaps and inconsistencies. As one participant shared:

> *'Initially there was [none], because I was the first Pakistani or the first Muslim, there was no food options, like we had to use only vegetarian [options] if there was a department activity. But now they make sure that they order it, which is halal, so that we can have halal food options also'* (male doctoral researcher).

Another participant shared his experience that they used to have halal chicken options at the London campus when there were more students coming from Muslim majority countries, but this was stopped after the number of Muslim students decreased.

> *'When Muslim students come to the London campus, so they know that there's going to be a lot of Arab students coming in and they facilitate that by bringing food that are sourced from halal sources and it says on the packet, but then the moment those students stop coming, they stop stocking that. So, I've raised that as a separate issue with the university, but they've not done anything about that'* (male doctoral researcher).

Another participant from the main campus stated:

> *'I remember when I first came to Uni and I was trying to see if there was anywhere on campus that was halal, but there isn't. As far as I know, they have, like the sandwiches, that are allowed, but they have no hot food'* (female UG student).

The focus group discussions and the survey data suggest that there is room for improvement in the provision of halal food choices for Muslim students, DRs and staff. As discussed earlier, this is an important reflection on and recognition of an ethnically and religiously diverse campus population. Improving halal food availability and labelling will improve the future experiences of Muslim students, DRs and staff across both our university campuses.

3.5 Alcohol culture and social exclusion

Our research data show that many Muslim students experience social exclusion due to the dominance of an alcohol culture at the university. Among undergraduate participants, there was broad consensus that alcohol consumption was central to the social lives for many students at university, particularly during structured, formal events such as 'Freshers Week' and sports society social events.

Undergraduate students expressed how events that were marketed as 'inclusive' or 'open to all', often revolved around alcohol. This posed a challenge for students who are Muslim, who for religious and personal reasons avoid alcohol-related spaces. One student reflected,

> *'When it came to halls and stuff, I lived in student accommodation in first year and all the socials were mainly revolving around alcohol and pork and stuff…so it was just something I couldn't really attend'* (male UG student).

Another student similarly noted that,

> *'I think in the beginning when I started in first year, when I had to, like make friends and I had to socialise, I think it was challenging because we started in Freshers Week. So, a lot of the bonding that was going on between people was to do with, like partying and drinking. And I didn't do it. Obviously [I did not do] any of* that' (female UG student).

These accounts underscore the exclusionary effects of alcohol-centric events, particularly during the early stages of university. The initial transition at university is filled with new experiences, however, for Muslim students these early socialising opportunities can be isolating due the lack of alternative social spaces, which can create challenges for these students when trying to form peer relations.

Although these social events aimed to foster inclusion for all students (Fuller, 2019; Gambles et al., 2019), for Muslim students, such events create barriers to social integration which left some participants questioning the university's commitment to inclusion.

> *'If they're advertising as an inclusive university and advertising the events as inclusive. It didn't really feel that way'* (male UG student).

These insights were echoed in the survey findings. Only 40% of the respondents agreed that there are sufficient alcohol-free social events on campus, while 38% were neutral and 21% disagreed. This suggests a lack of provision for students who don't consume alcohol, which limits their ability to access the full benefits of university social life. Importantly, such barriers are not isolated to Muslim members of the student community. Existing research shows a decline in the number of young people in England who consume alcohol, suggesting universities must do more to reflect this cultural shift relating to alcohol and its consumption (Oldham et al., 2018). This broader cultural shift towards a deviation away from alcohol consumption among young people highlights that the exclusion experienced by Muslim students reflects a broader disconnect between university social infrastructure and the cultural shift of young people's relationship to and perception of alcohol and its use.

The absence of equitable access to inclusive and accessible social opportunities has broader implications for students' sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). Research shows that an

absence of belonging can lead to feelings of isolation, significantly impacting mental and physical well-being (Jansen, 2019). Several previous studies (Strayhorn, 2012; Freeman et al., 2007) highlight the connection between increased belonging, student retention, and degree completion. Students from underrepresented groups may face barriers in developing feelings of belonging within UK higher education institutions (Strayhorn, 2012), raising critical questions around who stands to benefit from dominant social practices.

For staff and doctoral researchers, the drinking culture was still present, specifically in social activities outside of work (e.g. departmental meet ups) but these events were perceived as easier to navigate due to the priority of focusing on academic responsibilities. Several participants noted that there is a culture of having alcohol at university events. A female academic staff had considered attending the yearly 'Pint of Science' festival, but when she realised that it was taking place in a pub, she felt conflicted about it and ended up not attending.

When comparing how staff members and doctoral researchers navigated experiences of the drinking culture compared to undergraduate students, for undergraduate students the perceived level of exclusion was instant and marginalising. This difference may be attributed to *some* undergraduate students' priorities to develop socially and academically, reinforcing the pressures placed on students to align with the neo-liberal 'student experience' in the UK, where consuming alcohol plays a central role in university social life (Measham & Brian, 2005; Griffin et al., 2009).

As the priorities of staff members and doctoral researchers are more closely aligned with professional responsibilities, it may be perceived as easier for these individuals to withdraw from planned events with alcohol. An academic staff member describes how it is common for colleagues to go to the pub after work; however, they discuss how continued self-exclusion has become normalised.

> *'Especially when there's like alcohol included, like inside, or they go to a pub afterwards or something. Personally, I'm not too fussed about it because it's... I don't know why. Maybe I'm just used to it that we keep ourselves out of these events'* (female staff member).

Furthermore, there is uncertainty about the university's provision of halal food (see above), and out-of-office socialisation with other members of staff feels inclusive to some and exclusive to others, depending on whether individual Muslim staff are comfortable or not with being in settings where alcohol is served.

The most common strategy across all participant groups was self-exclusion. While this choice reflects personal agency, it also involves emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and reinforces the ideal of a 'typical' student or colleague as someone who consumes alcohol with peers. By choosing alcohol-focused spaces for post-work socialisation, individuals whose religious practices prohibit alcohol are left to adapt or withdraw. Moreover, whilst the choice for self-exclusion is empowering, it is also one of normalisation that underscores the paradox between colleagues who attend these social opportunities to build cohesion, and colleagues who withdraw, which risks leaving said individuals on the periphery.

These findings indicate a long-term impact for individuals who choose to not consume alcohol for religious and personal reasons when navigating these spaces. Universities should consider how they can better support these individuals from the outset and ensure Muslims do not have to sacrifice attending social events unless they want to. Addressing this gap, especially during the transitional phase of university, will help to reduce any prolonged impact from navigating attendance at events that should offer equitable opportunities to engage for all. Insights from our participants' experiences surrounding alcohol and its consumption on campus are depicted in an anonymised short story for use as a training resource. See Appendix A for details.

3.6 Alcohol-free halls and zones

The survey data indicated strong support for alcohol-free spaces and halls at Loughborough. Across multiple statements, respondents consistently expressed a desire for inclusive living environments and spaces where alcohol is prohibited.

- Three quarters (75%) said that they would be interested in living in alcohol-free halls if available, with an additional 17% unsure.
- 71% of respondents felt it was important to have the option of living in alcohol-free halls on campus.

- 77% of respondents said they believe alcohol-free zones should be introduced on campus, with a further 21% unsure.
- 71% said it was important to them that Loughborough introduced alcohol-free zones.

These findings clearly demonstrate the value of introducing alcohol-free halls and zones, particularly as respondents see such spaces as an important step in providing inclusive spaces on campus.

When asked to respond to the statement *'There are sufficient alcohol-free social events available on campus'*, 21% of participants 'disagreed', 38% replied 'neutral', and 42% chose 'agreed', highlighting a varied response. Table 3.1 breaks down these responses by level of study, showing that first-year undergraduates were more likely to disagree, with 38% of first year UG respondents expressing dissatisfaction. In contrast, postgraduate taught and doctoral researchers were generally more positive or neutral in their perception of available alcohol-free social events on campus.

This difference may reflect differences in social expectations and priorities across levels of study. For undergraduate students, particularly in the first year, there is often an emphasis on building friendships and participating in university social life. As such, perception of sufficiency may be linked to the perceived importance of alcohol-free events for social integration. The 38% neutral response rate reflects further ambivalence, which could be linked to either a lack of awareness of alcohol-free events, indifference towards them, or reflect individual difference in values.

Overall, our findings show a clear demand for structural revisions to improve inclusivity in social and living environments. Such provisions may not only benefit Muslim students but also appeal to other students who abstain from alcohol or prefer to socialise and live in alcohol-free spaces for health, cultural or personal reasons.

Table 3.1 Response to statement *'There are sufficient alcohol-free social events available on campus'* by level of study

Level of Study	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Total
1st year undergraduate	4	4	5	13
2nd year undergraduate	5	3	2	10
3rd year undergraduate		1		1
4th year undergraduate	1	1		2
Postgraduate Taught (Masters)	2	3		5
Doctoral Researcher (PhD)	8	6	3	17
Total	**20**	**18**	**10**	**48**

3.7 Chapter summary

This chapter explored participants' overall views of LU as a place to study and work, highlighting a generally positive experience by Muslim staff, doctoral researchers and students at LU. The findings indicated that Muslim staff felt their basic needs relating to religious practice were met, for instance, time off for Eid and flexible arrangements regarding prayer obligations and Ramadan. However, religious obligations were perceived as being accommodated on an individual basis. Similarly, while students and doctoral researchers praised the inclusion of prayer facilities on campus, availability and access to prayer space were dependent on where students were situated on campus. For instance, for some undergraduate students, accessing the prayer space between lectures may be challenging due to its distance from lecture halls. These insights showed a perceived need for a formal procedure that would allow flexibility for Muslim staff, students and doctoral researchers (and individuals who adhere to other religions) to perform their religious obligations and practices on campus.

The findings also show issues of social exclusion and marginalisation related to alcohol and drinking cultures on campus. There was broad consensus that consuming alcohol was central to university social life, and particularly a key social practice surrounding Freshers Week, which created barriers for Muslim students' opportunities to build social networks. In response participants identified the desire for alcohol-free halls and spaces on campus. The study has practical implications for institutional policy about formal procedures regarding

religious obligations, availability and access to faith provision to ensure that practical issues (i.e. layout of campus) do not impede access to prayer spaces and to equitable socialising opportunities.

Chapter 4

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSION, BELONGING AND MARGINALISATION

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter (Chapter 3) explored the lived experiences of practising religion on campus, including overall views about Loughborough university, availability and accessibility of prayer spaces, perceptions of faith provisions and experiences of navigating the drinking culture and the availability of alcohol-free socialisation on campus.

As stated earlier, both chapters 3 and 4 outline and discuss the findings from our research, addressing the first two research questions for our study:

1) What are the lived experiences of Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff across LU's two campuses in London and the Midlands?
2) What are the key opportunities and barriers to participation, inclusion and wellbeing among Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff at LU?

Chapter 4 discusses the above questions by focusing on themes surrounding inclusion, belonging, visibility, marginalisation and Islamophobia. The first section provides an outline of how participants described inclusion, highlighting workplace and classroom cultures as spaces where participants experience inclusion. Next, the chapter discusses the role of the Islamic Society (ISOC) in fostering a supportive network. The final sections address barriers to inclusion, including experiences of marginalisation and gaps in policy-practice.

4.2. Inclusion and belonging

Inclusion is often experienced positively by Muslim students, DRs and staff, particularly in academic spaces and through peer relationships. However, while surface-level acceptance was present, the findings indicate a lack of sustained deeper inclusion. The findings suggest that inclusion was often reliant on individual effort rather than institutional culture, and hindered by subtle exclusions, under-representation and unaddressed structural gaps.

4.2.1 Defining inclusion

The data suggest an overall positive experience at Loughborough (see Chapter 3, section 3.2). Participants often used appreciative terms such as *'supportive'*, '*welcoming*', *and*

'inclusive' when describing their experiences at Loughborough. Most undergraduate students (65%) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel a sense of belonging at Loughborough, compared to a greater proportion of doctoral researchers (77%) who reported feeling a sense of belonging, rather than simply being a student who attends university. Other quantitative findings reinforced these patterns of belonging. Almost 88% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed they were proud to be a student at Loughborough, and over 70% said they felt at 'home' on campus. Notably, no participants disagreed with the statement 'I am proud to be a student at my university', reinforcing a positive general sense of belonging across the sample of survey respondents.

4.2.2. Spaces of inclusion

Experiences of inclusion were frequently tied to campus spaces, particularly in classrooms and departmental offices. These spaces were considered welcoming and professional, with participants praising institutional efforts to provide a cohesive working environment. Doctoral researchers particularly praised the availability of flexible working hours and supervisory support, particularly during Ramadan. One participant commented,

> *'During Ramadan you can come to campus whenever, or work from home as well'* – (male doctoral researcher).

This was echoed by other doctoral researchers noting the unrestricted access to participate in Ramadan and maintain studying, *'There's not been a restriction placed on me by the university'*. However, this flexibility is less available for undergraduate and postgraduate students and for staff members with fixed timetables.

Undergraduate participants reported engaging with leisure spaces on campus, such as gyms, societies, university events, green spaces and prayer facilities. These spaces allowed participants to connect with others and feel included in the broader student community. While participants did not often detail their experiences in these spaces, the spaces were valued as an aspect of student life. However, some participants reflected on barriers to accessing these spaces as a Muslim student. In contrast, doctoral researchers and staff members referred less often to spaces beyond their academic responsibilities, potentially

reflecting differing priorities, practical constraints or caring responsibilities that hinder engagement.

One theme that emerged from the data was that of religious freedom relating to sense of belonging. Participants often described feeling comfortable to express their Muslim identity, however, as discussed in section 4.7 below, we see that contextual factors can make expressing religious identity complex. One male doctoral researcher noted,

> *'I like the fact that I don't feel uncomfortable to be a Muslim'* (male doctoral researcher).

This participant continued to describe how the freedom to engage with Islamic practices on campus is appreciated, *'Having the personal freedom to practice your religion properly, that's what matters to us…and not being judged in any way'.* These insights reflect how religious understandings, free from judgment, contribute significantly to the perception of inclusion on campus. It underscores the importance of existing authentically, free from judgement and pressure to conform.

4.3 Workplace and classroom culture

As noted earlier, Muslim staff, doctoral researchers and students who participated in our research generally view the two LU campuses as inclusive spaces where diverse religious views are respected and tolerated. Overall, there were few concerns about explicit hostility or hatred towards Muslims, but participants did report lived experiences of non-recognition, stereotyping, microaggressions, racism and Islamophobia (see section 4.7). In this section we take a closer look at experiences and concerns relating to LU as a place to work and study.

4.3.1. Classroom culture

Muslim students in our research were also asked if they felt included in the classroom culture at LU. They responded that the feel included in lectures and in the classroom more broadly. A post-graduate taught student noted how the classroom is a diverse community of

students from different countries and regions of the world: 'Everyone is adjusting, and everyone is welcoming' (PGT student). She felt that the culture and atmosphere in her classes are good, and that the classes and the library are welcoming places.

An undergraduate student observed that Muslims are in a minority on her course at LU:

> *'I come from Coventry. There's lots of Muslims there. And when I came to Loughborough, there weren't a lot of Muslims, especially in my course. I was the only Muslim girl [on my engineering course]* (female UG student).

The UG student had very good flatmates in the first year at LU and one of them was Muslim, which *'helped [her] to adjust better to Loughborough'.* She started going to ISOC events in the second semester of her first year and to meet with different Muslim at LU and found ISOC to be a great place to get to know people. She suggested that she would have felt even more welcome at LU had she gone to Iftar meals (shared evening meals during Ramadan) and other events from early on in her study but emphasised that she knows more Muslims now on campus and therefore feels more comfortable at LU. She hasn't ever felt *'not included'* as a Muslim. Yet, she feels it is strange that no-one asks her questions about her being Muslim.

> *'When people don't acknowledge the fact that I'm Muslim, like when people don't ask me questions about Islam then it feels strange to me. Because it feels like they are ignoring the fact that I'm Muslim'* (female UG student).

The above quote suggests that, for this student, not being asked questions about Islam is a form of non-recognition of her religious identity and belief. As discussed in section 4.7 below, however, questions from non-Muslims can also feel intrusive and hostile, depending on the context. Notably, the UG student said that she feels more excluded from being a woman on a male-dominated engineering course than from being a Muslim on her course: *'Sometimes it feels like they don't value my work as much as they value guys' [work], but I don't think it's ever because I'm Muslim'.*

When it comes to curriculum content, participants in our study had different views. A couple of students on engineering programmes, for example, noted that reading lists in their subjects are more 'technical' and don't reflect 'personal opinions', or identities like 'being Muslim'. They suggested that the issue might be more relevant to social science students.

> *'I think I feel included. I don't think they [lecturers] ever express a sort of opinion through their reading lists. I think it is just purely what's written, what we need to know for the course'* (UG student).

Other UG students and DRs noted that LU is a White majority university and suggested that teaching curricula are 'Western' or 'Anglo-centric'. Their views indicate support for a continued emphasis on decolonising the curriculum in relevant disciplines and programmes at LU.

A sports culture is central to LU in relation to its identity as a university and to its educational and research strategies. The issue of inclusion in sports was raised in one focus group, where students questioned whether Muslim women have sufficient opportunities to partake in sport at the university. One student expressed uncertainty about the extent to which visibly Muslim women are accommodated in sports:

> *'… if someone wears a hijab and wants to cover and still wants to play [sports], I haven't seen any person, any girl like this on the field till now'* (female PGT student).

Another student commented that sportswear requirements might produce barriers for Muslim women's participation:

> *'Yes, especially when I see the girls who play, like, rugby. Of course, they wear like shorts and T-shirts and stuff, so I can't imagine how easy it would be for Muslims to play'* (female UG student).

Moreover, discussions among focus group participants suggested that the campus gyms ought to offer gender-segregated spaces to accommodate women in general and Muslim women in particular.

Results from our survey show that the undergraduate participants largely agree that classroom environments are welcoming and inclusive of them. Of the 31 UG students who took part in our survey, 87% (27 students) agreed or strongly agreed with the attitude question 'I feel comfortable and valued by my peers in class environments'. On this question, three UG students were 'neutral' and only one disagreed. Most Muslim UG students thus seem to feel that their peers are inclusive of them in the classroom.

More than half (58%) of our UG respondents reported that they agree or strongly agree that they actively participate in classroom discussions. However, 36% chose the 'neutral'

response category and 7% (2 students) chose to disagree (no-one strongly disagreed). This could reflect a general trend in university classrooms when it comes to patterns of participation in classroom discussions. On the other hand, it could indicate that many Muslim students feel marginalised and opt to not participate in classroom discussions. This issue warrants further research.

Furthermore, as a measure of inclusion we asked whether students felt included in classroom environments. A majority of 84% of the respondents in our study agreed or strongly agreed that they feel included in the classroom, while 13% choose the 'neutral' response option. Only 3% (1 student) disagreed with the statement (no-one strongly disagreed). Among our UG participants, there is thus an overall feeling of being included in the classroom. We also asked the participants about whether they feel they can be themselves in the classroom (which we assumed would include their religious identity as Muslim). Among the 31 UG participants, a majority of 87% said that they agree or strongly agree that they can be themselves in the classroom. 6% (2 students) responded 'neutral' to whether they felt they can be themselves in the classroom, while another 6% (2 students) said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed. This suggest that a minority of Muslim students do not feel that they can be themselves in the classroom, and further research is needed to establish the reasons for this. Finally, we asked UG students if they feel that their perspectives are heard in the classroom. On this measure, 71% of the UG respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their perspectives were heard. While 31% of the responses were 'neutral', no students said that they disagree or strongly disagree. This seems to indicate that classroom practices are generally inclusive of a multitude of perspectives.

4.3.2. Doctoral research culture and experiences with supervisory teams

Overall, the DR participants in our research have very positive experiences at LU. They emphasised good relations with their PhD supervisors and fellow students. A male DR noted that his supervisors and DR colleagues are 'very welcoming', while another said that he could not have asked for any better university when it comes to faculty and the student body. He did, however, feel that there is 'rigidity when it comes to new ideas, especially if the ideas come from other cultures,' indicating that the research culture could be more open and inclusive. A third male DR observed that LU has a supportive and quite diverse culture.

The DRs in our study viewed existing flexibility as very positive when it comes to working patterns and working from campus and/or home. A male DR noted that both staff and DRs have flexible working hours, and that if you are observing Ramadan, you can come on campus when you want or you can work from home. Another male DR said that fasting during Ramadan has not been a problem for him and that there has been an understanding that you may come to campus a bit later, emphasising that he doesn't feel restricted in practising Islam in any way. Supervisors are generally viewed as very understanding about the month of fasting. The male DRs in our study have never experienced any issue with working flexibly at LU, and they value the personal freedom to practice their own religion. Similar views were articulated by most of the female DRs in our study and they feel included at the university. They perceived their supervisors as accommodating during Ramadan. For example, a female DR stated that everyone is supportive and that both her supervisors consider prayer times so that supervisory meetings don't conflict with prayer times. Another DR shared that her supervisor is very supportive during the Ramadan and offers flexible working hours. She also noted her strong feelings of belonging to the Muslim and international communities of DRs on campus.

> *'He [my PhD supervisor] asked me to go back home, and he doesn't even let me apply as an annual leave. He's very flexible with that'* (female doctoral researcher).

However, a story was also shared by a female DR about another DR whose supervisors knew that it was the day of Eid yet insisted on meeting with her for supervision. This prompted a reaction from another female DR whose supervisor was unaware of Eid, perhaps due to her being his first Muslim student. She reflected,

> *'... because people here, I'm sorry to say, they are ignorant about our religion. They don't understand what Eid is. They don't understand that it's maybe more equivalent to Christmas to them or to the Chinese New Year'* (female doctoral researcher).

This suggests that more awareness and knowledge about Muslim holy days are needed among members of the campus community (see also Chapter 3).

Furthermore, a female DR shared her experience of how her supervisor, who knows that the DR is Muslim, made a conscious effort to include her in an informal viva celebration for another student by bringing non-alcoholic drinks to mark the occasion. The female DR noted that her supervisor was the first staff member in the department who brought non-alcoholic

drinks to a viva-related event. She found this to be a considerate act that made a difference to her inclusion and belonging:

> *'...she brought non-alcoholic options. It made a little bit of difference when I had the same drink as other people, but just the non-alcoholic version, so it just you know, like I felt a little bit more included here. I just felt a little bit more appreciated'* (female doctoral researcher).

Another issue raised by some DRs relates specifically to DRs in London, and how, even with a PhD scholarship, it is difficult to get by with higher costs in London. They suggested that supervisors lack understanding of the DRs need for part-time work to support self and family.

Seventeen (17) doctoral researchers also took part in our survey of Muslim students at LU. The attitude questions aimed to measure whether DRs at LU feel comfortable with and included in the overall doctoral community at the university in relation to their peers (other PhD students) and their supervisors. In other words, these questions did not ask about their lived experiences of the university in general, but more about their lived experiences as part of the doctoral community, thus providing more localised measures of inclusion within their sub-community. The survey findings show that most of the DR respondents (71%) agree or strongly agree that they feel valued by the doctoral researcher community at LU. Most DRs (81%) also agree or strongly agree that they are satisfied with the doctoral researcher culture at LU. Moreover, most DRs (77%) agree or strongly agree that their perspectives are included and heard during supervision meetings. Finally, most DRs (82%) agree or strongly agree that they feel at ease attending supervision meetings. A handful of the DR respondents indicated that they had a neutral stance on these four attitude questions, while one DR said they strongly disagreed with the first two attitude questions. No-one disagreed or strongly disagreed with the latter two attitude questions. In conclusion, for the DRs who participated in our study, a clear majority feel valued and included in the doctoral researcher community, while only a small minority do not.

We also asked doctoral researchers about the extent to which they felt that their religious beliefs were accepted and valued by other students. Of the 17 DRs who participated in our survey, more than three-quarters (76%, or 12 DRs) responded that they agree or strongly agree with the statement that they feel confident about other students' accepting and valuing their religious beliefs. While 3 responses (18%) were neutral, only one DR (6%)

disagreed with the statement. On the question of whether DRs felt comfortable expressing their religious beliefs in and around campus, most DRs (77%) responded that they agree or strongly agree that they are comfortable doing so. 18% (3 DRs) were neutral, while 12% (2 DRs) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Moreover, most DRs (77%, or 13 DRs) felt that they have been treated fairly and without bias by peers. On this measure, 12% (2 DRs) were neutral, while 12% (2 DRs) disagreed (no-one strongly disagreed). Again, for the DRs who participated in our study, most feel confident, comfortable and treated fairly by others on campus, while only a small minority do not. Unfortunately, we lack detailed information about the reasons why respondents chose to answer as they did.

Furthermore, we asked Muslim DRs about other aspects of their lived experiences at LU. Of the 17 DRs who responded to our survey, 16 out of 17 (94%) said that they are comfortable using the facilities required to complete their work on campus, with one DR (6%) giving a neutral response (no-one gave an unfavourable response to this question). Also, 14 out of 17 Muslim DRs (88%) either agreed or strongly agreed that they feel a sense of belonging at LU, with 1 neutral response (6%) and 2 DRs (12%) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Again, we note a difference between a clear majority having a positive experience, with a small minority having a negative experience. The latter warrants further investigation.

On a further attitude question about feeling belonging at LU, rather than feeling just like a student attending university, most of the DR respondents (77%) agreed or strongly agreed that they feel like they belong at Loughborough. On this question, one DR (6%) response was neutral, while three DRs (18%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. We also asked an attitude question about the extent to which supervisory teams are experienced by the DRs as supportive of the DRs religious practices such as prayer and fasting. On this question, 13 out of 17 DRs (77%) said that their supervisory teams were either supportive or very supportive. While two DRs (12%) responded with ‘neutral’ attitudes, another two DRs (12%) said that their supervisory teams were ‘very unsupportive’ of their religious practices. This would indicate that a minority of Muslim DRs receive little or no support for their religious practices. However, when asked whether they had encountered any challenges related to their religious beliefs in their doctoral research supervision, all the Muslim DR participants our study (100%) responded ‘No’.

4.3.3 Workplace culture

Generally, Muslim academic and professional staff in our study said that they are being treated fairly in relation to career opportunities and promotion. 'For me, I have an equal opportunity to develop,' noted one staff member. However, some also said that they have not observed other Muslim staff progress to the next level of their careers and that there is a lack of Muslim staff at leadership levels. A lack of inspiring role models for Muslim staff was also mentioned (see also Section 4.6.1).

> *'There are no Muslim staff in senior positions at the university at all, and they're not in EDI and that's the shocking thing […]. I don't think there is any Muslim staff in EDI to be honest at all. Let alone senior ones'* (female staff member)

> *'I think the fact that there are no people in position that are Muslim, there's no inspiration for us to get there'* (male staff member).

Regarding equal opportunities at work, a female staff member recounted how she feels confident in her abilities, but sometimes she fears that other people might think that she gets opportunities because of the university's current focus on EDI. At a meeting she had experienced that a white man made a comment,

> '... *something insinuating that he's never going to get it because he is White, because now there is a lot of emphasis on EDI and inclusion […]. We don't have equal opportunities. I think there are moves [by the university] to be more inclusive'* (female staff member).

She has noticed that more is being done to make the university more inclusive, such as the introduction of targeted offers of PhD studentships for ethnic minority applicants.

> *'I think now they put in a lot of measures to make sure that we kind of are all getting equal opportunities, yeah'* (female staff member).

These findings show that Muslim staff who took part in our research note a lack of relevant role models in EDI services and a lack of representation in leadership positions more broadly at LU. Yet, they also recognise that EDI issues are gaining more policy attention.

4.4 ISOC as an anchor of belonging

The Islamic Society (ISOC) was a primary source of social inclusion for many participants, particularly undergraduate students. ISOC was often described as a faith-based society and a source of community and social centrality in wider university life that provided safety, the ability to express religious identity freely, and comfort and familiarity. When transitioning to university, some participants specifically sought an Islamic society to find like-minded students. One international student who moved to Loughborough to study discussed how ISOC was instrumental in providing a social base to build connections.

> *'ISOC really helped me gain some traction when it came to socialising here'* (undergraduate student).

Several students referenced ISOC when describing experiences of inclusion, which further reinforced how ISOC provides a gateway to building connections. Many students stated that the events organised by ISOC were the only events they would attend, and many students met their core friendship group through these events.

> *'I've met most of my Muslim friends, all of my Muslim friends here'* (undergraduate student).

These insights indicate the instrumental role ISOC plays in developing peer relations, socialising with others, and facilitating a sense of inclusion. Friendships are vital in constructing emotional comfort, navigating transitions, and helping students feel integrated at university. Therefore, the role of ISOC is central to providing Muslim students with a space to meet other students with whom they share values and interests. Thomas (2012) argues that the early stages of university are a key point for shaping students' experiences of belonging and engagement. While ISOC was a critical space for connection, particularly for undergraduate Muslim students, the absence of students discussing additional spaces that provided the same level of engagement was evident, raising questions of to how the orientation period of Freshers' Week can be marginalising for underrepresented groups (see also Chapter 3).

While ISOC's impact on undergraduate respondent's student experience was praised, one staff member noted the inclusion of the REACH staff network and Maia network (Women's network), which were commended, however, it was raised that there isn't an ISOC equivalent for staff members. Staff members expressed interested in the development of a Muslim staff network, a space where members could meet to share experiences and foster a sense of belonging among staff who are Muslim. This would thereby extend ISOC's framework for establishing connections between members to staff and strengthen institutional inclusion efforts across staff and student communities.

4.5. Disconnections between policy and practice

Although our survey findings suggest that many Muslim students feel a sense of belonging at the university, our focus group discussions highlight a complex and layered experience. The analysis illustrates an emergence of a layered perception of belonging, where inclusion was often conditional and contextual dependent on behaviour, visibility and silence around certain issues.

During the focus groups, participants often cited institutional policies as guidelines for inclusion. Many participants were aware of Loughborough's zero tolerance policy towards discrimination, highlighting the *'unanimous message'* among the student body towards inclusion. For example, one doctoral researcher shared,

> *'My School provided me with good support during the induction…the whole environment is quite conducive to different background cultures and for people to belong to different religions'* (male doctoral researcher).

It was clear the presence of formal structures relating to discrimination and ensuring equality was appreciated. Such discussion reflects a surface-level confidence in Loughborough's commitment to an inclusive campus. However, as the focus groups progressed, several participants began to question how far this inclusion extended. One participant elaborated,

> *'You can pray anywhere you want, but if you start expressing your views or your concerns about things, that's the problem… it's the hypocrisy that makes you laugh,*

> *be a quiet Muslim, be a good Muslim, just don't tell us what we're doing wrong'* (male doctoral researcher).

This participant's reflection, echoed by others, alluded to an idea of covert silencing rather than active inclusion.

> *'They don't mind you being a Muslim, they don't mind you living your life. It's more tolerance. They're very tolerant towards us'* (male doctoral researcher).

Another participant echoed this sentiment, saying, *'They* [the institution] *are quite OK with us just being us'* (male doctoral researcher).

The insights suggest a perceived notion of quiet tolerance, describing feeling tolerated rather proactively embraced, despite being protected by policy; there was evidence of passive acceptance, rather than active inclusion, which raises questions about who finds it easier to belong and why. While these reflections do not dismiss the value of institutional policy, they highlight a disconnection between policy and practice, particularly relating to initiatives that translated into genuine engagement within everyday realities. The findings not only raise critical questions about what forms of religious expression are truly welcomed on campus, who and what identities are permitted, alluding that identities that go against dominant norms are not truly accepted. Finally, these insights challenge the university to engage in critical reflexivity on how policy translates into everyday practices, and for whom experiences of inclusion is most easily accessed.

4.6 Social exclusion and marginalisation

In this section (4.6), we discuss findings related to the representation and visibility of Muslim staff, DRs and students; staff network groups; and communications from the University.

4.6.1 Representation and visibility of Muslim staff, DRs and students

Findings from our focus groups indicate that participants do not see their Muslim identity reflected in the university's newsletters or any campaigns, nor do they feel represented in any way. They also noted that Muslim staff role models are not prominent or celebrated (see also Section 4.3.3). Participants also observed that there are only a few Muslim staff members at

LU and that there are no visibly Muslim staff among the university's senior leadership, except for an Associate Dean.

> *'In terms of Islam and in terms of like Muslim role models, no, none. In fact, I don't really feel that much of a presence'* (male doctoral researcher).

One participant reflected that there might be some male Muslim staff members in the university, but they do not have enough representation from the female Muslim staff members.

> *'I don't think we have a lot. No, we don't have a lot of Muslim women there might be men that we don't know, it's not even though they are doing a lot I think we could investigate, could do better by having a bit more representation of Muslims'* (female staff member).

An undergraduate student shared that she has not seen any role models apart from her lecturers and other staff members, but she was inspired when she saw a Muslim female doing a PhD, which shows that having Muslim role models can motivate other Muslim students and particularly those who are women.

> *'Other than like my lectures and other staff members, I haven't really encountered any Muslim role models. But I met one PhD student, and she was Muslim and she kind of inspired me to also look into doing a PhD'* (female UG student).

Other participants shared similar thoughts:

> *'I spent almost, I guess, three years here. I haven't attended a single event in which they promoted Islam and talk about the achievements of Muslims, women or men'* (female doctoral researcher).

> *'You do see newsletters for Black History Month, LGBTQ month, and all of that. But from September (since she joined) till now I haven't seen anything that includes Muslims, any event or any person or anything'* (female PGT student).

This perception is further reinforced by survey responses to the questions about Muslim student representation in the hall committees and Loughborough student union. An overwhelming majority of 98% (47 participants) of survey participants said they have not previously held a position on the student union committee or on a hall committee. Only 2%

(1 participant) indicated that they have previously had a position in a hall committee and Loughborough student Union. It is also clearly visible from the views of participants expressed during focus groups that there is a strong sense of underrepresentation among Muslim students and staff members across various levels of the university. This difference may potentially reflect broader issues of inclusion, accessibility, or awareness of such opportunities which can be further explored in subsequent studies.

4.6.2 Staff network groups

Some participants expressed the view that the university's EDI initiatives do not reflect or celebrate Muslim identity as they celebrate other groups, such as LGBTQ+ communities or Black History Month. It is reflected in their views that while these communities are supported and acknowledged through visible events and campaigns, there is a marked disparity of similar recognition for Muslim community. This lack of representation may contribute to the feelings of exclusion and creates a perception that Muslim identity is not equally valued within the institution's EDI agenda.

> *'Their inclusivity definition excludes Muslims. I guess if we talk at a broader level. Yeah, they are promoting everything. They don't promote Muslims'* (female doctoral researcher),

Some participants were aware of the REACH network but suggested that there should also be a Muslim staff network in the university. Only a few were aware of the Religion, Spirituality and Belief Network at LU. As one participant noted:

> *'I think the only chance I get to network with other Muslim staff is in the prayer room [...]. And then the Reach network as well. But the REACH network is like a mixture of religions. There's like different Hindus and Sikhs and everything. So that's not only for Muslims, but there are Muslims in that network that I can socialize with'* (male staff member).

Muslim staff members in our study thus perceive a need for a dedicated network that acknowledges their religious identity and provides a source of support. Existing networks within the university are perceived as offering limited recognition of Muslim identities. It was suggested that the establishment of a separate Muslim staff network can address this gap.

4.6.3 Communication from the University

The participants expressed a sense of disappointment and noted a lack of clarity regarding the university's communication with Muslim students, DRs and staff on several critical and important occasions when students and staff members were expecting to receive reassurance and acknowledgement from the university administration. This was expressed in the following way:

> '[we] see newsletters for Black History Month, LGBTQ month, and all of that. But from September till now I haven't seen anything that includes Muslims, any event or any person or anything' (female PGT student).

Participants mentioned that they did not hear anything from the University during the riots of Summer 2024 when many Muslim students and staff members were affected and the riots directly affected members of Muslim community in the UK.

> *'After the riots in the summer, there was nothing at all. Nobody reached out to Muslim students and staff'* (female staff member).

It is important to note that, despite participants' concerns about not receiving any communication in response to the riots in Summer 2024, an email was sent to all students and staff across the University on 6 August 2024 detailing support available for anyone 'distressed by recent racially motivated incidents in UK towns and cities.' While this email did not explicitly mention Islamophobia, the 'Staff Newsletter' on 8 August 2024 included a statement from the Vice-Chancellor that strongly condemned the violence, racism and Islamophobia that followed the tragic incident in Southport. The VC's message also reassured students and staff about the University's commitment to creating an anti-discriminatory environment and signposted resources for support.

However, the participants' perspectives remain significant, as it is possible that some students may have missed or overlooked the email or they do not expect such communication in the Staff Newsletter. While the University's communication is commendable, it could be improved by making such messages more accessible and readable if sent as a separate email, with a clear subject line relevant to the incidents, such as "anti-racism," "riots," or "student safety," to ensure greater visibility during difficult times.

Moreover, participants also shared that the university communications on wars and disasters are not sufficiently inclusive of affected Muslim populations. Particularly, while the conflict in Palestine goes on, they had not received any email from the university and some participants said they felt very disappointed and perceived a biased attitude by LU as an institution.[1] Moreover, participants also shared that organising protest about Israel's military operations in Palestine which are being investigated by the International Court of Justice (2024) as potential acts of genocide, was not very welcomed by the university leadership.

> *'I find that they are very slow to react when it comes to Islamic issues'* (male doctoral researcher).

> *'The university has many Instagram pages and different social media accounts, so on their accounts they add events like regarding LGBTQ things, but they never added these protests like against the Palestinian genocide. They never added it'* (male doctoral researcher).

Another participant shared their feelings in detail:

> *'When the onslaught started in Gaza back in October. Something went out in the newsletter, and it went out and it was kind of specifically going out in support of Jewish and Israeli staff. And for a lot of the Muslims that kind of picked up on that, we were quite shocked. I really didn't expect it. Just found that quite shocking. But that was a point that I don't know if I'd say excluded, but I was really surprised. I was shocked ...'*

> *'... It was a difficult period to think that, you know, an institution of this nature. You would expect a lot better, you know. And so that was a little bit of a shock. There are conversations that people have that as a Muslim make you think, oh gosh, I wish I didn't have to listen to this'* (female staff member).

[1] Statements released by LU on Israel and Palestine since November 2023 include the following: https://www.lboro.ac.uk/internal/news/2023/november/events-israel-palestine/ ; https://www.lboro.ac.uk/internal/news/2023/october/events-in-israel-and-palestine/ ; https://www.lboro.ac.uk/internal/news/2023/november/israel-palestine/ ; https://www.lboro.ac.uk/internal/news/2023/october/events-israel-palestine/ ; https://www.lboro.ac.uk/internal/news/2024/march/the-israel-gaza-conflict/ ; https://www.lboro.ac.uk/internal/news/2025/january/israel-hamas-ceasefire/

The above quotes show that our research participants made references to the war in Gaza and how the university has responded to it to indicate disappointment in university leadership, but also to indicate how this issue demonstrates the marginalisation of Muslim voices and needs in the university context (see also Section 4.7 in this Chapter). This is supported by a recent study from the University of Bradford, where participants referred to the war in Gaza as an issue that further demonstrates Muslim university staff's lack of voice and barriers to their inclusion and belonging (Alam & Chaudry, 2025, p. 31).

4.7 Campus safety, non-recognition, stereotyping, microaggressions, racism and Islamophobia

As noted earlier, most participants described Loughborough as a welcoming and supportive university, but as discussions elaborated, it was clear that subtle forms of exclusion were common among experiences, which shaped how safe and comfortable participants felt navigating campus. These experiences included marginalisation, subtle exclusion, microaggressions and forms of identity management that point to a more complex, layered perception of belonging.

4.7.1. Visibly Muslim

Among the research participants who are visibly Muslim, there is a broad feeling of inclusion in the university community. A particular event held at the university on 1 February 2024 was singled out as very positive in this regard – the Voices of Diversity Allyship event 'How to be an ally … for people who wear the hijab', organised by EDI Services. The event marked World Hijab Day at Loughborough with a panel of four speakers. It was attended by both Muslims and non-Muslims and as such provided a space for non-Muslims 'to learn about you and know how to be an ally. So many people came there to try and understand, you know, trying to be more culturally sensitive' (female staff member). However, several participants, particularly women, including undergraduate and doctoral researchers, described feeling overly visible on campus, with their religious identity.

Participants noted how wearing a hijab influenced how others perceived and interacted with them. For example, a female undergraduate student described how wearing a hijab has implications for how other students perceive and act towards her,

> *'I notice that for example in like lectures, people kind of avoid, not avoid, but girls have told me that they feel people avoid speaking to them because they are wearing hijab. I just started wearing one, but I felt a similar vibe; people are just more hesitant to speak to them. I think another girl said she had to go out of her way to speak to people'* (female UG student).

This insight shows how choice of clothing can be a form of passive exclusion, where the visibility of Muslim identity marks can lead to social distancing. Nadal et al., (2012) research has documented how Muslim women who wear a hijab expressed examples of staring and comments from others. Participants in our study echoed this, using words such as '*apprehensive'* and *'stand-offish*' to describe how others sometimes acted around them. It was felt these encounters kept a distance between cross-demographic relations, *'it's what keeps people from wanting to like bridge the gap'*. This idea of distancing was reflected in a professional setting. One doctoral researcher added,

> *'I never honestly felt comfortable praying in my own cubicle at work because of the eyes and the judgment... but that's not the case here. You feel stared at sometimes, there's a distance'* (doctoral researcher).

The sense of being observed can foster discomfort in otherwise academic settings, highlighting how visibility can invite distance. Persistent experiences of curiosity and judgement have been noted by Nadal et al., (2012) to have implications for mental wellbeing and navigating everyday life. Participants also shared experiences of microaggressions related to visibility, particularly around being visibly or non-visibly Muslim. These included comments or questions when people ask why one is either wearing or not wearing a headscarf, and whether the headscarf is mandatory or not in Islam. One female DR had been asked 'Did you leave [your] country because you have to wear it, but you don't want to wear it?' She recounted that if she tells non-Muslims why she is not wearing a hijab, she fears that they may 'just start raising fingers to the other girls who are taking the hijab and [this would not be right]. Everybody should have the freedom [to wear or not wear hijab]'. Another female DR observed that,

> *'[people] do ask questions out of curiosity maybe. I have noticed one thing, that you have to initiate talking with them [non-Muslims], because sometimes they treat you as an extremist if you are wearing the hijab'* (female doctoral researcher).

Yet, she and another female DR in the same focus group said that they personally had not felt any direct negative consequences from wearing the hijab. It thus seems that an expectation about being met with stereotypes by non-Muslims has become normalised, due to broader patterns of anti-Muslim hatred, discrimination and Islamophobia in higher education and in society more broadly (see Akel, 2021; Mahmud & Islam, 2023; Mahmud & Islam, 2024). In contrast, a male staff member narrated a personal incident where his visibly Muslim wife was targeted by an 'aggressive lecturer' in a campus café who asked her to 'get off the table because she wasn't eating, and you have to'. His wife is visibly Muslim, wearing a headscarf and long clothing. He commented that,

> *'Unfortunately, it [an anti-Muslim incident] may not be seen every day, but it just takes a random incident like that, and it really opens your eyes about what some people really think of [Muslims]'* (male staff member).

The lived experiences of people who are visibly Muslim at LU differ, however. Several of our research participants conveyed that they did not feel discriminated against due to being visibly Muslim:

> *'I don't think I have been treated any differently because of how I have a beard'* (male staff member).

> *'I've never had a negative experience with my visibility of being a Muslim'* (male staff member).

> *'I do wear hijab, but I don't experience any negative experiences so far'* (female doctoral researcher).

> *'I don't think I've experienced people look at me differently because I'm in a hijab'* (female undergraduate student).

These reflections suggest that while participants could practice their religion on campus, this was often conditional on others' reactions. This contrasts the quantitative findings which found that only 12% of participants disagreed with the statement *'I have been treated*

fairly and without bias from peers', suggesting that although overall bias is less common, individual subtle forms of social distancing was experienced, signifying that forms of bias remain present.

Although this was the experience for some participants, others did not feel that being a visible Muslim impacted relations with others. *'Personally, I haven't experienced that, which I'm grateful for, but it does happen a few times', noted a female undergraduate student*. Despite initially claiming no personal experience of bias, the participant went on to acknowledge that such incidents occurred. This contradiction in experience may reflect a reluctance to name or fully acknowledge negative experiences, possibly due to internalised stigma or strategic silence. Strategic silence in this context can be viewed as a coping mechanism aimed at protecting oneself from the emotional toll or from being perceived as the Other (Ahmed, 2012; Mirza, 2019). However, it could also be viewed as an empowering move to take control of the narrative. One participant explained why they felt this bias occurred, elaborating,

> *'I would say it's quite a White university. I'm from a city, so I'm not used to being in a town which is so like majority of people are White. I think people are scared to approach [us]. I genuinely think that is it like I have some lecturers who wear hijab or who are obviously Muslim. Like, just like in their name or like in their accent, or just the way they speak. And you can tell, and the way that students act in their lectures compared to lecturers who aren't, it is. That in itself is also a big difference. So, I do think it makes a very big difference being visibly Muslim because I from what I've seen with my friends versus my experience, I think there is a difference'* (female undergraduate student).

Despite the visibility of Muslim identity leading to potentially negative encounters with peers, several undergraduate participants described a feeling of comfort when seeing other visible Muslims, as stated by this student,

> *'If I see somebody who is visibly Muslim, that immediately makes me feel comfortable rather than uncomfortable because it's familiar and I know that there is instantly going to be something we relate on'* (female undergraduate student).

These reflections indicate that visibility can also be a site for fostering belonging. While concealing identity can be viewed as a strategy in response to potential marginalisation, others demonstrate agency in exerting identity. In this way, participants demonstrate how visible markers of their religious identity act as a source of connection and to affirm their place within particularly White-dominated spaces (Peek, 2005). By actively asserting identity as a form of resistance and spatial belonging, in this sense, participants engage in a strategic form of empowerment which Puwar (2004) refers to as 'claiming space' within spaces that could potentially lead to exclusion.

Participants also discussed how some visibly Muslim women at LU do not shake hands with men, due to their observance and interpretation of Islamic prescriptions. For women who do not shake hands with men, it can be difficult to physically and/or orally object to a handshake (by responding instead, e.g., with a hand over their heart). They may feel obliged to explain why they do not shake hands with men, which in turn makes them feel uncomfortable and 'Othered' (Hall, 1991) as being different from and inferior to the (white) non-Muslim majority. As argued by Pickering (2001, p. 72), '[t]he symbolically constructed Other and the patterns of social exclusion and incorporation entailed by it are distributed in sign and language, discourse and representation.'

A female staff member recounted that, a lot of times she ends up 'giving in', because doing otherwise would require 'a lot of explanation' to clarify why she's not shaking hands with men. 'It is a lot of these situations where I think there's just the lack of sensitivity around different cultures and different religious practices', she said. A male doctoral researcher who wears a beard observed that his peers had initially hesitated to speak with him, perhaps because they had preconceived notions about him being 'a little bit on the extreme side of Islam and stuff like that'. When they came to know him, however, the peer conversations went well. These accounts illustrate that a gendered lens is needed to capture the diverse experiences of Muslim women and men. Our research participants' narratives also suggest that 'Islamophobic microaggressions' (Chaudry, 2021) are often part and parcel of Muslim everyday life at university and beyond.

4.7.2. Concealing and affirming identity

While many participants expressed an overall sense of belonging to Loughborough for students, the focus groups demonstrate a complex experience for staff members, shaped by context and power dynamics. Notably, some staff at LU actively hide their Muslim identity to avoid prejudice. For example, several male academic staff said that they hide that they pray, or that they don't want to be seen on campus together with other visibly Muslim family members. Some staff also feel that they must avoid talking about religion on campus to avoid negative reactions. This finding is similar to that of Akel (2021), who in a survey-based study of Muslim staff and students at London Metropolitan University found that a minority of staff respondents 'have hidden their religious beliefs from university colleagues and students to avoid Islamophobic treatment' (p. 12). Akel also noted that a minority of student respondents are 'hiding their religious beliefs from their peers to avoid prejudice, physical assault, discriminatory treatment and mischaracterisation' (ibid., p. 10). One male staff member captures this sentiment,

> *'There are two topics that we don't talk about in our department. We don't talk about politics, and we don't talk about religion'* (male staff member).

This was echoed by another male staff member who reflected on his Muslim identity,

> *'I don't advertise it…I keep it to myself'* (male staff member).

These examples suggest a strategic response to a perceived sense of caution towards religious presentation, particularly in workplace environments. The notion that religion and politics is a marker for what can be shared in the workplace was found to encourage individuals to conceal parts of their identity to avoid perceived uncomfortable conversations and prejudice. Notably, the female staff members in the focus groups did not share this experience. Nevertheless, our findings reflect broader institutional cultures where neutrality becomes the norm, which may inadvertently discourage staff members to present and engage more authentically in relation to their religious identities.

The notion of (non) communication between participants and colleagues was evident in student experiences, however a female undergraduate student discussed this from an alternative angle, describing how others not asking about her religious background was deemed as unsupportive. She stated,

'When people don't acknowledge the fact that I'm Muslim... it feels like they're ignoring it' (female UG student).

These insights show how non-engagement can lead to feelings of disconnection between Muslim and non-Muslims, hindering deeper belonging and solidarity among colleagues. These moments of subtle exclusion are not always named or addressed, but they impact on how participants navigate space and how they engage with others. While such moments reflect how non-overt forms of discrimination do not necessarily translate to an immediate sense of (non) belonging, they also suggest a tenson between who is truly accepted, adding a sense of discomfort to participants in our research. Additionally, these incidences were described passively, underscoring the normalisation of subtle exclusion in these spaces. In this way, campus safety is not just about reducing risk of violence or abuse on campus, but also the presence of support and trust when Muslims use and engage in campus spaces. Instances of silencing and self-silencing of religious identities relating to students of different faiths in UK higher education have also been shown by Stevenson (2013), who interviewed Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh students at a post-92 university.

4.7.3. Recognition

Many of the participants in our research felt that Muslim identities lacked visibility and recognition on campus. Participants often made comparisons with the visibility and recognition of other minoritised communities at LU, including the Black community and the LGBTQ+ community. Many stated that, in their experience, the university regularly celebrates and sends notifications and greetings (including on the university website and social media) related to religious and other festivals such as Christmas, Diwali and Chinese New Year, while Ramadan and Eid get less attention, leading to feelings of non-recognition and exclusion.

'Their inclusivity definition excludes Muslims, I guess, if we talk about at a broader level. If you understand what I mean to say. Yeah, they are promoting everything [Chinese events, Indian events, Christian events']. They don't promote Muslims' (female doctoral researcher).

'I have spent almost three years here. I haven't attended a single event in which they promoted Islam and talk about the achievements of Muslims, women or men. I think I haven't' (female doctoral researcher).

One participant stated that Islamophobia Awareness Month is not observed by the University. There has, however, been university statements relating to Islamophobia Awareness month on the LU website (e.g., https://www.lboro.ac.uk/equity-diversity-inclusion/edi-me/islamophobia-awareness/), but there seems to have been a lack of events supporting the university's endorsement of it.

Several of the participants remarked on the fact that they are in a minority at LU in terms of their religion and/or ethnicity. Some reported feeling uncomfortable due to a perceived lack of ethnic and/or religious diversity in an overall, White-dominated university (noting, e.g., an absence of Brown or Black people, of Muslims, and of diversity more broadly). A female staff member observed that she initially was a bit shocked as she didn't see many Muslim colleagues around her, making her feel she was the only one. A female staff member also commented that her School is not diverse at all and suggested that she stands out as a Black member of staff. However, she noted that

> *'[…] in spite of that, I'm really ok. I really feel very supported'. A further female staff member noted that 'the main sort of exclusion that I have faced is, it's not just with Muslims, it's with broader exclusion of non-White voices'* (female staff member).

Here, the participant talked about Eurocentric disciplines and a perceived lack of minorities and non-White voices in the curriculum. She recounted that a Muslim student came up to her after class and said it was so good to have a hijabi teacher. 'Teaching here and so just to have that representation … you know someone wearing a hijab was teaching on the course. It made a difference to her'. These examples show that Muslim academic staff act as role models by demonstrating that Muslims belong in higher education, and that ongoing work to decolonise the curriculum at LU is perceived as needed.

4.7.4. Islamophobia

Among our research participants, there were some lived experiences of Islamophobia at the university and in the local community. Notably, encounters where Islam or Muslims were depicted in negative terms were more often described by the participants as expressions of either micro-aggressions, insensitive comments, stereotypes, or 'small things', rather than as expressions of Islamophobia. This suggests that Islamophobic incidents might be normalised

for Muslims in British higher education institutions (Akel, 2021; Mahmud & Islam, 2022; Mahmud & Islam, 2024; see also UUK, 2021).

> *'I would say that there have been certain small microaggression incidents, but again, I would put that more to lack of sensitivity rather than Islamophobia, rather than hate. Just things like, being a Muslim and not drinking. So, comments about how I could enjoy myself without partaking [in drinking]'* (female staff member).

Solorzano and colleagues define racial microaggressions as 'subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously' (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000, p. 60). Microaggressions can occur towards people who belong to different minoritised groups, such as racialised, religious, and LGBTQ+ minorities. In a study of Muslim students in a British university in the north of England, Chaudry (2021, p. 257) uses the concept of 'Islamophobic microaggressions' to denote instances of religious prejudice towards British Muslim students that are articulated via 'maintaining excessive distance, peculiar staring and hurling racial jokes.' Whether microaggressions are committed by one or more individuals or groups, in the UK context they are expressed within and result from hegemonic structures dominated by white, secular and heteronormative ideologies (see Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018, p. 145).

Microaggressions can lead to feelings of exclusion and non-belonging. For example, a female doctoral researcher recounted that, upon exciting a storeroom in her building where she had just prayed, she felt obliged to explain to a non-Muslim member of staff that she had been praying, following the Islamic obligation to pray five times per day, to which the non-Muslim staff responded with a laugh and said 'good luck with praying five times a day!'. These kinds of comments 'just makes you feel not being part of the community sometimes', she noted. A female member of staff also said that she sometimes overhears conversations about issues involving Muslim people that make her feel excluded.

Notably, when participants recounted experiences of racism, either on or off campus, these were talked about as caused by racialisation or ethnicization, rather than by religious prejudice or hatred. For example, a female staff member noted that Black staff and students at LU have experienced racism and microaggressions on campus. She reflected that, in her own experience, this is due to racial minoritisation rather than to religious minoritisation and/or Islamophobia. Personally, she had not experienced any incidents of Islamophobia on campus. However, observing that she has experienced discrimination on public transport off

campus, she also expressed uncertainty as to whether discrimination of Black Muslims is due to anti-Black racism or Islamophobia:

> *'So, you don't know whether it's Islamophobia, because they would do that to other Black people. They would do that to other ethnic minorities. So, if nothing has been said specifically with regards to my religion, then I'm not too sure whether [it is Islamophobia or racism]'* (female staff member).

A female undergraduate student also suggested that any experiences she has had of racism and micro-aggressions in Loughborough town are due to her skin colour and nationality, and not due to her being Muslim (see also Dhillon et al., 2018, for experiences of racism by Black students in Loughborough town). Participants who had experienced racism in the town felt unsafe outside of campus, while feeling safer on campus. A female doctoral researcher also noted that international students 'just assume there's going to be a lot of hatred towards us or inequality towards us. You just manage' (female DR). Due to perceived and actual experiences of hostility, stereotyping and insensitivity at university and beyond, minoritised Muslim staff, doctoral researchers and students thus engage in considerable 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) 'that is self-managed and invisible in institutional terms' (Koster, 2011 p. 62) to navigate white-dominated, non-Muslim spaces. In turn, this invisible labour may affect their health and wellbeing (see also Chaudry, 2021, for effects of Islamophobic microaggressions on the psychological wellbeing of Muslim students).

As discussed above, participants in our study have experienced stereotypes about Islam and Muslims (e.g., feeling a need to counter views of themselves as 'extremist' for being visibly Muslim), microaggressions relating to Islam and Muslims, and racism relating to 'race', ethnicity and/or nationality. There were hardly any accounts of direct experiences of Islamophobia among the research participants, but some of them were aware of others who had experienced Islamophobia within our outside university contexts.

Some staff and DRs, however, viewed the university's newsletters about Gaza as Islamophobic. That the university did not mention the targeting of Muslims and asylum seekers during the summer riots in 2024 in its email to staff and students was also perceived as an example of Islamophobia. These were seen as instances of poor communication and a lack of reaching out to Muslim students and staff by the university (see also Section 4.6 in this chapter).

> *'I don't know if it's fair to say it's Islamophobia. There's a lot of ignorance, certainly. There's a lot of indifference to the experience of Muslims' […]. 'I think we'd all agree that our experiences are quite positive and the people that we work with, in all. The rest of it, in terms of policies and things like that, I think there is a massive indifference to the experiences of Muslims'* (female staff member).

> *'I feel like they are very tolerant to Muslims, and they are very tolerant to my religion, and they are very tolerant to me as a person. But that tolerance feels sometimes almost forced, like they are trying very hard. It's not natural. You know what I mean? So other cultures aren't as tolerated'* […]. *'I think honestly, they don't mind you being a Muslim. They don't mind you living your life. They're ok with it. Like I said, it's more tolerance. They are very tolerant towards us'* (male doctoral researcher).

The above statements suggests that more knowledge is needed at LU about Islam and Muslims, and that active recognition and inclusion, rather than 'tolerance', would be welcomed by Muslims at the university.

Some staff and DRs suggested that it is difficult to speak out on issues that matter to them, such as the war in Gaza. There were fears that expressing concerns might be viewed as problematic by others. In turn, this can imply that the freedom of expression of Muslims at LU is at best curtailed.

> *'Be a quiet Muslim. Be a good Muslim. Just, you know, don't tell us we're doing wrong'* (male doctoral researcher).

> *'You can pray anywhere you want, but if your start expressing your views or your concerns about anything, any issue, that's the problem then'* (male doctoral researcher).

Our findings echo those of Alam and Chaudry (2025, p. 31-32) who found that Muslims at Bradford University experienced a 'double standard' with perceived differences between how the university, as well as individual colleagues, reacted in more visible and demonstrable ways to the war in Ukraine than to the war in Gaza. Such 'double standards' were also read as resulting from negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims within and outside the university (ibid).

Our survey also asked participants to respond to questions about freedom of speech and the university's Prevent policy. Prevent is part of the UK government's counter-terrorist strategy (O'Donnell, 2016) and UK higher education institutions have an 'obligation to identify and report their students, and staff, if they are suspected of having been radicalised or exhibiting signs that they may be vulnerable to radicalisation' (Spiller et al., 2023, p. 1118). Notably, none of the survey respondents had observed or experienced any incidents where freedom of speech was restricted or challenged at Loughborough ('No' = 100%). While this might seem to contrast with some of our focus group participants finding it difficult to speak out on certain issues, the survey question is specifically related to 'incidents' while the focus group discussion suggests more subtle forms of institutional censorship where individuals might engage in self-censorship in reaction to perceived hostility in the academic environment.

We also asked the survey respondents to respond to a series of statements regarding freedom of speech and Prevent policies on campus (Table 4.1). The results show that a small majority (56%) agree that they feel comfortable expressing their views on campus even if others disagree. On this item, 35% neither agreed nor disagreed, while 8% disagreed, thus indicating that some participants feel uncomfortable expressing their views. Most students (70%) agree that they hear a wide variety of opinions on campus, including those different from their own. On this item, 23% neither agree nor disagree, while 6% disagree.

A clear majority of survey respondents agree that the university promotes good relations on campus. On this item, 23% neither agree nor disagree, and only 2% disagree. A smaller majority of respondents agree that they are able to express ideas, opinions and beliefs on campus (63%), with 31% neither agreeing or disagreeing and 6% disagreeing. These and the above findings suggest that the university should consider implementing strategies that will enhance students' ability and levels of comfort with expressing their own ideas, opinions and beliefs on campus. A potential strategy is to provide spaces for 'provocative encounters' between different worldviews as well as 'safe spaces' for students who share specific worldviews, as advocated by Peacock et al. (2023, p. 38). Such encounters can be supported via the toolkit document 'Facilitating EDI Discussions' developed by EDI Services at LU. The university has also supported initiative such as Peace Cafes held in November 2023 and January 2024 'to promote healing, fellowship and community' and a Forum for Expression held in December 2023 to 'reflect recognition of grief and concern'.

Table 4.1 Student (UG/PGT/PHD) perceptions of freedom of speech and prevent policies on campus			
Item	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree
I feel comfortable expressing my views on campus even if others disagree	56%	35%	8%
I hear a wide variety of opinions on campus, including those different from my own	70%	23%	6%
My institution promotes good relations on campus	75%	23%	2%
I'm able to express ideas, opinions and beliefs on campus	63%	31%	6%
The university effectively communicates its policies on Prevent and Freedom of Speech	48%	50%	2%
I believe my freedom of speech is respected on campus	58%	35%	6%

Regarding Prevent and freedom of speech, 48% of the survey respondents agreed that the university effectively communicates its policies on these two issues, while 50% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 2% disagreed. Moreover, a majority of 58% of the survey respondents agreed that they believe their freedom of speech is respected on campus, while 35% neither agree nor disagree, and 6% disagree. The survey also asked how familiar respondents were with the details of the LU Prevent policy. A majority of the respondents (58%) said they were unfamiliar or very unfamiliar with the policy, while 27% opted for 'neutral' and only 15% said that they are familiar with the policy. Furthermore, 75% of the respondents said they would find it beneficial if Loughborough provided educational resources or workshops about its Prevent policy, while 25% would not find this beneficial. Based on these findings, we recommend that the university considers the provision of an educational resource for UG/PGT students and DRs about its Prevent policy.

4.8 Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the themes of inclusion, belonging, visibility, recognition, microaggressions and Islamophobia. Broadly speaking, most Muslim students, DRs and staff in our study experience the university, and in particular academic spaces (i.e., classrooms) and peer relationships, as inclusive. A majority of student and DR participants in our study feel a sense of belonging to the university and are proud to be part of it. However, while many participants feel included at LU, perceptions of inclusion were often conditional, shaped by norms and individual effort, suggesting a surface-level experience of inclusion,

rather than a deeper, sustained acceptance and inclusion at both individual and institutional levels.

Our findings show that the Islamic Society (ISOC) plays a crucial role in fostering a supportive and inclusive space for Muslim students to socialise and come together in congregational activities including prayer. In short, ISOC provides an important space for Muslim students to experience a sense of inclusion and belonging in an overall environment where many Muslim students are de facto excluded from social spaces that support a drinking culture, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Most doctoral researchers in our study feel included in the doctoral community and that they belong at LU. Moreover, most of the DRs view their supervisory teams as accommodating of their religious practice, especially during Ramadan, and flexible working patterns are appreciated. However, our findings relating to covert silencing of issues important to Muslim members of the LU community suggest an institutional culture of tolerance and passive acceptance rather than of pro-active embracement and inclusion.

Muslim staff in our study report that they feel fairly treated and have equal career opportunities. They do, however, note a lack of Muslim role models and especially a lack of Muslims in university leadership roles. Moreover, they feel a need for a university-supported network dedicated to Muslim staff.

Muslim students, DRs and staff who participated in our research indicate that they do not feel that their Muslim identities are reflected in university communication, leadership and governance. University communications are viewed as non-inclusive of Islam and Muslims, especially in times of crises in the UK and around the world. When Muslim voices are marginalised, it raises barriers to inclusion and belonging. Several of our participants suggested that the Muslim community on campus lacks visibility, voice and recognition.

Furthermore, our report shows that participants in our study have different experiences of being visibly Muslim. Some have experiences of stereotyping and microaggressions either at university or beyond. There is evidence that a visibly Muslim identity can lead to reactions that include social distancing and microaggressions, for example in response to Muslim women's headscarf. Asserting a visibly Muslim identity can also be a form of resistance to stereotyping, via the claiming of space (Pumar, 2004).

While experiences of Islamophobia are common among Muslims in UK higher education (UUK 2021), there are less overt or direct experiences of Islamophobia among the participants in our study. However, our findings show that, while most participants are comfortable moving about on campus, some actively choose to hide their Muslim identity from non-Muslims, to avoid 'Islamophobic treatment' (Akel, 2021, p. 12). Furthermore, 'insensitive comments', stereotypes and subtle forms of exclusion contribute to experiences of exclusion and non-belonging. This suggests a normalisation of what Chaudry (2021) calls 'Islamophobic microaggressions' in higher education, mirroring the overall society in which prejudice against Muslims has 'passed the dinner table test' (Warsi, 2024).

Chapter 5

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS AND GOOD PRACTICE FOR LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY TO MEET THE NEEDS OF MUSLIM STUDENTS, DOCTORAL RESEARCHERS AND STAFF

5.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the final two research questions of our study (see Chapter 1):

- What are the current best practices as well as gaps in existing LU policies, practices and facilities that directly or indirectly support Muslims across the two LU campuses?
- What are the strategies and mechanisms that can best support a set of research-informed, comprehensive university policies that will enable Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff to thrive across our two campuses?

The recommendations and examples of existing good practice detailed in this chapter are based on research evidence collected via our survey, focus groups and interviews with Muslim students, doctoral researchers and staff at LU. The proposed actions relate to prayer facilities and services, food and fasting, workplace culture and practices, supporting non-drinking students, DRs and staff, doctoral researcher supervision, student accommodation, societies, sports and academic curricula, university communication and recognition, and combatting stereotyping, microaggressions, racism and Islamophobia. Importantly, our survey was made up of 63% international students and 37% domestic students, and the focus groups included 14 international students and 4 domestic students. When reviewing engagement strategies, institutions need to recognise when and how international students' needs may differ from domestic students. Starred items below highlight existing good practices at Loughborough University.

5.2 Prayer facilities and services

- Improvements to existing prayer room facilities in EHB including, e.g., carpet change and heating repairs to increase the wellbeing and comfort of users.

- Provision of additional spaces for prayer in existing buildings other than EHB so that people don't have to take long walks and miss out on meetings or lectures. Consider the needs of Muslims in the design of new buildings.

Good practice to be rolled out across the university: Schools/Departments to reserve rooms in local buildings for prayer during the month of Ramadan.

- Allocation of a more spacious room for prayer on the London campus.

 Good practice: the prayer room on the Midlands campus is accessible to users 24 hours a day.

- Increase communication/information to staff, DRs and students about the availability of EHB prayer spaces and that these are gender segregated.

- Consider re-opening the EHB prayer spaces to visitors who come onto campus. These are now restricted to students and staff via locked doors/card access only.

- Improve facilities for ablution (ritual washing, Wudu) in advance of prayer. Provide water access for washing (e.g., bidets) in some toilets, for washing of feet (difficult in a regular toilet wash basin/sink, which also risks water spillage).

- Increase awareness about the new Muslim Chaplain among students, DRs and staff.

- Evaluate the positioning of the Chaplaincy and prayer facilities within Health and Safety in the university governance structure, considering factors such as social inclusion as well as safety concerns.

- EDI Services and the Chaplaincy to consult at least once per year with Muslim students, DRs and staff to discuss relevant issues (e.g., prayer room and ablution facilities; access; etc.).

5.3 Food and fasting

- Clearer labelling of product ingredients and marketing of halal options to students, staff and visitors.

- As part of the above, the concept of a food being 'halal' should be clarified and well defined, e.g. any food which has no meat but has gelatine and/or alcohol is not halal.

- Create wider community awareness about fasting practices in our campus communities, including the freedom not to fast under specific circumstances.

Good practice: the Chaplaincy supports inter-faith Iftar meals organised by ISOC during Ramadan.

- Consider offering breakfast (Suhoor) during Ramadan.

5.4 Workplace culture and practices

- Provide training on Islam and religious practices among Muslims as part of formal induction processes and events for students, doctoral researchers and staff, to increase awareness of the needs of Muslim members of the LU community.

- Provide focused training for leaders and managers of academic and professional staff about Islamic norms and Muslim practices and about Islamophobia and its impact in higher education and more widely.

- Showcase internal and/or external role models for Muslim students and staff.

- Encourage and support the career progression of Muslim academic and professional staff and their promotion to university leadership roles.

- Recruit more Muslim students as part of the Widening Participation Agenda and address this in LU's Access and Participation Plan (see also Sardar, 2024).

- Consider offering support to prospective Muslim students via scholarship programmes (e.g., the Aziz Foundation's Masters Scholarship Programme for British Muslim Students).

- EDI Services to enable and support the establishment of a Muslim Staff Network in consultation with Muslim staff and DRs.

The current Religion, Spirituality and Belief Network is open to members whatever their religion, spirituality or belief.

- Increase awareness and knowledge of Islam among students and staff via annual communications about Muslim Heritage Month and Islamophobia Awareness Month.

- Increase interfaith interactions among students and among staff to support mutual understanding and interaction and understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim students and staff.

Good practice: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion training as Performance Development Review (PDR) objective for staff.

- Introduce a formal policy to encourage flexible working practices that allow Muslim staff to pray, especially during Ramadan.

- Introduce a formal policy for Muslim staff to have time off for the Islamic holy day of Eid.

- Encourage managers to be flexible regarding staff meeting times, especially during winter and/or Ramadan, to accommodate lunch-time Islamic prayer times on Fridays.

- Create awareness among event- and meeting organisers that Muslim participants may need a break to pray.

- Line managers to enable and support Muslim staff to request changes to the timetabling of teaching sessions if these coincide with the Jummah prayer time on

Fridays. Consider introducing a formal policy of restricting taught timetabled sessions 1-2 pm on Fridays (the latter is current policy at Bradford University; see Aslam & Chaudry, 2025, p. 28).

5.5 Supporting alcohol-neutral engagement among students, DRs and staff

- Introduce more alcohol-free social events for DRs and staff to enable opportunities to build connections, network and meet new people in the same way that alcohol-centric events allow. These events would also appeal to those outside of the Muslim community who prefer alcohol-neutral spaces, encouraging broader social interactions and potentially fostering engagement across different belief and faith groups. In doing so, this would reduce the pressure on ISOC as the perceived sole avenue for engagement among the Muslim student community.

- Increase the availability of alcohol-free events for all UG/PGT students and especially during Freshers' week to support socialisation, friendship and networking for Muslim and other non-drinking students in inclusive environments.

- Introduce training for Hall Committee members and student society leads on developing inclusive engagement strategies that ensure a range of social initiatives to support diverse participation.

5.6 Doctoral researcher supervision

- The Doctoral College to encourage DR supervisors to avoid scheduling DR supervision meetings during the main Friday prayer time (Jummah), which is the obligatory congregational prayer around midday on Fridays. The congregational Friday prayer is also a time for Muslims at LU to socialise with each other.

- The Doctoral College to encourage DR supervisors to avoid scheduling DR supervision meetings on the holy day of Eid celebrations. Note that the date of Eid celebrations changes each year, in comparison with the fixed dates of Christmas celebrations.

Good practice: Doctoral supervisors to provide non-alcoholic beverages at PhD viva celebrations to facilitate social inclusion and belonging for Muslim students and staff.

5.7 Student accommodation, societies, sports and academic curricula

- Consider the introduction of dry halls for students who prefer a non-drinking culture and atmosphere on campus.

- Ensure timely and repeat communication to new and existing students about the existence of the Islamic Society (ISOC), and especially to students during Freshers' week.

- ISOC to use diverse marketing strategies to promote their events in order to reach a broader population of Muslim students including those not using social media.

- ISOC to collaborate with other societies to arrange joint events for Muslim and non-Muslim students to support socialisation, friendship and networking (e.g., with the Film Society).

- Increase the offering of women-only sports, such as a separate room for women only in all campus gyms or a dedicated women-only gym.

- Make available sport uniforms that are in line with Islamic notions of modesty to support Muslim women's participation and inclusion in LU's sports culture.

- Encourage and support greater representation of Muslims in sports at LU.

- Encourage academic staff to include knowledge about Islam and Muslims in relevant curricula and teaching activities.

- Consider arranging student exams held on Fridays on either side of the main Friday Prayer held around lunchtime (Jummah).

5.8 University communication and recognition

- Regular communication via student and staff notifications and on university social media channels about religious festivities and holidays related to all religions, including those that relate to Islam and Muslims (e.g. Ramadan and Eid).

- Schools and departments to foster an inclusive approach to sending messages to staff and students about key religious celebrations. E.g., if happy Christmas/Easter messages are circulated by the School/Departmental leadership, similar messages inclusive of other religions should also be sent at appropriate times of major religious events during the calendar year.

- Ensure university-level communication about significant community events at local, national and global levels that may have adverse effects on Muslim students, DRs and staff (e.g., the genocide in Gaza as documented by Amnesty International (2024); the UK Summer Riots 2024 which resulted in attacks on asylum seekers and Muslims – see Rutter et al. 2024). To ensure consistency in messaging, this should not be left to individual Heads of Department/Deans, but HoDs and Deans may be encouraged to add local messages.

- LU to annually communicate about and observe Islamophobia Awareness Month as part of its work to increase awareness and knowledge about Islam and Muslims.

Good practice: LU Equity, Diversity and Inclusion website 'Islamophobia Awareness: What is Islamophobia and How Does it Manifest?'

- EDI Services and the Chaplaincy to support an increase in awareness among the LU community about the importance for Muslim students, DRs and staff to practice Islam on campus, including daily prayers and fasting during Ramadan.

Good practice: LU Equity, Diversity and Inclusion website 'Creating an Inclusive Environment During Ramadan: A Guide for Managers and All Staff on How You Can Support Your Muslim Colleagues During Ramadan'

5.9 Combatting stereotyping, microaggressions, racism and Islamophobia

- Embed awareness and knowledge about Islamophobia, along with other forms of religion-based racism and discrimination (e.g., Anti-Semitism) in the university's compulsory unconscious bias training for all staff.

- Embed awareness and knowledge of religion-based racism and discrimination in UG/PGT curricula and teaching activities.

- Provide educational resources for UG/PGT students and DRs about Loughborough's Prevent policy.

- Provide spaces for 'provocative encounters' between different worldviews to support the flourishing of diverse views and enhancing students' ability and levels of comfort with expressing their own ideas, opinions and beliefs on campus. These can be supported by the toolkit 'Facilitating EDI discussions', developed by EDI Services.

- EDI Services to encourage education and raising awareness about Islamophobia as a form of racism as part of its work to promote anti-racism and inclusive practices relating to religion and belief.

- Increase awareness about the university's reporting tool for incidents relating to racism and discrimination, including Islamophobia, among students, DRs and staff, and encourage usage of the reporting tool.

- Increase awareness of gendered aspects of Islam and Muslim practices, including the availability of gender segregated prayer rooms on campus and modesty practices which discourage handshakes as a greeting form between women and men.

Good practice: The Voices of Diversity Allyship event 'How to be an ally … for people who wear the hijab', organised by EDI Services to mark World Hijab Day.

REFERENCE LIST

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life.* Duke University Press.

Ahmed, K. & Yousaf, O. (2025). An exploration of mindfulness during the Islamic prayer in British and Pakistani Muslims. *Cogent Psychology*, *12*(1), 1-10.

Akel, S. (2021). *Institutionalised: the rise of Islamophobia in higher education*. London Metropolitan University. https://repository.londonmet.ac.uk/6295/1/Institutionalised-the-rise-of-Islamophobia-in-Higher-Education.pdf

Alam, Y. & Chaudry, I. (2025). *Countering Islamophobia on campus*. The Aziz Foundation and The University of Bradford. https://www.azizfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Alam-and-Chaudry-2025-Islamophobia-on-Campus.pdf

Allen, C. (2020). *Reconfiguring Islamophobia: A Radical Rethinking of a Contested Concept.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Amnesty International (2024). *'You feel like you are subhuman': Israel's genocide against Palestinians in Gaza*. Amnesty International, London, UK. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/8668/2024/en/

APPG - All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims. (2018). *Islamophobia defined: the inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia.* https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf

Aune, K., Perfect, S. & Ryan, B. (2024). Building bridges or holy huddles? Student religious organizations in British universities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000595

Blogs.Lboro (2024). *Islamophobia Awareness Month.* EDI Services, Loughborough University. https://blog.lboro.ac.uk/edi/islamophobia-awareness/

Braun, V. & Clarke. V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology 3*(2), 77–101.

Chaudry, I. (2021). "I felt like I was being watched": the hypervisibility of Muslim students in higher education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53(3), 257-269.

Collins, P. H. (2019). *Intersectionality: A Critical Social Theory.* Duke University Press.

Collins, P. H. (1991). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* Routledge.

Cooke, J. & Nyhagen, L. (2024). Introduction. In Cooke, J. & Nyhagen, L. (Eds.), *Intersectional Feminist Research Methodologies: Applications in the Social Sciences and Humanities* (pp. 1-12). Routledge.

Dhillon, C., Ebende, J. K., Esson, J., Nyhagen, L. & Sherred, A. (2018). *Experiences in the Classroom and Beyond: The Role of Race and Ethnicity.* School of Social Sciences, Loughborough University. https://repository.lboro.ac.uk/articles/Experiences_in_the_classroom_and_beyond_the_role_of_race_and_ethnicity/9471068

Easat-Daas, A. & Zempi, I. (Eds). (2024). *The Palgrave Handbook of Gendered Islamophobia.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Esposito, J. L. (1998). *Islam: The Straight Path. (*3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

'EDI at Loughborough' (2025). EDI Services, Loughborough University. https://www.lboro.ac.uk/equity-diversity-inclusion/edi-lboro/

Freeman, T. M., Anderman, L. H. & Jensen, J. M. (2007). Sense of belonging in college freshmen at the classroom and campus levels. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, *75*(3), 203-220.

Fuller, A. (2019). *Student drinking in the transition to university and across the first academic year*. PhD thesis. University of Nottingham. https://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/56519/#:~:text=This%20thesis%20demonstrates%20for%20the,across%20the%20university%20academic%20year.

Gambles, N., Porcellato, L., Fleming, K. M. & Quigg, Z. (2022) "If you don't drink at university, you're going to struggle to make friends": Prospective students' perceptions around alcohol use at universities in the United Kingdom. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 57(2), 249-255.

Grier-Reed, T. (2010). The African American Student Network: creating sanctuaries and counterspaces for coping with racial microaggressions in higher education settings. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education and Development* 49, 181-188.

Griffin, C., Bengry-Howell, A., Hackley, C., Mistral, W. & Szmigin, I. (2009). *'Every time I do it I absolutely annihilate myself'*: Loss of (self) consciousness and loss of memory in young people's drinking narratives. *Sociology*, 43(3), 457-475.

Guest, M., Scott-Baumann, A., Cheruvallil-Contractor, S., Naguib, S., Phoenix, A., Lee, Y. &Al-Baghal, T. (2020). *Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: Perceptions and Challenges.* Durham University, SOAS, Coventry University & Lancaster University. https://durham-repository.worktribe.com/output/1634711/islam-and-muslims-on-uk-university-campuses-perceptions-and-challenges

Guest, M., Sharma, S., Warner, R. & Aune, K. (2013). *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith*. Bloomsbury.

Hall, S. (1997). The Spectacle of "The Other." In Hall, S. (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (pp. 223–79). London: Sage.

HESA (2025). *Higher education student statistics: UK, 2023/24 student numbers and characteristics.* https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/20-03-2025/sb271-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers

Hochschild, A. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press.

Hopkins, P. (2011). Towards critical geographies of the university campus: understanding the contested experiences of Muslim students. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *36*(1), 157-169.

International Court of Justice. (2024). *Summary of the Order of 26 January 2024. Case 192 – Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel).* Document number 192-20240126-SUM-01-00-EN. https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203454

Jansen, A. (2019). Building bridges with book club: Supporting international students' comfort and belonging on campus. *College & Research Libraries News*, *80*(10), p.580.

Johnson, A. & Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2018). "Are you supposed to be in here?" Racial microaggressions and knowledge production in higher education. In J. Arday & H. S. Mirza (Eds.), *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy (*pp. 143-160). Palgrave Macmillan.

Jones, S. H. & Unsworth, A. (2022). *The Dinner Table Prejudice: Islamophobia in Contemporary Britain.* https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/documents/college-artslaw/ptr/90172-univ73-islamophobia-in-the-uk-report-final.pdf

Koster, S. (2011). The self-managed heart: teaching gender and doing emotional labour in a higher education institution. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 19(1), 61-77. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14681366.2011.548988

Mahmud, A. & Islam, M. (Eds.) (2024). *Uncovering Islamophobia in Higher Education: Supporting the Success of Muslim Students and Staff.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Mahmud, A. & Islam, M. (2022). Intersectional oppression: A reflexive dialogue between Muslim academics and their experiences of Islamophobia and exclusion in UK Higher Education. *Sociology Compass* 17(2). https://compass.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/soc4.13041

Measham, F. & Brain, K. (2005). Binge drinking, British alcohol policy and the new culture of intoxication. *Crime, Media, Culture 1*(3), 262-283.

Mirza, N. (2019) Everyday living with Islamophobia. *Culture and Religion*, 20(3), 302–321.

Nadal, K., Griffin, K., Hamit, S., Leon, J., Tobio, M. & Rivera, D. (2012). Subtle and Overt Forms of Islamophobia: Microaggressions toward Muslim Americans. *Journal of Muslim Mental Health*, 6(2), 15–37.

O'Donnell, A. (2016). Securitisation, Counterterrorism and the Silencing of Dissent: The Educational Implications of *Prevent*. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 64(1), 53-76.

Oldham, M., Holmes, J., Whitaker, V., Fairbrother, H. & Curtis, P. (2018). *Youth Drinking in Decline*. University of Sheffield. https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/news/polopoly_fs/1.806889!/file/Oldham_Holmes_Youth_drinking_in_decline_FINAL.pdf

Peacock, L., Guest, M., Aune, K., Rockenbach, A. N., Staples, B. A. & Mayhew, M. J. (2023) *Building student relationships across religion and worldview difference.* Coventry University, Durham University, North Carolina State University & The Ohio State University. https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/99714220/ideals-uk-final-report.pdf

Peek, L. (2005). Becoming Muslim: The development of a religious identity. *Sociology of Religion 66*(3), 215-242.

Pickering, M. (2001). *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Puwar, N. (2004). Thinking about making a difference. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *6*(1), 65-80.

Rahman, M. M., Razimi, M. S. A., Ariffin, A. S. & Hashim, N. (2024). Navigating moral landscape: Islamic ethical choices and sustainability in Halal meat production and consumption. *Discover Sustainability* 5(225).

Rutter, J., Katwala, S., Dixon, A. & Scudamore, J. (2024). *After the riots: Building the foundations for community cohesion.* British Future, Belong, & Together.

https://www.britishfuture.org/wpcontent/uploads/2024/09/After_the_riots_report.Final_.pdf

Sardar, Z. (2024). The 'New' Intersectionality of Disadvantage? British Muslim Students and the Widening Participation Agenda. In Mahmud, A. & Islam, M. (Eds.). *Uncovering Islamophobia in Higher Education (*pp. 251-268). Palgrave Macmillan

Scott-Baumann, A., Guest, M., Naguib, S., Cheruvallil-Contractor, S. & Phoenix, A. (2020). *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities & the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain.* Oxford University Press.

Sharma, S. & Guest, M. (2013). Navigating religion between university and home: Christian students' experiences in English universities. *Social & Cultural Geography* 14(1), 59-79.

Solorzano, D., Ceja, M. & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students. *Journal of Negro Education* 69 (1/2), 60-73.

Spiller, K., Whiting, A., Awan, I. & Campbell, B. (2023). The Politic of Everyday Counter-Terrorism: Online Performances and Responsibilities of the Prevent Duty in UK Higher Education Institutions. *Sociology* 57(5), 1118-1136.

Stevenson, J. (2018). *Muslim students in UK higher education: Issues of inequality and inequity.* Bridge Institute for Research and Policy. https://www.azizfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Bridge-Higher-Education-report-2.pdf

Stevenson, Jacqueline. (2013). Discourses of Inclusion and Exclusion: Religious Students in UK Higher Education. *Journal of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14(3), 27–43.

Sumer, S., O'Connor, P. & Le Feuvre, N. (2020). The Contours of Gendered Academic Citizenship. In Sumer, S. (Ed.), *Gendered Academic Citizenship: Issues and Experiences.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Sultana, F. (2007). Reflexivity, Positionality and Participatory Ethics: Negotiating Fieldwork Dilemmas in International Research. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 6(3), 374-385.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2018). *College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students (*2nd ed). Routledge.

Thambinathan, V. & Kinsella, E. A. (2021). Decolonizing Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Creating Spaces for Transformative Praxis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *20*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211014766

The Runnymede Trust (2024). *Islamophobia: The Intensification of Racism Against Muslim Communities in the UK.* https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/61488f992b58e687f1108c7c/67507138f93ab16b069b3375_Runnymede_Islamophobia%20Report_Final_11_compressed-compressed.pdf

The Runnymede Trust (2017). *Islamophobia: Still A Challenge for Us All.* https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/islamophobia-still-a-challenge-for-us-all

The Runnymede Trust (1997). *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All.* https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/islamophobia-a-challenge-for-us-all

Thomas, L. (2012). *Building Student Engagement and Belonging in Higher Education at a Time of Change.* Final report from the What works? Student Retention and Success Programme. Paul Hamlyn Foundation. https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/hea/private/what_works_final_report_1568036657.pdf

'Working Groups' (2025). EDI Services, Loughborough University. https://www.lboro.ac.uk/equity-diversity-inclusion/topics/working-groups/

Warsi, S. (2024). *Muslims Don't Matter*. The Bridge Street Press.

Appendix A: Training resource

The following composite stories of the lived experiences of Muslim doctoral researchers in UK higher education have been developed to support training events aiming to identify and address barriers to participation, inclusion and belonging. The stories, which are anonymised, are based on qualitative data collected during this research project.

This training resource is relevant for the training of staff, doctoral researchers and students.

Aisha's story – A taste of uncertainty.

Fatima's story – University life and inclusion.

Omar's story – A place for peace.

University life and Inclusion - Fatima's Story

Fatima is a PhD student studying accounting. In her first year, Fatima noticed that her supervisor was unfamiliar with Ramadan and Eid. Over time, conversations with her supervisor unfolded with understanding surrounding her faith. During Ramadan, her supervisor adjusted meeting times to accommodate her fasting schedule. Fatima states, "Fasting can be risky for me because I'm diabetic but my supervisor understood this and encouraged me to go home early without needing to use annual leave. He's very flexible and supportive, and I have had no issues with my supervisory team accommodating my needs around Ramadan. So, I feel good about these thing".

As her PhD journey progressed, she attended department organised events, to celebrate other students passing their PhD viva. Whenever students celebrated their successes, her supervisor ensured that a non-alcoholic drink was available for her. Fatima reflects, "I never realised how much it would mean to have the same drink as my peers, just the non-alcoholic version. I felt appreciated and accommodated for by my supervisor as during the early stages of my PhD I did struggle a little bit because so many events are centered around alcohol.

Fatima described the early stages of her PhD as challenging, as many social events revolved around alcohol. She didn't participate in these activities as they didn't align with her values, which made her feel restricted when deciding to attend certain social events. Overtime, though, she began to settle in and find other students both Muslim and non-Muslim students who don't drink.

Omar's Story - A Place for Peace

Omar, a practicing Muslim, was committed to observing his daily prayers on time. Despite a demanding schedule, he always made room for his spiritual connection. When he began his university studies, he was relieved to find a multi-faith prayer room on campus—a tranquil space open to students of all faiths, including Muslims.

Initially, Omar balanced his prayers and studies with ease, heading to the prayer room between classes and appreciating the university's inclusivity. However, as winter set in and the days grew shorter, maintaining this routine became increasingly challenging. Prayer times in winter were closer together, and the frequent walks to the distant prayer room in the freezing cold, coupled with a packed schedule, left him feeling rushed and frustrated.

Amid these struggles, joyful moments brought solace. During Ramadan, his department's Muslim students organised Iftar dinners. These gatherings were filled with warmth, community, and shared purpose, offering Omar a sense of belonging and a reprieve from his challenges. Yet, the difficulty of balancing his prayers and studies persisted, and he knew a practical solution was needed.

One particularly exhausting day, Omar decided to address the issue directly. He approached the department's administrative team with a humble request, explaining the significance of regular prayers for Muslim students and the difficulties posed by the current arrangement during winter. "Would it be possible," he asked, "to allocate a small room within the department for prayers?".

To his delight, the administration responded positively. They not only designated a small, unused room for prayers but also made it a quiet space open to all students seeking peace, reflection, or relaxation.
The new prayer room brought immense relief and joy to Omar. Its proximity allowed him to pray on time without the stress of constant rushing. Over time, he noticed others using the room—some meditating, others reading quietly. The shared space fostered a sense of peace, inclusivity, and mutual respect.

Omar felt deeply grateful, realising that seeking solutions with kindness and persistence could lead to meaningful change. The small room became a sanctuary, symbolising a community's resilience and the power of understanding to overcome challenges.

Aisha's Story - A Taste of Uncertainty

Aisha, an international student from Pakistan, had been studying in the UK for nearly a year, adapting to her new life with curiosity and determination. Today, she was attending her first academic conference, a milestone she had been eagerly awaiting.

The venue buzzed with energy as scholars and students mingled. After the morning sessions, lunch was announced, and Aisha joined the line at the buffet. The aroma of fresh food filled the air, but her excitement quickly turned to apprehension. Unlike in Pakistan, where halal labels were common, the food here had no clear indications of its ingredients.

As she scanned the options, unfamiliar dishes and ambiguous labels made her hesitant. She couldn't be sure if the chicken was halal or if the creamy pasta sauce contained alcohol. Not wanting to attract attention, she selected a plate of vegan food—roasted vegetables and quinoa—and found a quiet corner to eat. The meal was delicious, and she felt reassured by her safe choice.

Encouraged by this success, Aisha returned for a second helping. The vibrant salad bar seemed like a safe bet, so she filled her plate with lettuce, cherry tomatoes, olives, and what appeared to be shredded beets. Back at her table, she eagerly took a bite. A strange texture and salty taste caught her off guard. Confused, she turned to a colleague nearby and asked, "What is this red thing in the salad?"

Her colleague glanced at her plate. "Oh, those are bacon bits. They add a smoky flavour," they replied casually. Aisha froze. The realisation that she had unknowingly eaten pork—a food prohibited in her faith—hit her like a wave. She pushed her plate away, feeling nauseated and unsettled.

For the rest of the meal, she remained quiet, reflecting on the unexpected challenge. That evening, she resolved to be more vigilant. She would carry snacks to future events and never shy away from asking about ingredients, even if it felt awkward. The experience was a harsh lesson, but it strengthened her resolve to stay true to her values, knowing that it required both awareness and resilience in her journey.

Appendix B: Exhibition poster

Five Pillars: Lived Experiences, New Futures.