DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY LEICESTER

AZIZ FOUNDATION

Being and Becoming: British Muslim Students' First-Year Journeys in Higher Education

December 2025

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Acknowledgements

The research team are grateful to The Aziz Foundation for the funding that enabled this work to go ahead. They would also like to express their gratitude to Dr Zain Sardar of the Foundation for his wisdom and guidance throughout the project.

At DMU, the Imam, Mohammed Laher, has offered continuous support for this work, and we acknowledge his energy and faith in moving the experience of the University's students and staff forward generatively. The research team also wish to thank the students who have given so much energy to this work and who expressed their lived experiences candidly and for the benefit of others.

Research Team Biographies

Dr Lucy Ansley is a Senior Research Fellow whose research expertise focuses around methodologies that centre participant voice and lived experience. Lucy has worked as part of the Decolonising DMU team for the last 5 years, and its predecessor Freedom to Achieve for 2 years prior, and is committed to improving the educational experiences of minoritised communities.

Richard Hall works as a Professor of Education and Technology at De Montfort University. A National Teaching Fellow and an AdvanceHE Principal Fellow, Richard was a member of the Decolonising DMU team, and is also a member of the School of Applied Social Sciences Athena Swan Working Group. In previous research, Richard has worked with Muslim students to investigate the impact of the student loans system on their lived experiences of the University.

Sumeya Loonat is Senior International Student Lecturer at De Montfort University and Fair Outcomes Champion for the Decolonising DMU project, which aims to build an anti-racist university. She is a DMU Teacher Fellow and Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Sumeya is a doctoral researcher, exploring critical perspectives in the context and construction of minoritised domestic and international students in UK higher education.

Dr Lamia Nemouchi is a Lecturer in Education at DMU. She is researching EDI in education policy and practice. Lamia worked on researching education using arts in different pedagogies to raise social justice issues to develop intercultural competence. She is currently investigating the experience of Muslim students in the UK education system since the Equality Act 2010 has been introduced and the experience of multilingual students in a monolingual UK education system taking a decolonising multilingualism approach.

Yusraa Maryam is a graduate of the Education Studies with Psychology BA course at DMU. Her undergraduate dissertation explored the student loans system as a barrier to higher education for Muslims. Subsequently, she contributed to an extension of this study as a Research Assistant, focusing on engagement and retention of Muslim students at DMU. She has also worked in several other roles at DMU, conducting academic research and planning, and creating teaching materials.

Student Advisors

Ola Al-Saedi is a second-year Computer Science undergraduate at De Montfort University. As a British Muslim student, she joined this project to challenge barriers and bring forward the lived experiences of Muslim students in higher education. The role deepened her understanding of identity and belonging and strengthened her drive to create innovative solutions that ensure underrepresented voices are not only heard but acted upon.

Humera Ashrafali is a second-year Psychology undergraduate interested in understanding people's experiences and identities. With little prior experience in research, this project was her first opportunity to be involved in a study, which felt especially meaningful as a British Muslim student. She is still exploring her interests within Psychology and hopes to gain more experience through research and its role in supporting people and communities.

Dawood Khalifa is a second-year British Muslim student studying BA Architecture at De Montfort University. His work goes into depth into the psychology of the built environment and aims to become a chartered architect. He is a hafiz of the Quran and brings an insight into the Muslim community and context around Leicester. As a research assistant he has curated and aided in the development of the project and hope to broaden his skills in the future.

Maria Shah is a second-year Computer Science undergraduate at De Montfort University with a background in the humanities. As a student adviser on this project, she aimed to strengthen her analytical and research skills to help amplify underrepresented voices. The experience reaffirmed her commitment to grassroots efforts and to use technology as a tool for community development in the near future.

Shimla Shifan is a second-year Medical Science undergraduate with a keen interest in how health is shaped by culture, identity, and lived experience. This project was her first research experience, offering a meaningful opportunity to engage with issues often overlooked in academic settings. As a British Muslim student, she brought valuable perspective to the advisory team and developed a deeper interest in inclusive, community-informed approaches to healthcare. She plans to pursue a career as a physician associate, applying her understanding of diverse health needs to enhance patient care.

Foreword

AsSalām Alaykum Wa Raḥmatullāh Wa Barakātuh

May God grant You peace, mercy and blessings

This report and its findings reveal the nuanced truths of Muslim student life on campus. It provides an invaluable opportunity to listen and learn from student voices which might otherwise remain unheard. It offers authentic insight into the lived realities of the Muslim student experience and the importance of the freedom to live one's faith with dignity to strive academically and professionally.

As the DMU Imam and Muslim Chaplain, I regularly engage with students navigating the delicate balance between their academic commitments of lectures, exams and coursework, and their religious and personal lives, especially during significant periods such as Friday prayers, Ramadan, Eid and assessments. Supporting students to excel holistically across all areas of their lives requires ongoing dialogue between staff and students, ensuring that our university environment remains harmonious and enables both faith and academic purpose to flourish without compromise.

The commitment to being a welcoming for all, including as a Muslim-friendly University, must be rooted in institutional cultures of dignity and acceptance. It is heartening to note, this report's emphasis on the importance of The Prayer Room in creating spiritually enriching environments on campus for students. This is extremely important for a substantial number of students for recruitment and participation. The findings demonstrate that The Prayer Room functions as much more than a place to pray; it is a space where Muslim students and staff feel included, experience a genuine sense of belonging and security, and can be true to who they are.

Students have noted Leicester's vibrant environment to celebrate its diversity and the freedom to practice their faith. This distinctive position places Leicester as a globally renowned city of cultural importance, particularly in the areas of faith, respect and mutual understanding. This report represents an important step in strengthening these values through meaningful action and institutional commitment.

My sincere appreciation goes to DMU staff, including our Leadership Board, for their support and commitment to enhancing student experience and staff wellbeing. I also extend my earnest gratitude to all who contributed to this report: the researchers, participants, board members, well-wishers and supporters who made this work possible. May this work serve as a catalyst for meaningful change that empowers Muslim students to thrive both academically and spiritually, and in doing so, enrich the experience of our entire university community. `Āmīn.

Imam Mohammed Laher

Imam and Muslim Chaplain, DMU

Institutional Response

De Montfort University has a rich history in Social Justice. It is committed to creating communities of participation, fairness and collective responsibility. It has always been our aim to transform and affect the lives of our students, our city and region and it is in this context that the exploratory work of the report of the Aziz Foundation sits. Studies of this kind can help bring understanding, balance to those it engages with, and value to those it seeks to represent. This report also sits alongside similar Aziz Foundation audits at other universities, contributing to a wider sector conversation about the place, belonging and experiences of British Muslim students.

We live in an increasingly complex world. One where individual and group identity is often misunderstood, treated with suspicion, and at times, reviled. Communities are increasingly framed against each other as inevitably adversarial and prevented from enjoying the richness that difference brings or the depth of commonality that often underlies many of the different identities we see around us.

Faith is also an important aspect of belonging for many, creating moral and ethical pathways, and bringing hope, stability and a sense of worth. In engaging with the stories of our first and second-year British Muslim students, we know this matters at a time when, politically, a range of faith-based groups feel under pressure or threat from rising nationalism and a more visible and vocal far-right. We also know that this matters to our communities in Leicester.

With our DMU-Aziz Foundation report deliberately titled *Being and Becoming*, the University celebrates the ways in which our Muslim students and staff enrich our campus life and have their lives enriched in return. This project has enabled second-year students to act as advisors and co-researchers, helping nurture the next generation of diverse researchers and at the same time, finding ways to build confidence and enable voices to be heard by the wider DMU community. This is a purposeful Social Justice partnership between the Aziz Foundation, DMU staff and our students.

The report itself touches on some powerful indicators, including a lack of religious literacy from staff and peers; support for the representation and expression of faith on campus; concepts about what Muslims believe; feelings of surveillance; and the availability of, and access to, appropriate faith-based spaces and environments.

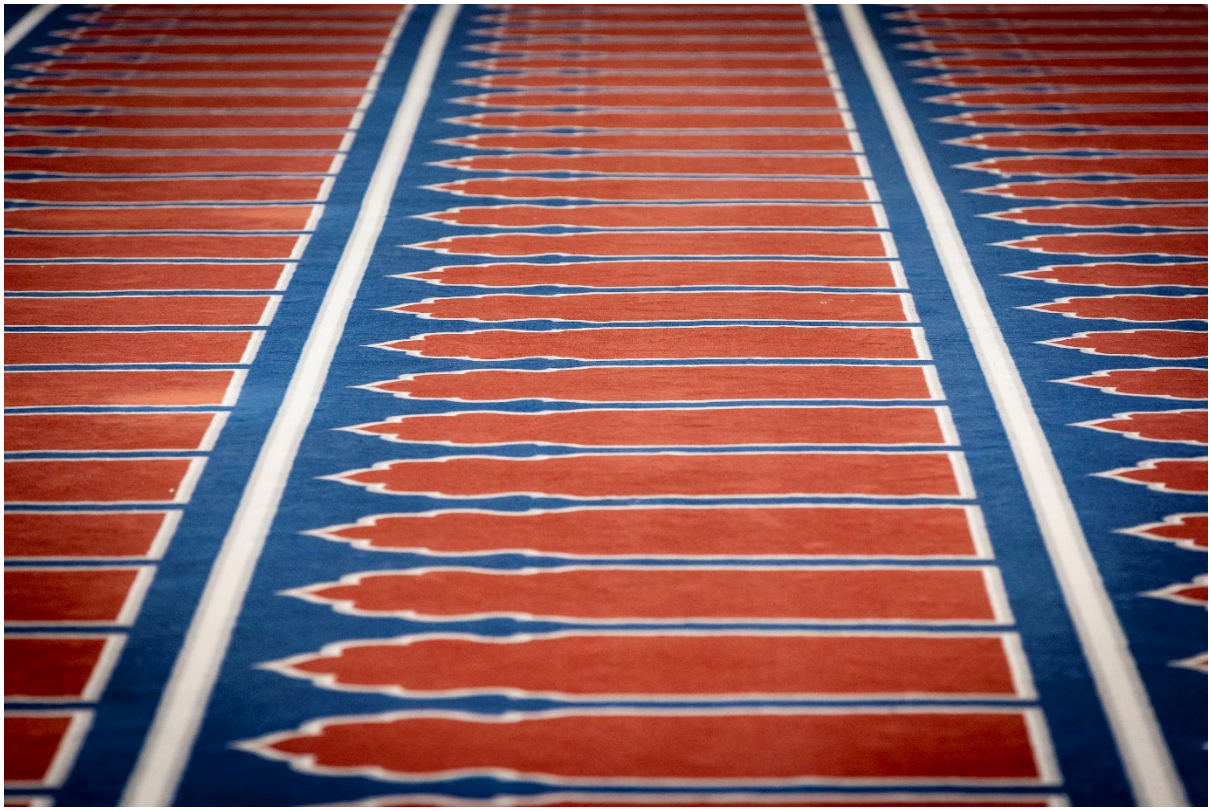
Understanding how our students experience their Muslimness in the University offers important insights into these issues. Many of these themes are evident across the wider higher education sector, and this work helps us situate DMU within that broader picture and will inform thought and discussion on how we support our students, staff and communities in De Montfort and Leicester.

I would like to thank all those involved in producing this report. Those students who talked both openly and courageously about their experiences. DMU staff who have been pivotal in developing this study and receptive and supportive in their engagement of the areas under consideration. Thanks also to the Aziz Foundation, for its funding and essential and ongoing support.

Engaging thoughtfully in the areas highlighted by this report is a starting point for renewing our engagement with our thriving British Muslim students and communities, and I commend this report to you.

Professor Kasim N Sheikh

Pro Vice-Chancellor for Social Justice



Executive Summary

Overview

A range of intersecting issues impact the lived experiences of British Muslim students in higher education (HE), including: a lack of religious literacy from staff and peers, which often leads to isolation and alienation; support for the representation and expression of faith on campus; access to appropriate funding for study; Islamophobia and normative truths about Muslims (amplified recently in relation to Gaza/Palestine); surveillance and the Prevent strategy; the relationship between universities, students unions, and Islamic societies; and, the availability of and access to appropriate, faith-based spaces and environments. Moreover, there has been a tendency towards limited opportunities for institutions to engage productively and generatively with the complexity of the student experience, and to enrich that experience through faith-based analyses.

This is important for individual institutions, precisely because context matters, in how they create, share and celebrate generative and generous narratives about the student experience. In this, it is important to reiterate that the Muslim experience of HE is not homogeneous, and that experiences are richly differentiated. In working with this reality, the De Montfort University (DMU), Muslim-Friendly Universities audit focuses upon the student experience of British Muslim, first-year undergraduate students. It situates this experience against those students' conceptions of their faith, and also draws out emergent relations to ethnicity, gender and disability. The primary intention of this audit was to understand how these students experience their Muslimness in HE. A secondary intention was for this research to impact, materially, the ways in which universities can recognise intersectional and faith-based complexities in the undergraduate student experience.

The project team included four experienced academic researchers, at a range of career positions, and with a range of identities, committed to social justice and a politics that celebrates diversity. However, crucially, it also included five second-year British Muslim students as advisers, able to co-create the project's research design. This partnership was designed to enable voice and agency, through authentic and meaningful partnerships with students, facilitated with support, advice and guidance from the Aziz Foundation. A primary gain was enhanced engagement with the richness of British Muslim student identities, in order to support students' sense of belonging and positively impacting attainment, retention, progression and engagement.

Research Design

The project connected with the Aziz Foundation's suggested audit areas of faith provision, workplace culture/ inclusion, and academic experience. It had the following aim.

- To analyse how British Muslim students experience their Muslimness in Higher Education spaces during their first year of study.

The audit team's approach utilised a mixed methods study, to enable the collection and interpretation of data that are contextually-detailed. At the heart of this was also reflection upon the positionality of the research team, of four staff, a British Muslim alumnus of the

University, and five second-year British Muslim students as advisers. At the heart of the research lay co-creation with impacted communities, in enriching outcomes by shaping participative approaches. The methods of engaging British Muslim students were developed with the student advisers, and included: first, an anonymous survey (n - 44); second, in-depth interviews (n = 7); third, reflective, team-based journals; and fourth, a focus group with the advisers (n = 4).

Outcomes

Anchor points: participants focused upon certain anchor points that were crucial, including: the availability of the Prayer Room, the role of the Imam and the Islamic Society; the large capacity of the Prayer Room, alongside access to the *Quran*, and the breathing space; and, the opportunity to engage with faith-based activities, including *Jummah* Prayers and Ramadan *Iftar*. Thus, participants highlighted a relationality to themselves, enacted through their faith and relationship to Islam, and also in demonstrating care for their communities.

Student experience: the findings from this research reveal a complex terrain of being and belonging within the university context, and a range of ways in which the first-year, British Muslim student experience is both shaped and experienced. This impacts the stories that the University can tell about itself, in relation to the student experience as a whole, and also in relation to EDI work.

Muslim identity: the complexity and rich range of experiences of first-year, British Muslim students highlighted a deep intention and intentionality to feel and live a Muslim identity, within the institution. Respondents mentioned the importance of choosing a university that enables their engagement with their faith and provides the facilities they need for this, to support well-being.

Being and becoming (*deen* and *dunya*): students reported transitioning to a deepened sense of faith, inside a space that demanded more independence from them. In this way, some were clearly able to articulate a desire to challenge misconceptions, especially when supported by the availability of Muslim-friendly spaces, like the Prayer Room, and the Imam. They reported developing agency and an understanding of the spiritual (*deen*) and worldy (*dunya*), supported by Islamic communities.

Institutional secular assumptions: students reported having to choose between their engagement with their education or practicing their faith in the facilities provided. In addition to this, despite the availability of the prayer room facility, its closure on weekends creates a barrier for Muslim students. The ways in which teaching and learning were timetabled, and the lack of appropriate timetabling around Ramadan and Eid, called into question the institutions focus upon supporting diversity and inclusivity through equality in curriculum design, delivery and assessment. This impacted their ability to undertake *Salah* (prayers).

The relationship to DMU: some reported that the relationship between the University and its Muslim students needed work. In particular, some spaces, like the Food Village, and some practices, like the lack of appropriately-certified, halal food, tended to be alienating.

The lack of prayer room facilities across different buildings on the campus also disrupted engagement in the curriculum.

Visibility and vulnerability: for some, their identity was a very visible enactment, for instance, as a female Muslim student. Some students related that many of their peers self-policed their behaviour, precisely because of their visibility, and of feeling conditional inside the University.

Institutional religious literacy: a general lack of religious literacy amongst academic and professional services' staff for supporting learning emerged across the research. This impacts issues of retention, for instance in relation to the secular content of the curriculum. Building faith-rich cultures across institutions, grounded in dignity and respect, emerge as crucial components of an authentic religious literacy.

Co-creation: participants identified co-created research as a participative endeavour, predicated upon legitimacy, authenticity, identity, and voice. Throughout this research, participants highlighted a deep, personal, familial, communal set of motivations to enrich their lives.

Recommendations

1. **Religious literacy**: ensuring that all staff are aware of the ways in which faith interacts with academia to create a more nuanced identity is important. This should be factored into the Post-Graduate Certificate in Empowering Education, and the work of the DMU Education Academy, and, crucially, in developmental offerings to professional services' staff. The religious community should play a central role in shaping these developmental offerings. This is especially important at key times of celebration, like Ramadan and Eid. Here, institution-wide communications should be used, with reminders that the Imam is available to discuss impacts and possibilities. CPD and communications should be co-created with the Imam, as well as Muslim staff and students. In building such faith-based literacy, the place of Islamic celebrations and role models/news, in institutional communications needs to be addressed.

2. **Prayer Spaces**: DMU is a diverse institution. It must consider its approach to prayer spaces, to address issues like: ensuring that students are aware that the DMU Prayer Room on campus is open during evenings and weekends to current students and staff to offer their mandatory congregational prayer timetable; and, key support services and facilities, like the library, having dedicated spaces for prayer. Other institutional communication channels might also highlight the importance of Prayer Rooms, for instance, at open days. Additionally, to invest in future engagement with the Muslim student community at DMU, we recommend that future expansion of the campus or campus-based capital projects should ensure that faith provision is built into the designs. We recognise that having more local prayer spaces would require appropriate facilities in each building otherwise they would not be suitable. Moreover, this may also compromise numbers in the main prayer room in Portland, where current facilities are fit for purpose. Possibly, having a reflection room in the library available to all faiths is an option,

especially during exam period for the late night and early hours of the days. This should be discussed.

3. **Faith and study**: it is important that the curriculum and the timetable reflect the needs of British Muslim students to pray, with an understanding that this has differential effects at different times of the academic year (e.g., in Winter when prayer time is short). Having more local prayer spaces would help. Although block delivery works for some students, 3 hour classes significantly impact prayer times, especially in Winter. At this time, during afternoons, breaks at appropriate times for prayers (including at Ramadan) would be beneficial.

4. **Assessments and reasonable, faith-based adjustments:** assessments and exams that fall on Eid day, or demands from academic staff that students attend on Eid, creates Islamophobic tensions for some students. Staff need to make reasonable, faith-based adjustments, as with other protected characteristics, or students need to be reassured that prayer times can be adjusted to ensure no detrimental impact on attendance and attainment. For example, sometimes extensions to assessments in Ramadan do not work, because ten days extension will largely still affect students who spend the last ten days in heavy worship and then have Eid celebrations.

5. **Curriculum development:** productive work with the DMU Education Academy should focus on how faith-based perspectives inform EDI-adjacent initiatives like decolonising (for example, in embedding intersectionality beyond race and ethnicity), and those focused on student voice and belonging. This should also include support for teams in implementing more Islamic Muslim perspectives into programme and module content (e.g., in professional programmes like law and accountancy/finance). This might also include further opportunities with DMU's partner institutions and DMU Global, to engage students from diverse cultures with a worldwide audience. In this, co-creation work can centre student agency and develop authentic critical dialogue with the institution.

6. **Student well-being**: student-facing services and personal tutoring practices should consider how to understand and support the wellbeing of British Muslim students across their student experience, including the responsibilities and systems that these students have to navigate, in balancing *Deen* and education. We recognise that the Imam works closely with the Healthy DMU team to build relationships, including through referrals.

7. **Dialogue with established Muslim agencies**: a number of students highlighted the positive role of the Imam, Prayer Room and ISoc. The University might engage in positive dialogue with these agencies, for instance in contributing to *iftars* (which have a huge impact on home students who have moved away, and on international students).

8. **DSU/ISoc relationship**: students highlighted a wish for more integration of their ISoc/Prayer Room experience with other student societies, including the DSU. This will include support for an appropriate, collaborative approach to be taken towards Muslim student experience of freshers' week and inductions. Here, Muslim-friendly events would

include an appraisal of events that were free of alcohol, and where halal-certified food was available.

9. **Halal food**: the University should discuss with food providers the provision of more inclusive, Muslim-friendly options, including in more stringent labelling of Halal, or sourcing local Halal food such as HMC-certified. This should be in partnership with students and staff who require this as part of their religious diet.

1. Introduction

Allen (2023) notes that the primary foci of research surrounding British Muslim students has historically been political activism and extremism. Saeed (2018) suggests that research on Muslim students has focused primarily on Islamophobia or securitisation within universities. A small body of research into the lived experiences of British Muslim students has begun to emerge (Abbas *et al.* 2023, Guest *et al.* 2020, Islam *et al.* 2019, Osman 2025), including in relation to intersectional analyses (Mellor, 2010). However, more work is required focusing specifically upon first year undergraduates at their pivotal transition into higher education (HE) spaces.

The specific faith-based context is important because although much work has been undertaken in the United Kingdom (UK) on the race and ethnicity awarding gap (see, for instance, Universities UK, 2022), this has often been conflated with, or made invisible within, work on decolonising (see, for instance, Hall *et al*. 2023; Shain et al. 2021). Within university access and participation plans, there tends to be a focus on student-centred approaches, belonging, and inclusive learning environments, and the pivot for this has also tended to be the awarding gap, rather than social justice. Moreover, there has been a lack of focus upon students of faith in general and British Muslim students in particular (Stevenson 2014), alongside the socio-cultural practices and environmental factors that impact their belonging within UK HE (Islam *et al.* 2019).

However, we are mindful of distinguishing between, first, the awarding gap that mostly serves the needs of institutions and sectoral organisations, and second, concerns for social justice. In this, there are studies on the awarding gap for race and ethnicity that speak to the experiences of Muslim students, but which lack specific data on faith, and that are compounded intersectionally. Here, Stevenson (2018) and Malik and Wykes (2018) have been able to show the disparity in achievement between male Muslim students (low achieving with higher rates of drop outs) and female Muslim students (high achieving). Osman's (2025) recent work, building on her PhD research, identifies the intersectional pressures on Black, female Muslim students.

There has been a tendency towards limited opportunities for institutions to engage productively and generatively with the complexity of the student experience, and to enrich that experience through faith-based analyses. This is in spite of a history of reporting of the negative impacts on the British Muslim student experience (see, for instance, Office for Students (OfS) 2021), and the recommendation by Universities UK (2022) of the need for 'A greater push to implement university-wide change is needed so that the work that universities are doing to create inclusive communities is fully reflected in students' experiences.' Whilst this is a complex terrain that focuses attention upon structural constraints and barriers, movement between communal or shared cultures, and individual and collective identities, deep work is required to enable HE institutions to engage with such complexities.

This is amplified because intersecting issues impact the range of British Muslim student identities, including: a lack of religious literacy from staff and peers, which often leads to isolation and alienation; support for the representation and expression of faith on campus;

access to appropriate funding for study; Islamophobia and normative truths about Muslims (amplified recently in relation to Gaza/Palestine); surveillance and the Prevent strategy; the relationship between universities, students unions, and Islamic societies; and, the availability of and access to appropriate, faith-based spaces and environments. Uddin et al. (2022) highlight the greater discrimination experienced by those with more visible signs of Muslim faith, and identifies how 'over-courteous, self-censored Muslim' responses to discrimination act to self-silence (witnessed, for instance, in relation to geopolitics and culture).

Stevenson (2018) has highlighted the intersecting impacts of these issues with a clear focus upon the need for religious literacy. However, Gholami (2021: 323) notes that though admirable a focus on such literacy can lead to interventions and 'standard' recommendations that are unlikely to be equal to the task: 'On religious literacy training, for example, it is not clear what this would entail, which groups or individuals would be best placed to deliver such training and whether they would have to focus on religion as a broad category or on a particular branch of Islam'. This matters because as Gholami (2024: 215-16) subsequently notes: that 'Muslim educational disadvantage has unique facets,' traversing the sacred and secular, and leaving scars through ongoing self-judgement.

This is important for individual institutions, precisely because context matters. The Muslim experience of HE 'is not homogeneous, their experiences are therefore shaped differently, which impacts on their life choices and outcomes' (Malik and Wykes 2018: 17). Additionally, Muslims are arguably the most visible, and monitored, of all religious groups within HE, whilst their own perspectives and experiences continue to be under-reported (Guest *et al*. 2020; Rehman and Hanley 2023). In this, it is important to note the explicit work on Islamophobia by, for instance, The Aziz Foundation (AIWG 2024), and Universities UK (2021), which pivot around specific toolkits and the desire for meaningful and authentic actions.

In responding to these issues, the De Montfort University (DMU), Muslim-Friendly Universities audit focuses upon the student experience of British Muslim, first-year undergraduate students. It situates this experience against those students' conceptions of their faith, and also draws out emergent relations to ethnicity, gender and disability. The primary intention of this audit was to understand how these students experience their Muslimness in HE. A secondary intention was for this research to impact, materially, the ways in which universities can recognise intersectional and faith-based complexities in the undergraduate student experience.

The project team included four experienced academic researchers, at a range of career positions, and with a range of identities, committed to social justice and a politics that celebrates diversity. However, crucially, it also included five second-year British Muslim students as advisers, able to co-create the project's research design. This partnership was designed to enable voice and agency, through authentic and meaningful partnerships with students, facilitated with support, advice and guidance from the Aziz Foundation. A primary gain was enhanced engagement with the richness of British Muslim student identities, in order to support students' sense of belonging and positively impacting attainment, retention, progression and engagement (Pedler *et al.* 2022; Samatar *et al.* 2023).

2. Research Context

2.1 Disparate outcomes

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, a global Black Lives Matter (#BLM) movement created the conditions in which anti-racist and decolonial projects within UK HE could gain traction. Across the UK, calls to address classroom and relational inequalities grew, alongside demands to broaden the corpus of study, and to close the ethnicity degree awarding gap. Notably, the OfS ambitiously called for the complete elimination of the awarding gap by 2038 (Samatar *et al.* 2023).

However, despite the recognised intersections of ethnicity and religion, relatively little work has been conducted in addressing the disparity of student outcomes and experiences for those with religious beliefs. Analysed by religion for the first time in 2020, awarding data highlighted how Muslim students in particular are receiving lower outcomes than the general student population, with only two-thirds of these students awarded a good honours degree classification (Codiroli McMaster 2020). Exemplifying these disparities, HESA (2024) data from 2018/19 to 2022/23 shows a 10% awarding gap in First Class Honours between students from a Muslim background and the national average, which has increased since the pandemic, following a previous steady rate of 8%.

It is clear that this disparity stretches far beyond awarding gaps, and is deeply embedded into the fabric of HE, in terms of its structures, cultures and practices. Regardless of claims to secularity in HE (Stevenson 2018), the very organisation of the academic calendar is grounded historically in particular cultures and practices. For instance, the academic calendar is constructed around Christian holidays (Mubarak 2007), and requires other faiths to accommodate to that reality as it governs study. There is a sense that understanding faith-based experiences, and in this case, the Muslim student experience, requires an understanding of how outcomes are shaped against a broader set of accommodations and settling within specific cultures and practices of whiteness.

2.2 Inequitable experiences

These cultures and practices shape the background of the British Muslim student experience, and are in relation with the awarding gap and student outcomes. Taking a critical approach highlights how creating an environment in which British Muslim students can succeed demands more than access to a prayer room and halal food. That said, Islam and Mercer-Mapstone (2021) identified 6 core needs of British Muslim students, for which access is sought (but not always granted): dedicated prayer rooms, Muslim chaplaincy, Islamic Societies, Halal food, consideration of religious observation during exam periods and opportunities for non-alcohol-based socialising (see, for instance, Shaffait 2019).

However, in relation to these core needs, there has been much focus upon the potential for a misalignment of university cultures and Islam as a way of life (Islam *et al.* 2019). One key example is the transitional focus upon alcohol-fuelled welcome activities. Muslim students are made acutely aware through this focus on alcohol-based activity, that they are outsiders in the university experience, and must settle for a place within an established culture that is not theirs (Shaffait 2019). A second example links to the burden of the awarding gap, which tends to be compounded by race and ethnicity. Anand and Redclift (2022) highlight the

experiences of British Bangladeshi Muslim students in this. These experiences tend to work negatively against well-being and mental health (Javaid et. al. 2024) and their sense of belonging to British society (Allen 2014).

However, Gholami's (2021) identification of how centring faith and 'religification' moves our discussions of the meaning of HE beyond normalising discourses of equality of opportunity, and Kafargi *et al.* (2021) have given space for such work in the context of medical education. The need for such work acts as a reminder of the ways in which students can be placed into asymmetrical relation to the secular assumptions of our institutions. At times, faith-based compromises are identified a widening, negative sense of self, for instance given the ways in which their financial choices might be seen as a rejection of the centrality of spiritual purpose in life (Hall *et al.* 2025).

In this context of settling, and of restricted ideas of belonging, it is perhaps unsurprising that around 70% of Muslim students choose to live at home while studying in HE, compared to 40% of the average student population (Allen 2023). This might offer one way of engaging familiarly and communally, about faith and the role of faith in study, which is foreclosed upon within university spaces. Discussions involving Islam within learning and teaching spaces are often very uncomfortable for British Muslim students who find themselves expected to justify the actions of extremists and present their own standpoint on controversial topics (Akel 2021).

This focus upon standpoints, connected to a critique of the essentialism of hegemonic knowledge, cultures and practices within the University, and the potential for creating counter-narratives that enrich the HE ecosystem, points towards the unfolding of what has been termed critical Muslim theory (Abdullah 2013), as resistance to whiteness (Breen 2018; Breen and Meer 2019). This helps to generate critical engagement with the contexts that shape what Guest *et al.* (2020) noted as the discomfort some students feel in being visibly Muslim. It enables a critical stance to be taken in assessing the celebrating of faith through the wearing of religious garments, and refusing to be made an object of suspicion. This is a deep, intersectional component, given that female Muslims in particular experience a higher rate of microaggressions and harassment, likely related to their hair and facial coverings which can be a more prominent sign of Islamic worship (Allen 2023).

It is important to recognise how an enriched understanding of the contextual factors that shape our Muslim students' existence inside and engagement with the University, is deeply implicated in attempts to close awarding gaps. Moreover, it is deeply implicated in, but tends to be hidden by, a focus upon measuring the student experience. This risks fetishising and homogenising that experience, rather than crack it open, in order to understand the myriad ways in which the University is experienced. This includes students who reported feeling pressured to minimise their visibility, such as British Muslim students, so as to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

In this, Osman (2025) is clear about the need for institutions to support the being and becoming of Black, female, Muslim students. She argues that, in relation to a broader narrative of human rights, universities must:

> move beyond superficial diversity initiatives and commit to genuine transformative changes. This includes actively confronting institutional racism, decolonising curricula and campus cultures, and embedding intersectionality into all levels of policy and practice. Only by aligning institutional actions with human rights obligations can higher education evolve into a truly inclusive space where all students, regardless of race, gender, or faith, are afforded the opportunity to belong, succeed, or thrive.

In this, Osman centres that the expression of faith does not simply open-up a negative terrain. This, then, pushes institutions to consider how a focus upon awarding and outcomes might be developed critically, in relation to, for instance, the risks of harassment experienced by the students as they seek to express their faith (Akel 2021). Yet this also offers a clear path to consider more than simply the costs of personal expression, but how personal and communal expression might enrich our university ecosystems, and support a plurality of ways of knowing a world facing intersecting crises or polycrises (Tooze 2022).

2.3 Higher Education and societal Islamophobia

This work on enrichment also has to face the reality that the British Muslim student experience in UK HE sits inside a socio-cultural terrain that is, at best, wary of Islam. In the Summer of 2024, the shocking murders of three young girls in Southport was seized upon by right-wing and far right politicians, influencers and networks to maintain anti-immigrant, anti-migrant and Islamophobic narratives. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB, 2024) noted:

> These actions echo the far-right's growing intimidatory presence, exemplified last weekend on the streets of London with Tommy Robinson supporters openly spewing invective against Muslim communities. They are aided and abetted by sections of our increasingly right-wing media, whose agenda has always been to scapegoat Muslims for society's ills.

In the wake of these tragic murders and the far-right riots that followed, the British Islamic Medical Association (BIMA, 2024) Statement on Far-Right Extremism, noted that 'Refusing to call out Islamophobia and permissive responses from authorities have allowed it to become one of the most tolerated forms of racism.'

This is exacerbated in relation to Gaza/Palestine. On X, Lilla Tamea also reported on the outcomes of freedom of information requests about racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia (@lillatamea 2024). Reporting on 140 responses, she noted in her thread on X, that: 'There is also a clear need to do more for the safety and welfare of students regarding the ongoing war on Palestine. Universities must stop shying away from the conversation and allow / facilitate debate and education - and stop punishing free speech and protest on campus.'

Muslim students returned to campus for the 2024/25 academic session inside a socio-cultural ecology shaped by these recent riots, ongoing Islamophobia, and global events with significant religious ramifications, including genocide in Gaza/Palestine, the threat of a wider Middle Eastern war, and civil war in Sudan. Given the broad sense of identity and belonging across communities, this is a significant background context against which students of Islamic faith are returning to campus. This also has a deep resonance in Leicester, amplified by the disturbances of September 2022.

Thus, it is crucial that institutions like universities, which act as critical intercultural and intercommunal spaces, understand the impacts of events that impact and shape identity and belonging. There is a significant risk that such events lead to silencing and a lack of voice, or diminish the ways in which an individual's identity and belonging feel enabled inside hegemonic institutions. Rehman and Hanley (2023) have been clear that this carries a range of emotional and psychological implications for Muslims, with implications for this project, including: experiences of othering; stigmatisation in relation to appearance; an imposed homogenisation of identity; and, a desire to conceal beliefs and engage in normalising behaviours (Chaudry 2020, 2022). As a result, in the current socio-political context, it is increasingly important that universities understand the ways in which their British Muslim students can express, or are willing to express, their Muslim identity, or Muslimness.

Allen (2023) reminds us that the documented experiences of Islamophobia in HE are by no means a complete reflection of what Muslim students experience in terms of microaggressions and 'covert Islamophobia' In his exploration, Allen (2023) notes that this prolonged exposure to repeat microaggressions on campus, in learning and teaching spaces, and in university accommodation resulted in many of his respondents feeling hyper-aware of their actions, words and appearance, self-monitoring in an effort to appear safe and keep their heads down. This self-monitoring was also central to students' discussions held with Akel (2021), where they spoke of a fear of constant surveillance and needing to minimise expressions of their faith in order to feel safe and not draw attention to themselves. She goes on to note how Muslim students are perpetually 'negotiating, strategizing and navigating fear' (ibid: 36).

Zempi and Tripli (2022) linked this explicitly to the increased surveillance culture on university campuses, under the Prevent Duty. In their work, students again spoke of needing to self-censor and not being able to participate in 'academic discussion' for fear that their views could be misconstrued as extremist. This sense of surveillance and persistent fear of appearing a threat to others, fuelled by the implementation of the Prevent Duty, has created a significant barrier to inclusion and integration of Muslim students, who do not feel safe to express their religion for fear of being marked as radical (Abbas *et al.* 2023). In light of a widening sense of societal Islamophobia, understanding modes of expression is dependent upon meaningful engagement with social justice agendas inside our educational institutions.

2.4 Resulting 'Satisfied settling' of Muslim students in UK HE?

A helpful way of understanding how British Muslim students accommodate themselves to our universities and their agendas, is in relation to satisfied settling. Islam *et al.* (2019: 94) identified this as 'A mechanism in which (Muslim) students have justified (unconsciously) not having access to a richer and more fulfilled university experience in relation to religious needs'. Shaped by majoritarian norms, previous educational experiences, expectation down-management and self-accommodation, this concept explains how Muslim students reshape their own agency and autonomy, in order to survive (Islam and Mercer-Mapstone 2021).

As a result, satisfied settling highlights that, for some British Muslim students, maintaining a faith-based approach to study and the student experience, demands significant compromise. In this, the students find themselves having to choose between their religion, as a way of

life, and their education (Zempi and Tripli 2022). This is made worse by the educational offer being a subpar one, to which they are forced to settle, precisely because it does not meet their needs.

One example of this is witnessed in advice and guidance about, and mechanisms for engaging with, student finance. Student loans containing interest are a barrier to education for some Muslim students, as Islam prohibits interest (Habermann 2014; Hall *et al.* 2025; Malik and Wykes 2018). Despite this being an issue explicitly recognised by successive UK governments (e.g., Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) 2014), a funding solution that supports access and participation for impacted individuals and communities has yet to be implemented (Abdulrahman 2020; Hall *et al.* 2025). Moreover, there is limited research available on the impact of this system on Muslims who are trying to adhere to Islamic teachings (Avdukic 2023; Muslim Census 2021). Whilst there remain competing interpretations from scholars about this issue, the structure of funding and access force Muslim students seeking to adhere to particular, faith-based ways of living, to accommodate themselves or limit the choices.

Yet, Islam (2024: 276) is clear that these spaces also develop forms of existence, survival and resistance that are 'both individually instigated and collectively embodied despite Muslim students and staff experiencing a nexus of oppressions'. Through this, Islam (*ibid.*) argues, emerges the potential for 'a sense of empowerment, identity, and belonging' that enables students and staff to use their 'Islamic identity as a form of capital and source of hope.' This points to a generative intentionality in engaging with Gholami's (2024: 215-16) statement that whilst 'Muslim educational disadvantage has unique facets,' understanding of how faith/the sacred/*deen* might be traversed inside secular institutions, enables a richer and more authentic revelation of those institutions.

2.5 Summary

This audit works from the basis that the concept of identity remains complex, multifaceted and intricately linked to cultural, social and historical contexts (Hall 1990). It recognises that the British Muslim student experience in UK universities is conditioned by a range of representations of Muslim people and Muslimness, which have tended to exacerbate the marginalisation and stigmatisation of Muslim individuals, or Muslimness as an identity facet (Ali and Whitham, 2018). This has also led to self-censorship (Guest et al., 2020). Of course, the impacts of traumatic events like the pandemic and the war on Gaza shape societal, institutional and individual representations. However, the audit team wished to use this complexity, in order to understand how these students internalise and express their Muslimness in relation to their specific learning environments.

The audit team intended to understand how the active or passive engagement of institutions with negative stereotypes about Islam can: first, contribute to the internalisation of feelings of othering, potentially affecting access of Muslim students to HE (Islam *et al.* 2019); second, shape their experience within HE to reinforce these self-perceptions through lived experience of microaggressions, 'manifestations of Islamophobia, both overt and covert' (Akel 2021, p. 8), subtle biases, exclusionary practices (Ahmed 2012) or practices that neglect religious identities; and, third, understand how these students celebrate their identity in relation to Islam as a holistic system, or 'a way of life, a code of laws, a complete

system encompassing and integrating the political, social, and economic, as well as personal, moral, and spiritual aspects of life' (Dabashi 1993: 439). Developing such understanding lies at the heart of our core aim for this audit:

- to analyse how British Muslim, first-year students experience their Muslimness in HE spaces.

In this, the broader social and communal, faith-based contexts of the student experience become central. Various analyses have highlighted the variety of family and community influences in shaping Muslim staff and student identity, including their limits (Iqbal and Modood, 2023). Others have highlighted the value of spaces that support the realisation of Islamic cultures and practices, including for females (Mokhtar 2020). Others have highlighted the need to understand this experience from across the student lifecycle (Mahmud 2024).

3. Institutional context

DMU has one of the most diverse staff and student populations of any UK HE institution. In 2020/21, the University had 27,534 students and 2,848 staff (1,206 academic and 1,642 professional services), with a turnover of £244 million. Of its student body, 49% identify as Black, Asian and Ethnically Minoritised, and DMU recruits from around 130 different countries. Of these students, 14% declare a disability, and the University have been in the top 100 of the Stonewall workplace equality index since 2016.

In terms of religious belief, the make-up of the University's staff and student cohorts based on the signed off HESA (2024) return for 2022/23, is given in Tables 1 and 2.

Staff	
Religion	%
Agnostic	0.8
Atheist	1.8
Buddhist	1
Christian	26.7
Hindu	7.7
Jain	0.1
Jewish	0.3
Muslim	8.6
No Religious Belief	32.6
Not Available	1.4
Other Philosophical Belief	0.3
Other Religious Belief	1.2
Prefer not to disclose	13.4
Sikh	2.8
Spiritual	1.1
Total	100

Table 1: religious belief reported by all staff, 2022/23

Religion	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Total
Any other religion or belief	428 (2.1%)	47 (0.7%)	475 (1.7%)
Buddhist	173 (0.8%)	89 (1.3%)	262 (1.0%)
Christian	5059 (24.5%)	1654 (24.7%)	6713 (24.4%)
Hindu	1318 (6.4%)	1562 (22.9%)	2880 (10.5%)
Jewish	25 (0.1%)	6 (0.1%)	31 (0.1%)
Muslim	4044 (19.6%)	1204 (17.7%)	5248 (19.1%)
No religion	6676 (32.3%)	826 (12.1%)	7502 (27.3%)
Not available	691 (3.3%)	660 (9.7%)	1351 (4.9%)
Prefer not to say	1516 (7.3%)	452 (6.6%)	1968 (7.2%)
Sikh	749 (3.6%)	316 (4.6%)	1065 (3.9%)
Total	20679 (100%)	6816 (100%)	27495 (100%)

Table 2: religious belief reported by undergraduate and postgraduate taught students, 2022/23

There is a significant cohort of Muslim students amongst both undergraduate and postgraduate populations. Within these groups, intersections of race and ethnicity, and gender, as well as disability, each have an impact on identity. Understanding the characteristics and factors that shape the relationships between these groups and the University is critical in defining a meaningful experience that centres Muslimness.

Any understanding of Muslimness at DMU emerges in relation to its Empowering University Strategy (DMU 2024a). This centres a desire for empowering people, pivoting around diversity, and Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) is a key cross-cutting theme in that strategy. This connects with innovations that have helped to anchor EDI initiatives across the University, which have been realised in the first UK Race Equality Charter (REC) Silver Award for a University, alongside the national successes of the Decolonising DMU project (Advance HE Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence, and a UKRI Green Gown award). Moreover, there are institutional initiatives around Athena Swan, including bronze awards for several academic schools across the University.

Thus, this audit aligns with a range of institutional work on voice, agency and belonging (e.g., Islam 2020). Moreover, it is shaped against REC work that centres the desire: to overcome differential awarding gaps for students; to repair the undergraduate/postgraduate pipeline/bridge for all students; to support the progression of all academic and professional services staff, for instance in relation to Women's and Race Equality Networks; to review and renew recruitment processes; to develop interventions to address underrepresentation in institutional governance. It is inside this institutional context that any understanding of Muslim identity and agency, or of the lived experience of Muslimness, among first-year British Muslim students, might emerge.

Following negotiation with the University Strategic Planning Service and Information Governance team, access to awarding gap data by religion was enabled. We are mindful that, akin to race and ethnicity data, these are protected characteristic data. Our intention was to analyse our awarding gaps to give context for the work with student advisers. We regard this as part of our deeper engagement with the institution about how best to support enrichment and enhancement for British Muslim students, predicated upon an understanding of faith-based outcomes. Engaging with institutional teams around the access to, and engagement with religious belief awarding data is part of awareness raising, and decolonial work.

Mindful that intersectional analyses impact on understanding of differential student outcomes for students, in relation to faith alone, the awarding gap for Muslim students was lower at DMU than nationally. Whilst the gap for first-class honours grew nationally from 8% in 2018/19 to 10% in 2022/23, that for a 2:1 remained steady at 2% over this period. At DMU, the gap for firsts closed from 4.9% to 1.6% between 2018/19 and 2023/24 (although fewer first-class degrees were being awarded). For 2.1 awards, the gap fluctuated, but moved from -1.6% in 2018/19 to 2.0% in 2023/24.

4. Research Design

4.1 Background

This audit builds upon established, mixed methods approaches developed and tested in the Decolonising DMU project (Hall, Ansley and Connolly, 2023), and explicitly connects with the interpretivist methodology enacted in a DMU Academic Innovation Project (AIP) investigating *The impact of the current Student Loans regime on Muslim student engagement and retention in Higher Education* (Hall *et al.* 2025). Those approaches are as follows.

- The DDMU project integrated institutional surveys of staff and students around critical issues in decolonising (e.g., what decolonising means to the University community, with a focus on the practicalities of decolonising and challenges faced by individuals), with in-depth interviews. It then applied a grounded approach to analysis, in order to centre participant voices. In analysis, Critical Race Theory approaches aimed to bring marginalised experiences to the forefront, or to situate dominant voices against those experiences.
- The AIP deployed a systematic review focused upon retention, aspiration and value, in the relationship between HE and Muslim students who experience the loan system as a barrier. This is situated against OfS condition B3 on student outcomes (continuation, completion, awarding and graduate employment). This work underpinned in-depth interviews with 12 DMU Muslim students or former students, who have experienced the loan system as a barrier. Constructivist thematic analysis modelled characteristics that shape the experiences of these students.

The audit team's approach utilised a mixed methods study, to enable the collection and interpretation of data that are contextually-detailed. At the heart of this was also reflection upon the positionality of the research team. In all of our work, researcher positionality is central, and needs to be clearly articulated in the context of this specific research.

As British Muslims, two of the Co-Investigators meets the study's participant criteria (Loonat and Maryam), whilst a third member of the team has extensive fieldwork engagement with decolonial and faith-based experiences of education as an international, Muslim researcher (Nemouchi). Both the Principal Investigator (Hall) and fourth Co-Investigator (Ansley) have extensive experience in pedagogic and educational research, in relation to decolonising and anti-racist practice.

However, it is pivotal that this range of academic and staff-based expertise was extended through dialogue with five second-year British Muslim students enrolled at DMU, who acted as student advisers, to support promotion and recruitment, the design of research methods, and dissemination. In this way, they were able to build their confidence and expertise in research methods, analysis and dissemination. Co-creation with impacted communities, in shaping participative approaches to research, is crucial in generating authentic outcomes and counter-narratives that respect these standpoints. The Job Description and Person Specification are given as Appendices E and F.

4.2 Research aims

Our focus was upon an audit of DMU, British Muslim students, and their experience of their Muslim identity, conceptualised as their Muslimness, whilst transitioning into the University. This connects to the Aziz Foundation's suggested audit areas of faith provision, workplace culture/ inclusion, and academic experience. It had the following aim.

- To analyse how British Muslim students experience their Muslimness in Higher Education spaces during their first year of study.

The concept of HE spaces refers to the physical and virtual environments in which the student experience takes place, and the institutional systems/places within which the academic, social and personal development of the students occurs when pursuing their higher education.

The audit had the following, linked objectives.

1. To identify how British Muslim students perceive their religious identity (Muslimness) when planning to pursue HE.
2. To identify intersectional factors, including socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender and disability, that impact the experience of British Muslim student during their first year.
3. To explore institutional strategies to ensure the retention of British Muslim students beyond their first year.

The potential benefits and outcomes for this project were a richer and deeper understanding of the lived experiences of a significant minority of DMU undergraduate students. This was designed to enable the institution to engage in a dialogue about its structures, cultures and practices, and how those support the transition, retention and progression of British Muslim undergraduate students. We intended that this project, connecting to the outcomes of an already-validated, DMU-funded AIP, looking at the experience of Muslim students who see interest-bearing loans as a barrier to HE, will build further expertise in engaging with the Muslim student experience in HE. A secondary gain will be building capacity for further UKRI funding bids in this area.

4.3 Methods

This audit sought to explore the lived experience of British Muslim undergraduates, during their first year of study, through a qualitative approach that centres student voice (Islam 2020). Using survey and interview methods, students were asked to reflect upon their early experiences on campus, in relation to their Muslimness[1]. Reflexive thematic analysis was then used to identify findings from the data, recognising the interaction between data and researchers (Braun and Clarke 2023).

An anonymous survey developed themes from the literature surrounding Muslim student experience in HE. Themes such as university choice, accommodation, societies, campus

[1] within the study as a whole, religion or belief was a key inclusion/exclusion criterion, and as a result a full Data Protection Impact Assessment was required and was signed off. In this, anonymity and confidentiality are key.

facilities and relationships were considered through the lens of the initial stages of the undergraduate journey (Humphrey and Lowe 2017), before being further refined around application, welcomes and the first term. In this way, the survey could capture student reflections on this pivotal transition into higher education.

The existing literature highlights the many and varied ways in which British Muslim students are negatively impacted by their university experience, and so we did not wish to take an overly deficit-based approach to our questioning, but rather to offer neutral prompts that enable both positive and negative reflections. Before launching in early December 2024, the survey (Appendix A) underwent consultation with our Student Advisers, helping to refine the questions and presentation of the survey, to increase potential engagement. At this stage, the questions were adjusted into three core sections: space, belonging and identity. Crucially, safeguards ensured that students were not identifiable from their demographic information.

Focus groups were initially intended as the next, qualitative stage, to add greater depth to the themes emerging from the survey data, and to explore those question areas in more detail. However, following difficulties in recruitment of first-year students, the research team shifted approach, prior to Ramadan 2025, to focus upon interviews with both first-and second-year students. These were led by individual student advisers, supported by a staff member of the research team, in order to support the development of the former, and a richer conversation with interviewees (see Appendix B).

As part of this process, the interviewers made session memos, noting any non-verbal cues that may be of analytical significance, to provide additional context for the analysis process. Following each interview, the interview team also wrote a reflective memo noting the atmosphere, points of interest and any unsuspected points of discussion. These research memos, or reflective journals, played a central role throughout the study and were completed by both academic staff members and the Student Advisers.

In addition to the data collection memos, the team kept Research Journals throughout the project, focused upon the research team's experience of the analytical and methodological process, as well as their positionality, throughout. The research team believe that reflexivity is an iterative process, not a check box exercise, and that authentic exploration of researcher positionality is a continual exercise throughout a study (Gani and Khan 2024, Braun and Clarke 2023). The journal writing process was therefore a useful tool in supporting the research team in maintaining their reflexivity. A series of prompt questions were offered to support the reflexive process, organised under themes that were aligned with project activity (see Appendix D).

Towards the end of the project, a final focus group with the student advisers was arranged to act as a point of departure for understanding the project and its aims, as it drew to a close (see Appendix C). This also offered an opportunity for the student advisers to communally discuss their experiences, building upon their individual research journal reflections together.

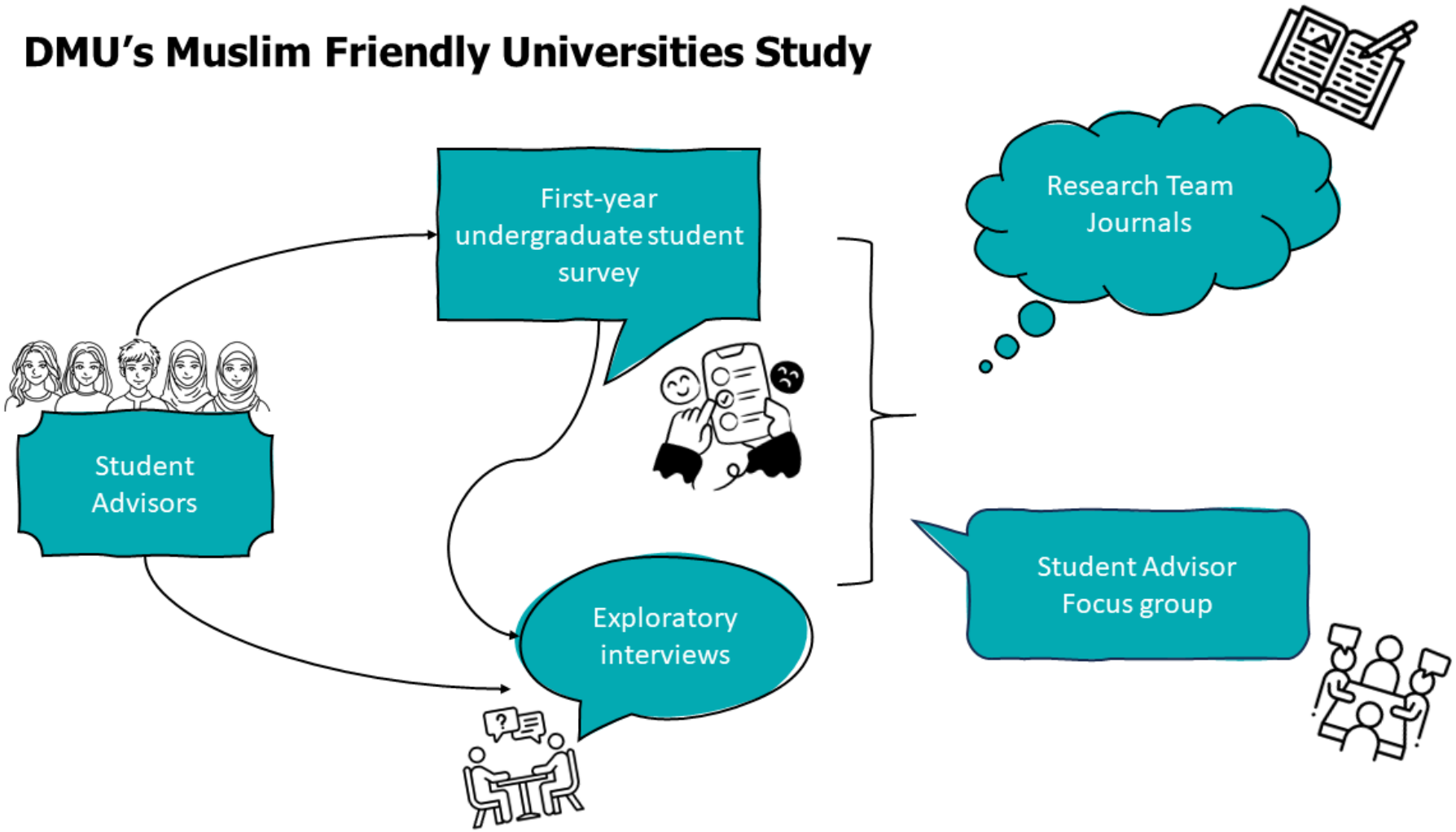


Image 1: visualisation of the research process

4.4 A note on Quality and Integrity

This study is bound by the DMU Research Ethics Code of Practice (DMU 2024b), and in particular takes seriously a commitment to rigour, the management and mitigation of risk/potential harm, clear communication and responsibility, and accountability to stakeholders. In this, it also follows both the British Education Research Association (BERA 2024) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, and UK RIO's Code of Practice for Research (See Parry *et al.* 2023). These 3 codes have been used to guide the design of this study.

Thus, the following principles follow.

- Given the qualitative nature of this study, we align with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability in our efforts to establish the trustworthiness of the study.
- Researcher reflexivity was used throughout the design of the study, during data collection, analysis and reporting. This was particularly important given the varied positionality of the research team. Credibility, confirmability and dependability can be demonstrated through reflexivity, as it allows for theoretical transparency as the researcher's processes and ideas are captured.
- Member checking, or participant validation in the form of student collaborators, also ensured that the theory developed is accurately representative of the opinions collected from the field.
- Transferability is demonstrated through the use of thick description, the clear presentation of the research design, context and interpretation allows other researchers to be able to judge the suitability of this work within their own setting.

The research team have extensive fieldwork experience in pedagogic and educational research, in relation to decolonising and anti-racist practice, as well as faith-based experiences of education. The PI has significant expertise in safeguarding in vulnerable communities, and the team as a whole has undertaken all mandatory training, including in relation to safeguarding.

The student advisers were inducted into the project formally, through Unitemps induction, and also in relation to: safeguarding; disclosure; relevant sections of the University student regulations; and lone working. The staff study team also teach on research modules, have developed resources around positionality and the conduct of decolonial research, and have designed training for Decolonising DMU Student Leaders, and were able to embed this within support for the students.

It was possible that student discussions might reveal difficult lived experiences. Participant wellbeing was paramount, and processes were outlined to ensure students were supported in their contributions. Pre-interviews, a clear set of ground rules reminded participants that they should not share any information that increases the risk of harm or identification, to themselves or others. In this way, withdrawal, and appropriate service identification was designed to ensure their wellbeing.

5. Findings

5.1 Survey outcomes

The survey was open for 9 weeks and promoted by the student advisers and academic staff through a variety of channels: posters around the campus; University social media pages; DMU ISoc social media channels; and, via the Prayer Room Committee. A very limited number of British Muslim first year students responded, and of the 46 responses received 2 were excluded as the respondent did not meet the recruitment criteria of being British and/or Muslim.

In line with other, recent, institutional anti-racist and decolonising surveys, the majority of respondents were from the University's Faculty of Health and Life Sciences (n = 33), self-identified as female (n = 34), and were heterosexual (n = 43). The majority stated no disability (n = 37), and only three noted a learning difference. In terms of heritage, the majority were South Asian (n = 24, with Pakistani = 12, Indian = 9, Bangladeshi = 3). In terms of domicile, 29 lived with parents/at home, whilst 9 either rented or were living in university halls. Finally, in terms of engagement with institutional faith-based provision or activity, 21 were members of a University Islamic Society There was more engagement with the Prayer Room, with 41 stating their use of this facility.

The responses to the closed-ended and to the open-ended questions were analysed together using mixed methods to understand the experience. The open-ended responses were analysed inductively and the themes identified are related to their motivations for pursuing higher education (HE) studies as a Muslim, the different ways of engagement with the student support services available and the barriers they face in their transition into HE, and being a British Muslim student.

	Not at all comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Comfortable	Very comfortable
In your accommodation	0	6	15	19
In the prayer room	0	1	7	36
Participating in social activities beyond the classroom	7	15	13	9
In the student's union	2	8	17	15
Socialising with other students	1	12	19	12
In the food village	1	14	17	12
Engaging in seminars/workshops and lectures	4	11	16	12
Walking around campus	0	6	17	21
Accessing support for your learning and development	4	11	16	13
In the library	0	9	14	21
Making time to practice your faith on campus	1	7	18	18

Table 3: reported levels of comfort in university spaces

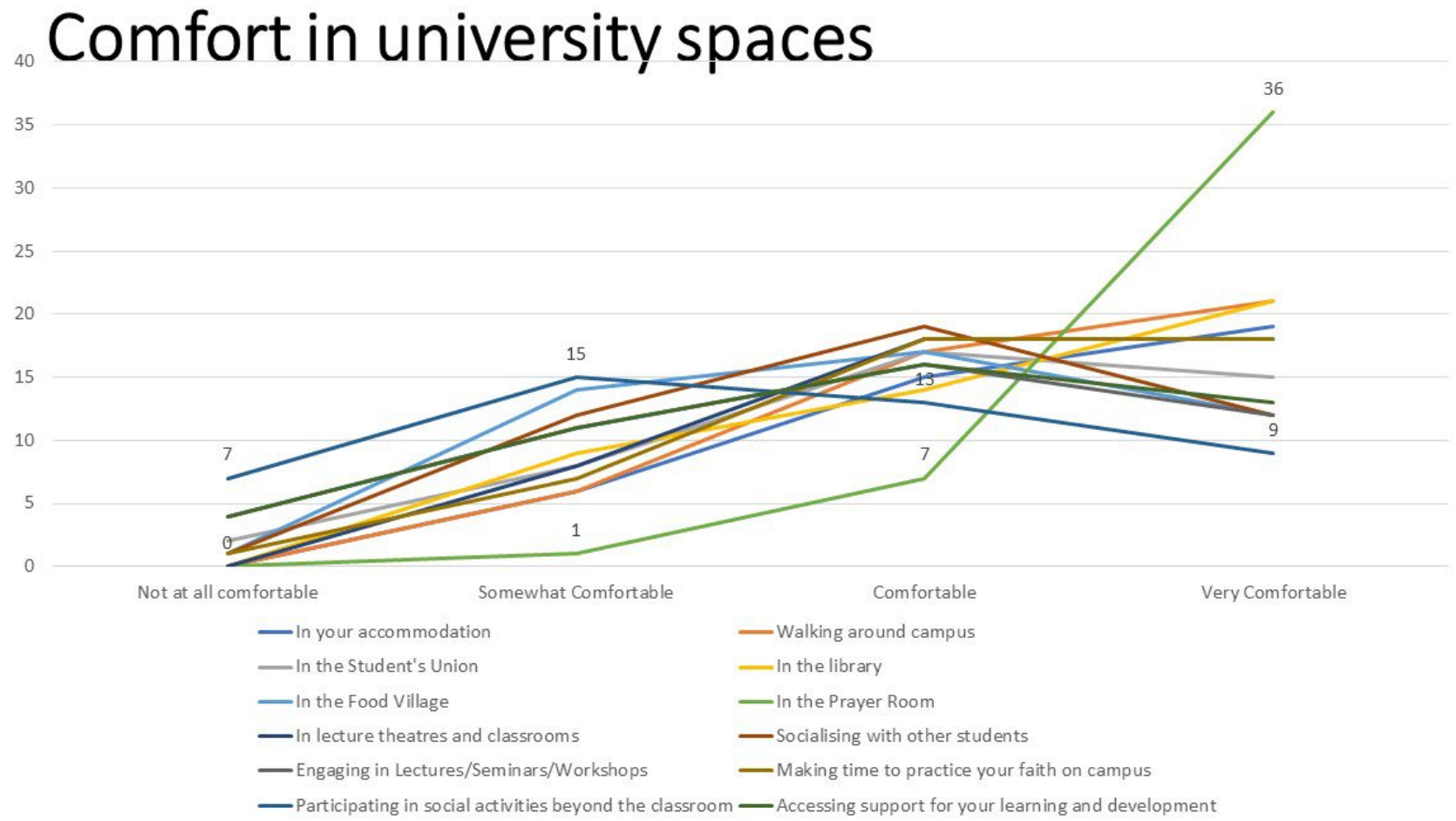


Image 1: visualisation of reported levels of comfort in university spaces

5.1.1 Motivations

The survey asked the respondents if being Muslim informed their decision to pursue HE and their choice of university. Twenty of the 44 respondents said 'yes', and 18 left open-ended responses that help us to understand their motivations. While some respondents referred to specific and clear motivations, for others the factors were diverse and complex. These included: career aspirations; intrinsic motivation; family/relatives support and influence; safety in diverse settings; and the facilities available at university that enable their engagement with faith.

- *Career aspirations*

Some respondents stated that their decision was informed by their career aspirations because they wanted to study in a specific field that the University offers, or for example:

> I chose to study at university because it's a stepping stone to achieving my career aspirations in mechatronics and robotics. The field fascinates me because it combines engineering, innovation, and technology to solve real-world problems…
>
> I believe this [degree/course] is needed to access better job opportunities in the degree I've chosen.

The first quote implies intrinsic motivation and career aspirations. In fact, the specific courses offered by the University were mentioned by several respondents as a 'stepping stone' towards their career aspirations. They also mentioned that their choices and motivations were informed by recommendations of teachers, or family. For example, a respondent stated '[r]ecommendations for my course – Forensics science by my A-Level teacher'.

- *Family support and influence*

Other respondents stated that their decision to pursue HE was either influenced directly by their family or through implicit, familial influences.

> [I] Wanted a gap year but I was encouraged by my family to come.
>
> Not the uni specifically, but it impacted the city u ch[oo]se to study in – Leicester […] My relatives here informed me that it has a large Muslim and desi population so I thought I'd be more comfortable living here rather than anywhere else.

A complex set of factors was motivating these respondents. These might include issues that are temporal, and driven by control over time, or they might be cultural, and focus upon the ability to study within a diverse institutional, and, especially, city or community context. This latter point appears to be an important factor for many British Muslim respondents to the survey, highlighted in the next sub-theme.

- *Safety in proximity and diversity*

Out of the 18 free-text responses related to motivation, 6 mentioned the importance of being/studying in a diverse context or where they can find their communities locally. One respondent stated simply: 'I chose Dmu [*sic.*] because of the diversity.' A second gave

'proximity' as a crucial factor, which reminds us of the reality that many of the respondents lived at home or with parents in Leicester. Whilst factors were diverse and complex, all six referred to diversity, in relation to DMU or Leicester.

> The diversity of the University and the facilities (prayer room, wudhu room) available were so well set up that it was a large part of the reason I ultimately chose DMU.
>
> There were many reasons that factored into me choosing to study at De Montfort university. One of them was the fact that it's a diverse university with a huge Muslim community […]
>
> De Montfort University stood out for its strong foundation program, diverse student community, and practical approach to learning, which aligns perfectly with my goals […]
>
> I always liked how diverse DMU was compared to other uni's so it made me feel a lot more comfortable knowing that, i came from a predominately white primary and secondary school and I was 1 of the only muslims [*sic.*] in my year […]

These students identify the importance of diversity at university, in addition to factors like ready access to a Muslim community. The final quote here, in particular, points out the different experience for the respondent in comparison to their school experience in a less diverse education setting. This quote suggests safety in being immersed in a context of diversity. This points back to the comfort in the Leicester community highlighted by relatives, noted above. Both of these students mentioned feeling 'more comfortable' as a motivating factor in their choice of university being a British Muslim student. The 'sense of comfort' seems to be an important factor that creates safety in the context of diversity, in general, because they find it' [w]elcoming and [a] friendly environment'.

- *Facilities enabling engagement with faith and Muslim community*

The 'sense of comfort' or safety is a recurring theme when the respondents stated their motivations for the choice of university. This seems to be reinforced by the facilities available and offered by the University and the community that enable British Muslim students to deepen engagement with their faith. Given that 41 respondents used the Prayer Room, it is unsurprising that when asked about their comfort level in different campus spaces, it received the highest number of respondents. Thirty-six felt 'very comfortable', and a further seven felt 'comfortable'. None stated that they felt 'not at all comfortable'.

The open-ended responses help us understand how they relate to this facility, and its importance in informing their choice of university. A respondent who compared their experience at university with their previous life in school pointed out the availability of praying facilities in particular:

> […] so we didn't have prayer spaces [in school] and [school name] had basically a closet to pray in where it was used by men and women and it would get packed really fast, making it harder to pray on time (you would have muslim sisters praying in the wudu rooms since there's no space) so its really great seeing a community at DMU and a prayer space that you can use whenever you like [*sic.*].

The respondent seems to enjoy the 'freedom to pray' in particular, and the availability of *Wudu* facilities which has not always been the case in her previous education setting. Other respondents also expressed appreciation for:

> [a university] that provides a prayer room and opportunities for Muslim students to get involved in many things outside the classroom.

A central activity that the Prayer Room Committee organises every year is *Ramadhan Iftar,* bringing the Muslim community at university together during the holy month for Iftar (a meal to break the fast with dates, food, fruits and drinks) and *Tarawih* prayers. This is *Lillah* (donation-based) from staff, alumni, and the community, and around 300 students are expected for every *Iftar*. One respondent mentioned that:

> The diversity of the University and the facilities (prayer room, wudhu room) available were so well set up that it was a large part of the reason I ultimately chose DMU

They later highlighted that 'facilities for iftaar was a bonus' [sic].

Respondents were clear that the different facilities enable engagement with faith and make prayer more accessible for large numbers, and this issue of scale and space was important in building community. Other respondents mentioned comfort in access to a place that was 'spacious', providing facilities that enable engagement with faith. One respondent was explicit in being:

> Very grateful for toilet and ablution facilities as well as the prayer room, really grateful for the Quraans on the shelf, and the prayer timetable on the tv. Prayer room nice and clean as always and makes me feel very comfortable

For one of their peers:

> The prayer room is the best part, please keep it up. It is so welcoming with great facilities.

These respondents expressed appreciation for the welcoming community and facilities available, although there is also a subtle vulnerability, and perhaps a fear of what it would mean to lose such a space.

5.1.2 Barriers

The survey asked about respondents' comfort level in different university spaces/activities, and asked them to record whether they felt 'not at all comfortable', 'somewhat comfortable', 'comfortable' or 'very comfortable'. Responses help us to identify different barriers to *both* social *and* academic engagement for British Muslim students.

- *Barriers to engagement with other University social activities/spaces:*

While many British Muslim student respondents seem to engage with the Prayer Room and related activities organised by the Prayer Room Committee and the Islamic Society, there is a lack of recorded engagement with other, institutional social activities. In fact, whilst grateful for organised, Muslim-friendly activities, the responses of some students enable us

to infer barriers elsewhere in the institution. In identifying social activities they could participate in while wearing hijab including sports, one noted:

> I love that there are sport headscarves available for students if needed. It's removing a barrier for Muslim athletes that have an issue with they're headscarves not being secure.

The level of comfort for 'participating in other social activities beyond the classroom' received the highest level of discomfort (50%) recorded in the survey. There was a mixed response, with a higher number of respondents (compared to all the other spaces and activities) highlighting that they feel 'not at all comfortable' (n = 7), and the lowest number of respondents reporting that they feel 'very comfortable' (n = 9). When thinking about the level of comfort in socialising with other students, 13 felt either 'not at all comfortable' or 'somewhat comfortable', 19 felt 'comfortable', and only 12 felt 'very comfortable'. Although 32 respondents felt 'comfortable' or 'very comfortable' in the Student Union, only 10 felt 'not at all comfortable' or 'somewhat comfortable', in that space. This suggests that the students struggle to relate to the social life of the University.

A second University space that was reported as having lower levels of social engagement is the University Food Village. One respondent said that they feel 'not at all comfortable' in that space, and a further 14 respondents said they feel only 'somewhat comfortable'. Against this, 17 said that they feel 'comfortable' and 12 said that they feel 'very comfortable', yet the open-ended responses help us understand the low level of comfort in this space. A few respondents mentioned the lack of options, or the lack of availability of *Halal* food:

> Maybe some Halal Food in the Food village!

> […] there's not enough Halal food in the cafeteria which is quite annoying for me as Muslim students. I wish if they can add different types of Halal food and reopen the Halal section in the canteen that will be more than helpful for all Muslim students […]

As will be shown in interviews and the focus group, the very limited choices of Halal food available in the food village ('Hola Pollo' operated by Chartwells) were a significant issue for British Muslim students. Moreover, although the Food Village offers food with the Halal certification on it, this is not comprehensive enough for all Muslim students and might not align with their ethical views of how the animal is slaughtered. For many Asian Muslim students who make up the majority of our British Muslim respondents to the survey (with 27% of them from Pakistani heritage, 21% of Indian heritage, and 7% of Bangladeshi heritage) the Halal label is not enough.

These communities tend to require food to be certified by the Halal Monitoring Committee (HMC certified) which has more rigorous procedure. This is a Leicester-based, independent organisation, established to ensure that Muslims are consuming 'genuinely Halal' food. Given the connection between Leicester and these students feeling at home or safe, it is important to note the role of HMC here. This connects to the potential for cross-contamination of meat when it is cooked with other non-Halal food in the same kitchen, and this further compromises the trustworthiness of the Halal label.

- *Barriers to academic engagement: diversity is not inclusion*

Barriers to academic engagement were also identified in the survey data. The survey data show that 'engaging with seminars/lectures and workshops' received 4 responses saying 'not at all comfortable', and 11 saying 'somewhat comfortable'. Whilst 16 reported being 'comfortable' and 12 'very comfortable', a number of students do not feel comfortable in these learning spaces. This might indicate that they do not feel included, or confident participating in academic discussions.

> Due to DMU being a diverse university, I do feel comfortable being a British Muslim and being open about it. Everyone respects each other which makes it better. But within classrooms, I do feel like their [*sic.*] is a division with all the different religion and ethnic groups.

This highlights that the sense of comfort in the wider University context is reinforced through diversity, but this is not enough in curriculum-specific spaces where there is limited intercultural interaction and more 'division'. This separation of classroom/learning and teaching spaces from the built environment of the University is highlighted by the majority of respondents (n = 38) highlighting that they feel 'comfortable' or 'very comfortable' walking around campus. No students felt 'not at all comfortable'. As a campus based in a very diverse city, this might be expected. However, it flags that diversity is not necessarily inclusion, and further teaching-related strategies or CPD is needed to enable students not simply to be in transit through the campus, but to ensure that the students engage in meaningful, intercultural encounters in the classroom.

The survey amplifies this, in relation to the level of comfort in accessing academic support for learning and development. Accessing academic support received the highest level of discomfort, equal to that recorded for *both* the Food Village *and* engaging in seminars/workshops and lectures. Four respondents felt 'not at all comfortable' accessing academic support, and 11 felt 'somewhat comfortable'. Beyond this, 16 felt comfortable' doing so, and 13 said they feel 'very comfortable'.

Although the University provides different support services, in addition to academic teaching staff, for instance, through the Library and Learning Services, personal tutor support and the Centre for Learning and Study Support (CLaSS), these British Muslim students appear to feel less comfortable accessing them. However, the Kimberlin Library had a higher level of acceptance than specific services, with 35 students feeling 'comfortable' or 'very comfortable'. Perhaps the issue is less the spaces than the services/mode of engagement, and the way these are shaped as culturally-appropriate.

The open-ended responses highlight the intersection of spaces and services. One noted:

> Is it possible if their [*sic.*] can be a prayer space during the weekends, maybe in the library as Portland building is closed?

Whilst the issue of the space in the library was raised more than once, there is a misconception amongst some students about the main Prayer Room opening times. There is clearly a need to ensure that students are aware that the DMU Prayer Room on campus *is*

open during evenings and weekends to current students and staff to offer their mandatory congregational prayer timetable.

This shows the importance of making prayer time for British Muslim student respondents during the whole of their study time. Through the survey, 36 respondents were 'comfortable' or 'very comfortable' making time for prayers, but as was seen in interviews and focus groups, the institutional space for this was an issue that also impacted study. This was an additional burden on these students.

Some of these challenges are due to the more intensive, block teaching format that the University adopts as part of its Education 2030 strategy. This involves two intensive days of on-campus teaching/learning, with students immersed in steady on one module at a time.

> it means a lot, beginning university and seeing other Muslim students is nice to see. However it is very difficult to accommodate prayer time during timetabled session. As if I choose to pray mid lecture I'm missing out or if I'm late to a lecture because I was praying sometimes they don't let you in and tell you to reschedule your session.

This student clearly highlights how much they appreciate diversity, but the academic implementation of the curriculum and the intensity of the block teaching format does not take into consideration Muslim students' need to pray. Of course, this can depend upon individual academics, but this tends to force the students towards compromise, either of their faith or of their academic engagement and attendance. Thus, whilst students celebrate the diversity of the campus and city, at times, this diversity is not reflected in the context of the curriculum and its secular assumptions. This is a differential impact, and one noted a struggle in:

> working hard to manage time, weve [*sic.*] got to balance our time with studies and practicing religion, sometimes it can get hard because of prayer times falling into the same times as classes so it can be a bit of a struggle. Especially during Ramadan where you want to be on time.

A collective experience is highlighted here, leaving us with a sense of these students having an additional layer of emotional and cognitive work to undertake, in order to navigate the curriculum and their faith. This navigation feels, at times, like it has to take place without accommodation from the University, resulting in individual and collective struggle: '[e]specially during Ramadan where you want to be on time.' This leaves us with a sense of guilt/anxiety, where British Muslim students cannot balance academic work and faith, and have to compromise on the latter.

5.1.3 On being a British Muslim student

To understand experiences and identities, respondents were asked an open-ended question about what it means to them to be a British Muslim student. Out of 14 responses the main themes identified include: a sense of responsibility, to represent Islam positively and to help their communities; a sense of pride in being visibly Muslim; and a sense of awareness about misconceptions about Islam that they attempt to challenge.

- *Representatives of Islam through a moral code and the ethics of caring*

Respondents seemed to use the survey as a platform for Dawah (to advocate for Islam). Several noted their responsibility in being representatives of the religion in university spaces, which they define and act upon in different ways.

> [I am] like any other university student although I represent islam [*sic.*] therefore I have to be a good student.

Others mentioned moral and ethical values.

> Having a moral code and belief to follow when faced with difficult situations and a God to rely on for comfort and trust when things get tough

Through religion, and their moral code, the respondent seems to find a sense of direction, through their faith in difficult times. Other responses also highlight morality and values in their everyday practice:

> to be kind caring and just treat everyone equally no matter what.

Here, there is value in acts of kindness and caring, giving direction to the expression of Muslimness. The ethics of caring seems to be important for other respondents, too:

> To be a representative of my faith. Always being kind, respectful and always there for when people need me

An ethics of caring or helping others reflects the importance of community-mindedness for British Muslim students in this survey, in relation to work and practice that is useful and enriching:

> someone who practises their faith and helps their community.
>
> […] Ultimately, it's about contributing to a community where my values and perspectives enrich the experience for everyone.

- *Pride in being Muslim*

Of the 14 responses to the question of how they see themselves as British Muslim students, eight responses mentioned pride, in particular in relation to visibility, including through wearing Muslim attire (*Hijab*).

> I feel pride in wearing Muslim attire going to lecture.
>
> I represent my religion through my dress code and my actions.
>
> Learning not only about my course but also about my faith and showing it outwardly too by wearing the hijab and modest clothing.

These students represent Islam not only through their beliefs, morals and acts of kindness, but also feel safe and confident in their visibility, reflecting the value of modesty. This respondent also highlighted the importance of a diverse context giving them the confidence to practice in this way:

> To be able to practice my faith comfortably and easily alongside my course without feeling discriminated against or different, and thankfully I can confidently say I am able to do so here at DMU.

Whilst this raises reflections on comfort in less diverse contexts than Leicester/DMU, it also has implications for British Muslim students in such contexts who do not wear the *hijab*. One such respondent says explicitly that in a context where there is a large Muslim community, she feels that she is judged, and pressured to conform, stating:

> if you feel accepted in the muslim [*sic.*] community. As I don't wear a hijab sometimes I get a few dirty looks and it makes me feel a bit uncomfortable, of course its only a few times that its happened and I could understand why but its our job as brothers and sisters to help each other out with these sorts of struggles and not judge each other since were all on different journeys in islam. when I'm in the prayer rooms I see other muslim sisters the same as me and putting on their hijab to pray, so maybe they have a similar experience too with maybe not feeling comfortable in the community which might prevent them from getting more involved. I would love to get more involved in the islamic community but I'm a bit worried if id get judged for not wearing a hijab. I don't feel like it would look the greatest to represent our community but not wearing a hijab [*sic.*].

The respondent does not feel that this is a usual occurrence, but they have noticed it and felt its impact. They highlight the importance of community support and understanding, for a variety of positions, to overcome a homogenising pressure to conform. It is clear that this student desires a personal engagement with the University's Muslim community and its activities.

For context, it is important to note that the *hijab* is worn as a pre-requisite, in order for the *salah* to be valid in Islam. The Prayer Room provides *hijabs/abayahs* with the DMU logo, specifically to cater for those who may not wear it outside of prayer, but who desire to fulfil their prayers, authentically and with validity. The DMU logo was added to this stock, because they see heavy use and can get lost.

This respondent clearly connects with others who do not wear the *hijab* out of the Prayer Room, but there is no compulsion to do so, or pressure to conform. We also note that some who wear the *hijab* outside the Prayer Room express admiration and respect for those who struggle with it, but who still wear it at prayer. The point we take from this is that wearing the *hijab* whilst undertaking *salah* matters, and, at the same time, some students are sense-checking their faith-based identities in noticing that others also do not yet do so outside of *salah*. Here, the emergence and development of faith is being explored at university.

- *Representing Islam: Dawah (calling/invitation) to challenge stereotypes*

Some respondents stated explicitly that they see themselves as advocates of Islam, and try to represent the religion positively. Other respondents seemed to use the survey platform to challenge any misconceptions about their religion.

> It's an opportunity to represent my faith positively, build bridges between cultures, and challenge stereotypes through my actions and character […]

> For me its a platform to showcase my identity to others who may not have interacted with muslims but only heard the brainwashed headlines about muslims [*sic.*].

The first quotation mentions the respondent's attempt to represent the religion while trying to challenge any stereotypes through their actions, without specific mention of the stereotypes. The second quote on the other hand, refers specifically to the stereotypes reinforced through the media describing their delivery of 'brainwashed headlines'. Similarly. another respondent seems to highlight the misconceptions and stereotypes from the media by saying:

> British values are intertwined with Muslim values, its part of who we are and the way in which we conduct ourselves as Human beings. its all about kindness, caring and showing humanity to one another. Islam is a way of life and i wish more people would really look into the religion to understand it rather then reading headlines or believing what they are told [*sic.*].

In addition to using the survey platform to advocate for Islam, the respondent highlights congruence between British and Muslim values: being British and being Muslim is being more fully human. This notion of being Muslim is being 'human' appeared in the data several times where the respondents seem to (re-)define their Muslim identity.

- *(Re-)defining their Muslimness*

Notably, some respondents define themselves through their religion and see themselves as representatives of Islam in their day-to-day actions and interactions:

> For me it's a representation and a reflection of who I am.

Other respondents had less emphasis on their religion as a predominant characteristic:

> Just as normal person, in UK it doesn't matter what religion you practice.
>
> Like a normal human that is not Having to choose between religion and education

Whilst the first respondent emphasises the contextual difference of the UK, which creates a sense of safety in the context of diversity, irrespective of faith, the second emphasises the importance of not having to compromise any asset of there being.

5.2 Interview outcomes

The interviews revealed a range of nuanced experiences across the seven participants, focused around two core areas.

1. Belonging and courage includes: elements of the personal, in relation to individual independence and a deepening of faith, and an emergent understanding of how their Muslimness is unfolding, including in relation to breaking stereotypes; and, the ways in which institutional culture and infrastructure, alongside the curriculum, impacts their identity.

2. Barriers to belonging, with a clear articulation of the impact of being hyper-visible[2], alongside a lack of diversity across the institution in its cultures and practices, revealed in relation to Ramadhan.

5.2.1 Belonging and courage

- *A home from home: belonging through faith-based provision*

Participants generally felt accommodated by the institution and its faith-based provision. There were several references to the importance of the prayer room as a deciding factor for choosing DMU. This is important because for practising Muslim students, access to prayer spaces is an essential institutional infrastructure, enabling them to maintain religious obligations whilst studying. These safe spaces shape belonging and inclusive environments in ways that go beyond student expectations.

In this, Participant 7 was clear about the centrality of these spaces in their decision-making, in particular where they compare university spaces to those they have experienced previously.

> I remember when I went to visit DMU, the first place I went was the prayer room and I was quite surprised at how big it was… the prayer room is probably my favourite part because back in college we had a very small room.

Participant 6 made this point explicitly, in relation to their being able to meet their spiritual obligations, and extend their faith-based intentionality on campus.

> Prayer is like a massive component of my life and its important to me. I have to fit that into my life like lunch and have to go to the prayer room to pray… the fact that it was there available for me really drew me into the university and the facilities, the community, everything it just really drew me in.

As a clear indication of how appropriate space built a sense of belonging in-community, this student could identify how the complexities of their life demanded appropriate provision. Moreover, their identification of being drawn in, was reiterated by Participant 3, in relation to feeling acknowledged and welcomed, in particular in the transition to a very new and very different environment like a university. However, they also indicated a desire to grow through this process, through a space that was intriguing as well as spiritually, communally and personally warm.

> As a Muslim you need facilities like prayer rooms and places to do Wudhu, and I was looking for somewhere that was welcoming and not so intimidating, but more intriguing.

This clear focus upon the environment for appropriate, faith-based expression, was exemplified by Participant 2 in discussing their application and transition to the University.

[2] It is important to note within this the gendered element that may impact the findings, as 6 of the seven participants were female.

> One of the most important deciding factors for me was being able to practise my faith, and having the facilities to go to… when I looked at the prayer facilities it was far beyond my expectations. It was really, really nice and I was like okay, this is the perfect university for me.

For these participants, the prayer facilities are central to their university experience and demonstrate how religious accommodation is influential in Muslim students' university selection and experience in UKHE. This is a factor that tends to remain overlooked across the sector, and in specific institutions, beyond the provision of a space. There is little narrative that connects that space or facility to its spiritual lifeblood in individuals and communities. Here, religious practice remains foundational to many Muslim students' lives, challenging assumptions that may negotiate religious identities with academic considerations.

As a result, the provision and investment in spiritually-rich facilities, and predominantly the extensive prayer room and its dedicated ablution spaces, is a central concern to first-year Muslim students. Well-designed physical spaces are seen as a reflection on how the institution communicates its own values in attracting Muslim students. In this, it is important to note that the provision of the prayer room extends to its being more than simply a place to pray. Participant 4 was clear that the prayer room events, particularly for a student living away from their home, were a defining and motivational point for choosing the University, and quickly became an integral part of their student experience.

> They did monthly activities and aid activities and they also had a lot of events. So I thought that's something not a lot of other universities offer as well. So that influenced my decision because I live away from home. So for events like Eid it was perfect for me.

Below (5.2.2), we raise issues in relation to Ramadan, but it is important to highlight how appropriate faith-based provision gives students an anchor point at times that can present challenges to the living and being of Muslim students. Navigating fasting and study can often feel doubly challenging, but this was manageable for Participant 6 in their experiences of the prayer room services during Ramadan.

> They were hosting iftars every day, breaking fast. And it was really nice because if I don't have time to cook or just focus on the assignments and stuff, they can just go there, pray and then eat. They got all that sorted. They have congregation prayer, and then food. And that was really helpful. I did attend a few times only because I'm with family. But my friends who would go every day because they couldn't go back home and they were in exams period and they couldn't go back home. And they said that it was really helpful to be able to go every eat food with everybody and pray with everybody and balance. I'm able to do my assignments and then I'm able to go somewhere where they've provided me with, everything to keep up with my practices.

- *The role of ISOC*

Just as not all student advisers were members of ISOC, not all interview participants were members. However, beyond the prayer room as a space for belonging for Muslim students, there was significant discussion that extended towards engagement with this important, communal society. The interviews highlighted how ISOC presented further opportunities for students to deepen their faith-based practices and beliefs, through discussion, representation and belonging.

> Representation with ISOC, that mattered to me quite a lot. [Participant 1]

> Because of ISOC communities and the different events that happen throughout, I've got the opportunity to get deeper into the faith, because of the facilities in here… before I had a small mentality thinking this is what Muslims are but now I've got a broad understanding that there are different kinds of Muslims… and it has broadened my understanding on what the faith is about. [Participant 2]

The role of ISOC is significant in giving space, time and energy to dialogues that enhance the spiritual development for students, which, for many, was absent in their previous educational environments. This complements the student experience by bringing a holistic understanding of Islam to the University rather than a narrow viewpoint. Here, Participant 2 indicates the importance of communal activities in broadening and deepening an understanding of faith.

For participant 4, ISOC was a 'game changer because I thought I could be represented and meet other people that are just like me as well'. Here, ISOC serves as much more than a student society. Rather it forms a social and spiritual hub that enriches belonging for Muslims, which offers safety as they navigate the secular nature and norms of the University. This was emphasised in beautifully simple terms by Participant 3, in their view that engagement with ISOC meant that 'I feel like it really helps me to be one. My university and religion doesn't have to be separate'. So, there is a sense that religious and academic identities can be blended in ways that bring confidence and agency to the student voice. They do not, necessarily, have to be negotiated, where there can be an authentic engagement with faith-based services and facilities.

This is an important message that emerges from the practical, transitional experiences of Muslim students moving into the University. However, it should also be noted that ISOC's importance grows for some students during key transitional periods, such as Freshers Week. Here, Participant 4 reflects on their experiences

> I felt like a weirdo… especially Freshers Week in the first term like everyone was going to clubs and I didn't do any of that. So I felt so lonely and left out but the more I got to know people, especially Muslims and the societies… the more times I found Muslims that helped me to accept I'm not a weirdo and I'm accepted in here.

This important role for ISOC, acting as a motivational factor for choosing the University, was felt by Participant 1, who 'made sure to check there was Islamic societies… because that way there was a community already there for me'. However, it should be noted that this was situated for many students alongside the importance of their own religious communities

or mosque in anchoring them during their studies. This was especially the case for those from Leicester or the local region.

- *Revealing stereotypes*

Issus in relation to visibility are dealt with below (5.2.2). However, engagement whilst in the University, both physically and in online spaces, in terms of acting in a certain way, revealed insider/outsider judgements about what it means to be Muslim. Participant 6 noted:

> If I'm too confident as a Muslim, like if I voice my opinions too much… it would just be pushed away… that's why I'm more quiet … I don't like to speak too much. I'm scared to voice my opinions especially from a British Muslim perspective.

This specific feeling of being expected to be quiet was also voiced by Participants 1 and 7. The former noted:

> I feel like I have to prove that I am approachable and that I can be confident. I feel like in my workshops in university everyone expects me to be the quiet girl in the corner that focuses on my own work… but then when I'm the one putting my hand up and answering the most, I feel like I get looks from some people, like they didn't expect it from me initially. So I can be loud and I can be out there and perhaps with my hijab people don't expect that.

The inextricable relationship between perceptions of being quiet and being a Muslim (Hijabi) woman can be linked to ideas of intelligence, alongside stereotypes of submissive Muslim women. The surprise indicated Participant 1, in the looks that they received from peers when 'answering the most' suggests surprise attached to perceived identity markers and characteristics, compounded by visible markers of faith. Participant 7 also identified these assumptions as crucial to their identity:

> Back in college… I'd sit at the front and I was kind of the loudest one in the room. I remember my teacher she was white and she had this assumption where they used to say Muslim girls are quite quiet and she obviously saw me and she said 'well obviously that's not true.'

Breaking stereotypes was also reflected in the choice of course for certain participants. Participant 3 discussed the choices of fellow ISOC members on group chats and this was 'eye opening because there's a lot of courses that you wouldn't really expect Muslim women to be going into'. They were studying a professional course and had a perception that similar courses, like Accounting and Finance:

> [and] related stuff would be predominantly boys, like when I go into my lecture room it's like 80% men, so it's like when I see a few *hijabis* and a few women you're very much comfortable being there.

This speaks to the importance of role models in generating belonging across courses, but it also points to the unspoken courage of these female Muslim students in their active application to and transition into these courses. In reflecting on their choice of study, Participant 4 felt:

> really scared there wouldn't be enough women or I'd be the only one, because in my college I was the only girl in my class. So when I went to Open Days there was actually quite a few women in this field so it was motivating.

This gendered set of lived experiences, intersecting with faith, and also race and ethnicity, demonstrates a rich set of possibilities for widening our engagement with the student experience. It points towards a need for institutions to think through equity in relation to the curriculum, and the lived realities of the students, and to centre such intersectional experiences within meaningful EDI work.

- *The curriculum, block delivery and faith*

Whilst in 5.2.2 below, we focus upon barriers to faith-based life inside the University and its curriculum assessment, it is important to highlight positive connections between faith and belonging through the design and delivery of curricula. The institutional provision of a block delivery curriculum was also recognised by participants as a strong feature of their student experience. A block mode of delivery structures learning sequentially through modules that are delivered and assessed in seven-week blocks, where students tend to be clear about the specific days of the week where face-to-face engagement will take place. For students in this study, block mode worked well in helping them to balance their religious obligations and their Muslimness.

Students were able to articulate a feeling of being accommodated within the University, although we are mindful that, at crucial periods like Ramadan and Eid, and also at Friday prayers, some students felt unsupported, and having to compromise their faith. Thus, Participant 4 argued that block teaching 'was one of the best things for me.' In particular, the ability to move on from module to module, and having assessments linked to particular modules and to particular content in good time, meant that they did not have the stress of having 'to concentrate on material I've learned a few months ago', ahead of final year assessments. For this student

> it impacted me in quite a positive way because I don't have the time like that. Like I need to pray my *Quran*. I need to pray my *Salah*. I need to dedicate a certain amount of time in my day to be able to practise my religion. So for me block teaching was actually a very positive thing for me where I can focus on material I've only learnt 2 weeks ago, take an exam and then I've got a good amount of time to just be able to practise my religion.

These discussions of engagement with faith and balancing education within a block system can benefit the experiences of Muslim students as it offers flexibility to have dedicated time for religious obligations and the ability to concentrate on particular module content. So, where traditional semesters may have not offered this flexibility, and thus inadvertently created barriers for students with religious commitments, block delivery's concentrated approach was reported as enabling a richer integration of faith and academic studies.

The connection between academic studies and religious practice also extended to career aspirations. Participant 5 demonstrated how their studies align with Islamic communal values, not just professionally, but also as an act of service to the community. As such, it

enables them to enact their religious principles. Here, faith brings meaning and alignment to their educational choices. In this, the flexibility of needing to go to university twice a week, for block-based sessions, gave Participant 5 the time, space and energy to focus on religious activities without having to compromise, academically.

> I think balancing it hasn't really been quite difficult, especially because like I have a lot of free time. I only go to university twice a week. I do have time to do all my religious activities whilst also studying and getting all my assignments done.

This student, who wish to go into teaching, also felt that block delivery gave them space to undertake placement work in schools, around their course and their faith. They argued that there was an integration, feeling 'that itself, religious wise for us, [the curriculum is] quite beneficial', and alongside this 'It's quite rewarding as well because I'm like teaching children and I'm being like support to their socialization at a young age and just like teaching them to grow'. Feeling like they belong and are growing is 'kind of one of the reasons why I want to go into teaching.'

For Participant 1, as a student living away from family, the flexibility of the curriculum is mediated by feelings of loneliness, but, crucially, gave opportunities to self-learn about faith and practice regularly.

> When I first came to university… I'm just completely living alone. That helped me find my faith because in loneliness you get sad… but that's when I started looking more into faith and practising it. I found a good balance between university and faith because I had more time for myself. I found college way more consuming…

This positive impact of block delivery was not felt by all students. Here, Participant 4 described a more negative situation, where they were forced to compromise between *deen* and *dunya.*

> Even if we have a one hour break between each seminar, in my lecture they will take that hour like they will literally teach, they will make a one hour lecture into two hours just because they wanted to. And I think that was really unacceptable for me because I just had to leave and then it was like you're battling between something you should have, like a break. And then you have to stay in class even though you're not meant to, because I had to go pray my *Salah*. So I think in that time period, if they could just accommodate like if they had a 2 hour lecture or do a 30 minute break in between before another seminar that would really help.

Despite the recognition of diversity as a strong point of the institution, this was not always felt in curriculum contexts. Once again, thinking about practice-based disciplines, governed by particular codes of practice, Participant 1 active:

> Across my course… it looks into mainstream perspectives and Christian big faith countries and Church of England… there's not enough representation, what about Muslim-led countries? The *Sharia* law? What about our different cultures? Because Islam varies across many cultures but we don't look into their perspectives. When it comes to mainstream ones they're very individualistic, they focus on thriving on their

> own but as Muslims we're more collectivists… I do wish we explored different cultures in my course, maybe that's something for the course leaders to look at.

- *Independence and acceptance of self and others*

The overall university experience enabled a newfound sense of independence for some students. Participant 1 was clear that this came from an integration of self, learning and faith, enabled through access to meaningful and authentic spaces.

> I feel like I'm more responsible for my own learning now, when it comes to Islam and my faith. I have more time to reflect… more consistent with prayers because we have the prayer room on campus.

For Participant 7, such independence was revealed in personal development and identity, reflected against their experiences of a more sheltered environment before university.

> Before uni I didn't have any freedom at all… since uni I can practically do anything. I'm not doing anything bad but I can do what I want… pre-uni I've been very shielded, there was a lot of things I didn't know how to do like go to the shops I would feel anxious… even this interview I was scared but I was like it will help me… I feel much more independent.

This is a crucial insight, in relation to the power dynamics and cultural implications of how institutions engage with a richer understanding of the student experience. Whilst there are significant issues in relation to student recruitment for evaluation, feedback and research, there are also potential, intersectional issues in broadening and deepening our understanding of how a range of Muslim students experience the University. Thus, Participant 7 added:

> Muslim girls who move out for uni they have a very big jump in freedom… I think its very brave and courageous and its good to see your social skills flourish because its very easy to be cooped in, I was like that.

This freedom was also felt by Participant 2, who notes that 'people get really greedy with freedom. When I first came I got to do what I wanted and it did affect my faith'. They reflected on their own spiritual journey, and the negative impact on their faith, as a result of excessive freedom in the first weeks of transition to university. Crucially, their ability to reflect on this experience in-communities, meant they now had 'so much more love for my religion as I've got such a better understanding, cause I've had to pull myself out or a dark space'.

It is important to recognise the courage it takes for the students to reveal these experiences at an early stage in their university life. Participant 2 was clear that having access to the prayer room enabled them to combat any pressure or stress during their studies, and enabled them to step out and be more contemplative and meditative, and to return to their studies feeling centred once more. Building upon a sense of courage, this demonstrates a strong sense of hope that they might enrich their faith-based being, knowing and doing in the world, which is grounded upon self-respect and dignity. The university experiences

described by these participants, in relation to freedom and independence, suggests feelings of agency, whereby students can navigate their own experiences through personal growth.

- *Relationships within and across the University*

A key component to belonging is the perception of, engagement with, meaningful relationships between students, and their peers and tutors. For Participant 7, 'my lecturers they're quite inclusive and nice. I can't recall any experience where it's been negative in terms of being a Muslim'. Participant 6 concurred, and, in reflecting on Ramadan, found it 'really helpful to have someone acknowledge that we're going through a month of religious practice'. This was in reference to their tutor who was reassuring with 'support even if it's a five minute talk', about assessments during the holy month.

However, recognition of Ramadhan was not consistent from staff. Participant 6 queried whether all staff are 'briefed on Ramadan as maybe I'd want just a tiny bit more acknowledgement'. Whilst we develop this below, in relation to the curriculum, it is important to highlight how a differential experience of understanding, predicated upon differential faith-based literacy, across peers and tutors, can significantly impact the student experience. This is not simply in relation to their outcomes, but also in relation to their sense of identity, belonging, and communities. For institutions striving to implement strategies of empowerment for all students and staff, there is a need to consider these issues of faith-based literacy. It is worth reiterating that, whilst this report focuses upon first-year student expressions of their Muslim identity or Muslimness, this is also the case for staff, and the ability of staff to act as role models matters in this regard.

5.2.2 Barriers to belonging

- *The hypervisibility of the hijab and behavioural policing*

It is important to note that the majority of participants who took part in these interviews observed the hijab. The core themes around their experiences thus revolved around perceptions of the hijab in relation to cultural stereotypes, and subsequent attempts to break these. There was an overwhelming feeling of importance attached to perceptions of 'self' and others, in relation to behavioural norms that may not be placed on non-visible markers of faith.

This realisation meant that for Participant 7:

> Let's say I'm in a classroom full of people that's not Muslim and not from where I am and there's another hijabi and they're acting a completely different way I guess I'd feel like we're sharing that identity so it feels more embarrassing if that makes sense.

For Participant 7, across those observing hijab, there was a relational bond in terms of identity. This implicitly extends to behavioural norms, and what is and is not permissible and acceptable. To an extent, here, there was a sense of a desire to police behaviour, and this participant felt a sense of responsibility, which crystallised at the intersection of faith and gender:

> As a Muslim woman there's obviously more responsibility. It's not like if you're wearing the hijab you can start vaping, then people are going to look at you more weird… when people see a woman anyways, they're like urgh, that's weird. But men vape too, but if he's a guy and he's vaping it's like oh he's just one of them ones too.

Vaping was also an issue raised by Participant 1. The perception of others and representing faith visually caused their vaping habit to stop.

> I used to vape and it was quite hard when I was a hijabi and vaping because I feel I'd get looks. I found it hard to stop that. So it was difficult because I feel like I'm not representing my religion in a positive way by doing that and in public either. *Alhamdulilah* I've kind of stopped that now but even back then it did make me more aware of how I behave in public and how people see me because what they see from me is what they take away from our religion.

It is clear that there is a weight of representational responsibility being carried by these participants, and an internalised, self-policing, self-awareness of their behaviours and actions as a reflection of their faith, and also of Islam (their Faith). This self-policing was especially strong in public spaces. Although Participant 1 'found it hard to stop [vaping]', ultimately, self-awareness and representational responsibility moved and reshaped their agency and conduct.

Participant 1 explained how this was not simply revealed in response to a single activity, like vaping, and articulated that when people 'see a hijabi woman they expect us to be perfect 100% of the time, conduct ourselves in a good way'. This demonstrates the internal struggles that are compounded through faith, gender and visibility, in terms of carrying and personifying an appropriate representation of Islam, through which the inner-self or inner life world is conditioned.

For Participant 5, it was also important to act and behave in particular ways due to the visible intersection of gender and faith:

> I feel like there's a certain way I should portray myself as a Muslim woman because I'm carrying my identity with me… I hope I carry myself in that manner.

This was further exemplified by Participant 3, with their view that

> As a Muslim… because I wear the *hijab* and people will be very much aware of the fact I'm Muslim or seeing me going to pray on campus. I feel like if I act a certain way that could portray a really bad effect on Islam.

This representation of faith, through markers of the *hijab* and prayer, puts a substantial weight on these students in relation to their campus-based experiences. There is a constant need to be mindful of 'bad' actions and behaviours that they presented as a representation of Islam as a whole. Here, there was a conflict between acceptance that an individual's intention and intentionality matter deeply in their faith, and how that might be perceived as representative, because of negative stereotypes and Islamophobia. This extended to linguistic norms such as swearing.

> I swear sometimes but I really try to stop myself because it's a bad habit to have especially in girls… but you want to be liked especially in first year because that's the year you need to make friends because my second-year people have their groups, so I feel like I had to engage and it really impacted me a lot. [Participant 4]

These insights serve as reminders that there are intense social pressures facing Muslim women inside and outside of the University, in curating themselves around cultural and religious identities and negotiations. Participant 4 was caught between engaging in swearing, seen as inappropriate, and the need to fit in socially during the crucial transitional period of their academic journey. They were struggling around the internalisation of a gendered expectation, in terms of acceptance and acceptability, and they highlighted an emotional toll: 'it really impacted me a lot'.

Such behavioural code-switching was also conditioned at the intersection of expectations and reality, in relation to first year friendships. Participant 4 revealed a deeper meaning behind socialisation processes at the University, which can lead students to compromise on their values for the sake of belonging and relationships. For Participant 2, concern over the possible or actual judgement of others lay at the heart of this.

> I don't just have an individual personality, I am a voice, I am a face of Islam as well, so if I act in a certain way, its not just me being judged, it's the religion that's being judged as well.

- *Ramadan and the impact of curriculum delivery*

This sub-theme addresses the importance and impact of *Ramadan* on the Muslim student experience, which again relates to how block delivery has been received by students. Crucially, the place of Ramadan in the student experience was integral to the findings of this project. The interviews were conducted directly after Ramadan, and there was a strong collective voice, in terms of how observance was managed with academic study and assessments. Here, interviewees described the resilience and drive that they needed to keep going, in part because the University (represented in terms of the institution, or in terms of module or programme teams) was unable or unwilling to make any sort of reasonable, faith-based adjustments for Muslim students during this holy period.

This is important, given that reasonable adjustment provisions are extended to other protected characteristics. These students clearly felt that, despite Ramadan being the holiest month of the Muslim year, there faith-based needs remain side-lined. This is particularly the case in terms of how these might be managed in relation to assessments and exams. For Participant 5 this was exacerbated, because their critical assignment 'was due, it was literally during the last 10 nights and the way my routine was at home, I had no time to complete that assignment.' This student was forced to make significant compromises in terms of their academic work, because they 'would have to stay up after *Taraweeh* until *Suhoor*, to just get those 5-6 hours of just completing my assignment in.' The students communicate this to the module team, 'asking if I could have an extended deadline', but an extension would have taken them into Eid week.

This was a complex terrain for a first-year student to negotiate, which was reported as a significant challenge for Participant 5: 'trying to get my assignment done, but it's also fasting and not being able to think straight really hard.' Participant 4 also recognised how hard this was, 'especially having to wake up at certain times and going back to sleep and then waking up, going lessons and my concentration was so low.' However, this participant accepted that 'the good thing about DMU is, especially for my course, they'll tell you in advance when you start the block, when an assignment will most likely be due in', and they could work their faith-based obligations in, around those deadlines. Thus, Participant 4 developed a clear practice during this month, again, pivoting around routine and access to the prayer room:

> What I did was I dedicated and I had to redo my entire time… break my fast in the prayer room then go to the library straight away and come back to the prayer room to pray.

That said, this participant was clear that this required them 'to be so resilient about it', because they did not live near campus, and on some days

> it was really hard for me to juggle exams and studies, having to prepare food or having to pray extra *Salah* as well. It was really hard but I just literally had to put my head down and just get through it.

In engaging with these difficulties, Participant 5 was clear that the University needs to be 'more considerate about the deadline and the time to complete assignments' during Ramadhan as it 'gets harder and harder throughout the second and third year'. It is clear in this, that these Muslim students accepted the compromises and sacrifices they would have to make, and it is also clear that the University community in defining its processes and practices, needs to take these into account, if they are to honour the working and being of these students (and also, of Muslim staff).

- *Satisfied settling in safety and diversity*

Whilst diversity came across as a strong theme for choosing the institution, in seeking comfort from this diversity, there was a sense of resignation revealed by interviewees. It was felt that there was not much more that could be asked from the institution. Participant 7 felt like they were asking for too much, in simply suggesting access to a room or empty space for prayer in other University buildings. They felt:

> I don't know how much can they really adapt for us anyway… because they'd be like "oh its not a Muslim country"… but if there's one thing I feel like it'd be better in every building if there was at least one room for a prayer room. I'm not saying it has to look like a mosque, just quickly pray because it's quite inconvenient to go from one building all the way to [the prayer room].

Here, there was a sense of settling in terms of their expectations, in particular when reflecting on those expectations that they had prior to coming to the University. Participant 7 remembered feeling that 'you've got a place to pray and it's not like anyone's gonna pull my scarf off when I walk through the door'. Here, the diversity of not only the institution, but the locality of the University, elevated a feeling of guaranteed safety, which, inside a broader culture of Islamophobia, felt like a satisfactory and safe harbour.

For Participant 5, their expectations, in particular in relation to settling, were conditioned by just wanting a university environment in which 'I could feel safe and not judged'. This sense of judgement, pointed towards a desire for an element of diversity through which students could be confident in their identities rather than feeling ashamed. In speaking about belonging at the university:

> If I have to feel ashamed of being Muslim then I don't want to be in that space, why would I put myself there. I'm not here to fight it either, I'm gonna go for a different space.

Interestingly, this is a positive for the institution, in relation to its facilities, the ways in which its communities of Muslim students and staff offer a safe harbour, and its situation in Leicester. However, this might also mean that some students settle for the institution, rather than pushing themselves and moving away, or moving to other universities, or undertaking other courses.

Here, it is important to recognise that whilst this feeling of safety emerges inside a particular institution, it is catalysed through the values, cultures and practices, of particular cohorts of Muslim staff and students, and their allies. Crucially then, there is work for institutions to undertake, in relation to integrating curriculum design, delivery and assessment, alongside the wider student experience, including, for Muslim students, the centrality of faith. Participant 2 was really clear that through open days they were very happy with their subject-specific facilities, and that the prayer facilities were 'far beyond my expectations'. Conditioned by their parents' desire that they stay to study locally, they felt that 'this is the perfect university for me at that time', because

> this university offered me the best of both worlds, to practice my faith and to succeed in my education and get the qualities I need for the real world. So this was the best option for me.

Enabling this experience for more Muslim students, mindful of intersectional needs and desires, is crucial in the institution embodying its desire to become an Empowering University, for all.

5.2.3 Interviewer reflections of interviews

In reflecting upon interviews, both student adviser as lead interviewer, and a staff member of the project team as secondary interviewer, reported back on how they felt following interviews. Crucially, a friendly and open atmosphere tended to be reported, which catalysed a rich dialogue. There were some instances of nervousness being expressed, both by student advisers and interviewees during interviews. In part, this was because of inexperience, and also because elements of identity were being revealed. The role of student advisers as interviewers was commented upon as enabling opportunities to extend discussions, through a common and authentic understanding of experience. For the student advisers, having a member of staff present, enabled them to tease out understanding in safe environment.

There was some reflection upon the gendered nature of the interview process. For one student adviser, the interview being led by two hijab observing women framed authenticity

and building trust. The team had tried to ensure that there was a gender-appropriate interview environment, and had sense-checked this with interviewees. In this interview, the member of staff highlighted how this intersectional conversation focused upon the importance of representation, and how role modelling in research around the student experience might strengthen experiences and expressions of *deen*.

Reflections focused upon dialogue catalysed by faith-based intentionality and values of respect and dignity. In terms of values and affective realisation through the interviews, the student advisers were able to pick up on issues in relation to feelings of guilt amongst certain interviewees. For instance, this might be in relation to *Iftar* taken in the prayer room, when the student lived locally, and whether this removed opportunity for others. In other interviews, members of staff expressed their deep reflections on the ways in which these interviewees were willing and open to discuss how their faith-based intentionality had been deepened in their engagement in their studies.

Members of staff reflected upon significant findings in relation to differences between those moved to Leicester, rather than those who are from Leicester, and in thinking about intersectional differences, for instance gender and is religion, which was mediated across different courses of study. For instance, for some students engaging in subjects like Education Studies, there were differential expectations than in perceived, non-traditional courses like Accountancy and Finance, Engineering or Law. This was extended where participants felt like even if they were given the chance to move out of Leicester, this environment was still most appropriate for them, given the City's diversity. In this, some students reflected upon how interviewees highlighted that the City and the Islamic facilities in the University supported an emergent engagement with social activities and social life was unexpected.

5.3 Reflective journal outcomes

The reflective journals offer a unique insight into the research teams' individual positionalities throughout the research. A total of 15 journal entries were anonymously submitted for analysis. Over the lifespan of the study four collections were made, coinciding with different elements of the research methodology. Collection 1 took place in November/December 2024, focusing on the introduction of the student advisers and the shaping of the survey tool. Collection 2 took place in January/February 2025, reflecting on the survey responses and shaping of the interview questions. Following a break for Ramadan, collection 3 took place in April 2025, focusing on reflections on the interview process and emerging findings. Finally, collection 4 took place in May 2025 reflecting on the key themes emerging from the study, the opportunities and challenges for the University in taking action and overall reflections on the study.

The core themes across the reflective journal entries focused upon: the importance of co-creating research that has a meaningful purpose; what the student adviser role offered to the project; and how the team worked together. Other topics included challenges faced, key findings, resonances, student adviser development, institutional opportunities and challenges for translation.

5.3.1 Meaningful Purpose

In discussing motivations for engaging in the study, and later in reflecting on the outcomes of the work, the concept of research with a meaningful purpose was referenced 34 times across the journal entries. The team discussed this through two main lenses: the study value and the individual value. The team wrote about: first, the valuable contribution they felt the project could make to recognising Muslim students' experiences in UK Higher Education institutions' and second, the role this could play in broadening institutional understanding of those experiences in order to create more inclusive practice.

This was seen as important, in light of the relative lack of research nationally on Muslim student experience, but particularly within our institution. Given its diverse student identity, and significant proportion of Muslim students, it was felt that this institution is a crucial space for this work.

> This research has the potential to contribute to greater visibility and support for British Muslims in higher education, which is a cause I care deeply about
>
> Research Journal, Entry 4

The team were also drawn to the study through a belief in its ability to not only support recognition and understanding of Muslim student experience, but to create an opportunity for action and improving the experiences of Muslim students. An important element of such action was an aim to enable conversations across the institution between leadership, staff teams and students around how best to support and enrich student experience. In this way the research team shared their hopes for the value that the study could offer to the institution and beyond.

More personally, the Muslim members of the team also highlighted a desire to contribute to their community, to hear the stories of other Muslim students, and to deepen and broaden their own understanding of Islam through exposure to the faith and practices of others. There are reflections here between the motivations of the research team and the experiences of the research participants who spoke about being a representative of their faith, setting an example and doing good for the Muslim community. Across both examples there is a strong sense of the collective over the individual and a great pride and sense of fulfilment from being able to contribute positively to the collective.

> I am also interested to hear the responses of the participants, their unique experiences and insights, and also whether first-year students would have the confidence to voice their experiences and concerns freely
>
> Research Journal, Entry 3

5.3.2 The Affordances of the Student Adviser role

As noted earlier in this report, that the Student Adviser role was established to support the design, delivery and dissemination of the project and to ensure that the research was grounded within the experiences of British Muslim Students. Throughout the research journals, the team discussed the ways in which the students had enhanced the work of the project 21 times. These were grouped into 3 core elements: bringing an authentic perspective; acting as a bridge between the staff members and the participants; and, enabling the elicitation of information.

Journal entries spoke of the advantages to the project of having second-year Student Advisers who could understand the perspectives of participants not only in terms of their university experiences, but also in their navigation of faith and institution. Through their own experiences and perspectives, the Advisers were seen to be able to give authentic meaning to the data collected through the project, and to understand which emerging findings were most pertinent to the Muslim student community on campus.

> I hope to add an authentic and effective voice throughout the research, ensuring that first year British Muslim students are well represented, and their perspective is understood.
>
> Research Journal, Entry 2

There was also acknowledgement that first-year students would still be finding their voice within the institution. It was also likely to be the first time that they had been asked about their experiences of transitioning into Higher Education, specifically as a British Muslim. The Adviser role offered a unique opportunity here to act as a bridge between the staff members of the research team and the participants, and to help shape the research in a way that would support engagement from first-year students and allow their voices to take centre stage.

> I share similar identities and experiences with the participants, but at the same time, I've also worked at the institution, know many of the staff and have a good relationship with them too. This gives me a unique perspective, allowing me to understand both sides.
>
> Research Journal, Entry 13

In reflecting upon this, it was decided that the Student Advisers would lead the interviews, with the intention of creating a more relaxed environment for the participant, with the staff team member offering support and ensuring correct procedures were followed. This approach allowed for the participants to build a rapport with their interviewers, and for us to create a safe space together for their stories to be shared. The journals reflect on how this approach supported the team in eliciting more information from the participants than may have been possible had the staff team members led these sessions. The Advisers were able to build upon their shared identities and experiences to encourage participants to open up to them, creating richer data for the project.

> This is because I could help elicit information that maybe they would be apprehensive revealing to a member with more privilege and status in the University
>
> Research Journal, Entry 10

5.3.3 Team working and methodology

> Everyone had the same purpose—to give a voice to British Muslim students—and that created a nice sense of unity
>
> Research Journal, Entry 15

The journals wrote of an open and collaborative approach to team working, with an emphasis on the supportive and welcoming atmosphere that the team members worked together create. The Student Advisers noted that senior staff members motivated them to

help shape the research tools, to conduct the interviews and to reflect on the emerging themes. This motivation was found to be particularly useful during issues with recruitment across the project.

There were also reflections within the journals around the outsider positioning of some members of the research team, and their desire to ensure that their identities did not hinder the project. They expressed a desire to prove their allyship and to create a safe space in which the Student Advisers would feel safe to challenge the staff team. This was echoed by other journal entries which spoke of the 'genuine effort' of the team and how they felt that all team members cared about the work.

It was also noted that the diversity of the team allowed for rich discussions around the research design and analysis, offering a range of perspectives and interpretations. However, it was recognised that increased representation from the male Muslim population would have created a more balanced team perspective, as with only 1 male Student Adviser and 1 white male staff team member those perspectives were minimal.

Discussions of the project methodology across the journal entries noted the value that a primarily qualitative study offered. Given that the aim of the research was to understand how students experience their religious identity, a qualitative approach was seen as a way to collect rich, detailed insights from our participants. The journal entries also discussed how a mixed methodology, with quantitative elements within the survey, allowed for the collection of broad perspectives on campus engagement which could then be delved into in more detail in the interviews.

Core discussions in relation to the research methodology were around the need for flexibility and to build trust with the first-year student community to improve engagement. The team were conscious of the possibility for participants to feel wary of intentions behind the research, particularly in light of the wider context of Muslim student experience in Higher Education (as noted in section 2.3). There was a desire across the team to communicate the aims of the project clearly, and to ensure potential participants understood the goals of the work.

> It is crucial that we can demonstrate to British Muslim first-year students that the project is to be trusted with their voices, and that it will lead to change.
>
> Research Journal, Entry 7

5.3.4 Challenges faced

The team journals highlighted the frustrations felt by the team in response to the lack of engagement experienced across the project, and the knock-on effect this had on the project timeline. Needing to extend the project to allow for greater time for recruitment impacted the whole team, as the project work began to compete for time with assessment deadlines, teaching responsibilities and other deadlines there were not originally scheduled to coincide with the project work.

The team reflected on what the lack of engagement might suggest about student engagement, their engagement with research and specifically their engagement with research which focuses upon religious identity. The journals provided a space for

contemplation and consideration of the participants' perspective, in relation to the research and what we might learn from the lack of engagement.

> In addition, the low number of participants raises different types of concerns, like, do the students not feel comfortable enough to share their experiences from within that same university setting, or are they satisfied with their experiences that they don't feel the need to fill out the survey.
>
> Research Journal, Entry 9

The team also reflected on the limitations to the Student Adviser role, due to conflicting schedules, the need to prioritise their own studies, and the need to progress bureaucratic elements of the project. In terms of the last of these limitations, ethical approval and the data protection impact assessment demanded attention within specific timeframes, meaning that the Student Advisers could not be as engaged in these processes as much as the staff team would have liked.

5.3.5 Key Findings and resonances

Not all findings from across the study were discussed within the research journals. However, the team did highlight certain findings that resonated or stood out to them. Staff religious literacy was a common theme, with team members sharing their interest in learning more about how much staff know about student religious practices, alongside where their existing knowledge and understanding has come from. The need to develop staff religious literacy was also raised within the journal entries, as a response to student experiences and the challenges they face on campus.

The team were surprised to learn of the weekend closure of the Prayer Room and linked spaces, and used their research journal as a space to consider the implications of this for students who live on campus, particularly international students. As noted in Section 5.2.1, faith provision on campus is seen as not just a place for prayers, but as a community hub and a place of belonging. The team reflected on the impact this must have for students away from home at the weekends.

The invisibility of daily barriers was also highlighted a key outcome of the study. The team journals reflected on how the project was an opportunity to raise awareness about the everyday challenges Muslim students face, and how easily they can be overlooked by those outside of Islam.

> I believe practical barriers should be emphasised the most. These barriers have a direct impact on students' day-to-day lives and academic engagement. They are also often invisible to those who do not experience them, making it crucial that they are brought to light and addressed openly
>
> Research Journal, Entry 15

The journals also provided a space for the research team to consider how the emerging findings resonated with their own experiences or those of friends and colleagues. Many of the responses to the survey and discussions within the interviews were reflective of the teams' own experiences, particularly in relation to timetable clashes with prayer times and the attractiveness of faith-based provision as a motivator for studying at DMU.

5.3.6 Student Adviser development

The Student Advisers wrote about the value of their engagement in the project in relation to developing skills and experience that will support their academic and future career development. In particular, they appreciated the opportunity to engage in the design, implementation and dissemination of the project and felt that their role allowed them to learn more about the research process from within. Despite the issues the project faced in recruitment, the students found this real-life experience helpful, being part of conversations around how to progress the research and respond to challenges as they arose.

> I learned just how significant these methodological choices are in shaping research outcomes and influencing how we interpret our findings
>
> Research Journal, Entry 8

5.3.7 Opportunities and challenges in translation

In the final journal prompts, the team were asked to consider how they felt the institution could make use of the findings from the project and what opportunities and barriers they foresaw. The team acknowledged that there would be financial and logistical barriers to implementing change in response to the study. That it may be difficult to translate student experience into clear action plans for change, and that the Muslim student experience is diverse, were acknowledged in making it hard to balance the needs of all students. It was also noted that if action is pledged, this would need to be measured to ensure that it addresses the needs of the community as intended. Journal entries also recognised the tension and interaction between faith and environment and how this may require further exploration.

> There is a challenge for all institutions in understanding Islam as a way of life, and how this impacts the secular assumptions of the University
>
> Research Journal, Entry 7

Beyond this, the team wrote of the possibilities that the study presents. They recognised the important role that the institution plays in moving this work forward and the benefits that such engagement could bring to the University. Through engagement with the Muslim student community, it was felt that the institution had the opportunity to show their commitment to diversity and inclusion. In turn, this engagement could improve retention of Muslim students and their progression in postgraduate education, enhancing a range of fields by increasing representation in those spaces.

One of the Student Advisers also noted that attractiveness of the Muslim Friendly University label for institutions like DMU, situated within a city that is home to significant Muslim communities. How the badge of Muslim Friendly could act as a beacon for such communities to feel that an institution could be a safe space, in which they might learn and grow.

> This project offers the University a valuable opportunity to lead in promoting inclusivity and understanding of underrepresented student experiences. As one of the first studies of its kind, the insights gained can shape policies, improve student services, and enhance the university's reputation as a forward-thinking, inclusive

institution. It also shows a genuine commitment to listening to students and making meaningful changes based on their experiences.

Research Journal, Entry 15

5.4 Focus group outcomes

The focus group consisted of four of the student advisers, in conversation with each other and with three members of the staff project team. The core themes that emerged from the discussion were in relation to: the relationship between the University and British Muslim students; the ways in which institutional culture impacts British Muslim students; and, the role of the students, and of co-creation more broadly, in innovation projects. A final area that emerged was in relation to the visibility of these issues, and where now for work with British Muslims about their experiences whilst at university.

5.4.1 The relationship between the University and British Muslim students

In this theme, we pick up on the University in terms of its facilities and infrastructure, but also in terms of its practices in shaping the experiences of British Muslim students. Here, there is space to understand how the benefits that a diverse cohort of students bring to the University is not necessarily mirrored in how they feel they are included. Beyond this, students spoke of the crucial work of the Imam, and the importance of the prayer room, in particular given the lack of other Muslim-friendly spaces on campus. Finally, students spoke about the lack of availability of certified halal food. Here, a key message is in relation to how getting the basics right for this group of students, has benefits across their experience.

- *How the University benefits*

Student Participant 1 emphasised how their engagement in the project help them reflect on their conflicted, institutional experience, in particular, how the University 'benefits from being a Muslim-friendly University', whilst 'not giving us the platform to express our Muslimness on campus like we thought they would allow us to do.' As will become clear, for this participant, there was a sense that the provision of a prayer room was the least that should be available to them.

For Participant 2 this was emphasised further by their expectation that in such a diverse city as Leicester, 'you would go into it expecting a very accommodating, you know for it to be a very accommodating Uni[versity].' However, this student highlighted a feeling that the University 'does not do much because it expects the community itself to sustain itself'. So, for Participant 1, there was a sense that the University has settled for the provision of concrete facilities, in the form of a prayer room, and supported a Muslim chaplain, but beyond this had made limited attempts to change its practices and cultures. This included in publicising the prayer room. They argued that 'it's the Imam who moves actively doing a lot of the, you know, a lot of the work for getting students in, and like managing a lot of the facilities.'

- *Belonging beyond core facilities*

There was some significant discussion of available space in the institution, not simply for prayer, but for prayer as a strand woven inside a richer Muslim student experience. So, this

would be an engagement in faith that was communal and social. Here, the lack of availability of appropriate prayer rooms or facilities in campus buildings was a problem, precisely because it meant that the secular assumptions of the institution are imposed upon students of faith. The students see their identities integrating faith and their spiritual being (*deen*), with a more worldly existence (*dunya*). This means that the students identified the provision of appropriate, faith-based spaces (for prayer, with halal food, enabling gendered separation as appropriate, without access to alcohol), beyond the central prayer room, as crucial to an enriched student experience.

Yet, this was more hope than expectation for Participant 1, who noted that beyond 'the bare minimum… 'we don't also have expectations of public areas providing us with those facilities'. Hearing the voices of other Muslim students challenged this Participant, such that they challenge their own resignation: 'it made me feel a different way than I used to'. Participant 2 held out the hope that more appropriate, Muslim-friendly facilities across the campus, in different buildings, 'will be like a waterfall effect', because it means individuals will not have to walk back to the main Prayer Room, meaning 'they are not going to be late' back to lectures. This participant was clear that the interconnected nature of facilities and other elements of the student experience provides a clear connection between *deen* and *dunya.*

Moreover, the students did not simply emphasise this for Muslim students alone. Rather, each of the four emphasise the importance of multi-faith spaces, and the ability to enrich the student experience through faith-based literacy. Again, Participant 2 noted how access to facilities and resources is a pivot for a richer experience, and one that overflows access to space. As we will see, the students connected this to agency and decision-making emerging from the ground up. A core element of developing belonging beyond core facilities was ensuring that the campus has a gravitational pull (is sticky) for all students, in particular because 'a lot of us don't have jobs to sustain us as well' (Participant 1). In ensuring that good decisions were made about spaces, which would then enrich the broader student experience, Participant 1 highlighted the importance of enabling 'a diverse group of people to speak to in order to make something… that would make students want to stay on campus'.

- *Halal food*

A critical issue affecting students was emphasised by three of the four participants was in relation to HMC-certified, halal food. Participant 3 stated clearly that, in order to build an inclusive, Muslim-friendly campus, 'HMC food will be a good start. Because there's nothing like that on campus, there are places outside, but even then it is still a bit of a walk.' Participant 1 was incredulous about the lack of appropriate halal food noting: '[i]f you are calling something a food village it's your responsibility to cater to everyone, and I don't expect much'. They pointed to for allyship:

> we can only hope that they actively listen to Muslim voices and even non-Muslim voices that are speaking up in regards to the treatment or the experiences of British Muslim students.

This participant was clear that universities 'take so much from us and we are basically indebted just to get an education.' They were frustrated that

> I'm pretty sure [Muslim students have] raised this concern over the years as well but to think that still in 2025 were having to, we are actively avoiding going to the [Food] Village because we are not getting adequate food other than meal deals and like in the form of crisps and sugary drinks. It is very sad and it's a bit disrespectful as well.

Participants stressed that access to halal food was integral to their ability to practice their faith and to occupy fully their identity on campus, to be 'in the name of God' (Participant 1).

5.4.2 Institutional culture and the British Muslim student experience

- *A perception of disrespect*

It is important to know that the focus group took place the day after a symposium involving 16 current and former DMU students. At this symposium, an issue was raised about the ways in which the University Islamic Society (ISoc) is felt to be unsupported by the De Montfort University Students Union (DSU). Building from this, Participant 3, who is not a member of ISoc, raised a question about funding available for all student societies and whether that was equitable. Participant 1 also raised this issue to note that 'if the DSU is actively excluding ISoc activities and blocking funding', it impacts Muslim students 'coming on campus'. This student was not asking for the DSU or the University 'to be super Muslim, we are just asking for them to be more neutral'. This Participant felt that 'they are just trying to exclude us when we literally make up, we are one of the biggest societies on campus.'

This sense of exclusion or invisibility was exemplified because, 'as a student ambassador', when Participant 1 gave campus tours, 'I don't recall ever going to the Portland Building mentioning that there is a Prayer Room there.' In this role a student ambassador, this participant also pointed out that the prayer room gets much less mention than the breathing space, which 'is very I get it, it's a very secular space.' They understood that the breathing space was 'for everyone', but highlighted that, given the number of Muslim students on campus, the lack of identification of the Prayer Room was 'also a disservice… and I think it's quite shameful because were being shunned in a way'.

- *Lack of religious literacy*

A second issue that had been raised in the previous day's symposium was in relation to a student being refused time and space to pray in the Kimberlin Library. The reported incident was where a student did not wish to walk back in the dark to the prayer room, and found a quiet corner in the library where they felt they could pray in peace. They reported a librarian reporting them to security, and as a result, the student being unable to pray, been told were making people feel uncomfortable.

In the focus group, Participant 4 stated that hearing this 'was shocking'. For them, there was a need for the institution to act, because the library is 'somewhere where you should be feeling safe, and saying something like that is just sad.' Participant 1 pushed this further,

and focused upon the conditional existence of Muslim students in the University, and a perception of disrespect. In conversation with Participant 2, Participant 1 articulated the view that the University is trying:

> to suppress us in public spaces by maybe not providing halal food, not having very up-to-date Islamic facilities, or not having support towards those, or not allowing us to pray because I think the library a lot of people spend a lot of time in library to not have a single small, even a corner, in the library to be able to pray, I think is a disadvantage and a suppression of our faith.

In reflecting upon the culture of the institution, they made the telling statement that: 'we have more of a relationship with God than we do to academia, if I am being for being honest', and building from this they focused upon the lack of an institutional understanding of Islam as a way of life. This lack of a cultural and practical understanding impacts the personal and communal inside the University, and reflected a lack of education 'about Islamic practices', raising a fear that 'maybe [those who complain] are influenced by the way that [such practice] was portrayed.'

Here, there was discussion about whether the library and librarians 'should have fealty towards everyone and not just a certain type of student' [Participant 1]. The fear was that a lack of institutional awareness would hinder an active appreciation of, and support for, Islamic practices, and might also connect back to 'an even bigger rise in Islamophobia' [Participant 1]. There was a fear voiced that in expressing their Muslim identity, for instance in relation to prayer, negative views would become more visible.

- *Conditional membership of university community*

Participant 3 had their own, strong community support network in Leicester. They were aware that 'the student experience is very different for different people', but this participant felt that the University did not have to invest in the Muslim student experience, because that would be picked up in the Prayer Room, ISoc or through the diversity of the city. For other students, there was a sense that the University just considered a single student experience, rather than a diversity of experiences, and this risked focusing everything on a student culture that was predicated upon a particular style of socialising that was anathema to British Muslim students. Participant 3 felt that the University is 'overlooking our experience.'

Participant 1 concurred that the biggest issue is in relation to Islamophobia, noting: 'I think it is kind of like, it's there but we do don't want to acknowledge it.' They argued that this conditioned Muslim student behaviour on campus, in relation to maintaining access to the Prayer Room, as a gift that they could keep on condition that '[w]e must follow the rules and stuff' [Participant 1]. This participant was very clear about the lack of institutional support for Muslim students in the Summer 2024 race riots. They felt that it

> is very good for Muslim organisations to have that check on us and to keep also institutions in-check about what we are facing and how they should be dealing with the Muslims on campus. We didn't hear about an email going out by top management regarding the race riots… it was so weird because we expected something to go around and like speak on these issues. For them to be so, you know, well neutral about it, or

not even acknowledge it, was I think was very harmful because it just goes to show that they don't actually consider stuff outside the campus affecting students as well.

5.4.3 British Muslim students and co-creation

- *Legitimating engagement*

The role of students was integral to the design of this project. Picking-up on a culture of co-creation and students-as-producers, in investigating lived experience and the enrichment of their own scholarly environments, the role of second-year, British Muslim students helped define the positionality of the team as a whole around trust and inclusivity. In this, Participant 3 was clear that the five student advisers enabled the project to benefit from 'stuff they [the staff] won't see'. Participant 1 concurred, noting the value of advisers immersed in the worldly and the spiritual existence of British Muslim students, who could serve as 'the point of interaction with those [Muslim] participants'. This Participant highlighted that the team included 'members of staff that are not Muslim', and as a result, the advisers 'made it easier for us to elicit information from those participants that would normally be a bit taken aback by sharing too much.'

- *Defining engagement*

The advisers were pivotal in defining how engagement with their first-year peers might usefully develop. In this, they acknowledged that the timing of the project, beginning in September 2024, and then having to build energy through the recruitment of the advisers, the definition of the fieldwork with those advisers, and the submission of ethics, was an issue. The sequencing of these activities, such that the advisers could be as involved as possible in the fieldwork, meant that critical moments of recruitment, like freshers' events, were missed. Participant 1 noted that the advisers began work on recruitment 'between the Christmas break and an Easter break and it was very awkward, there was also Ramadan between.'

Participant 4 revealed a sense of frustration: 'I wish there was more participation from the students. There wasn't as much as I hoped... But I don't know how we can get them to engage'. Student engagement and feedback on projects, and a sense that students might be feeling survey fatigue, has been experienced in other institutional contexts. In the context of this project, there is the additional risk that the frustrations noted around Islamophobia, a lack of active support from DSU, and a perceived lack of institutional support beyond the Prayer Room provision, added to a sense of wariness about institutional projects, even where they were tagged and associated with proactive organisations like The Aziz Foundation. In this, Participant 1 reiterated the issues with missing a window of opportunity around freshers' events where 'there's a lot of higher student interactivity', and where:

> everyone is very looking forward especially when the students that we're targeting, they aren't very overly included and they want to be involved in everything, assimilate like. I think it would be nice for the Muslim students to know that there is also space for them and that people there are organisations like the Aziz Foundation that are actively trying to improve Muslim student, British Muslim student experiences on campus and so I think there would be a lot more willingness [at that

time].

Yet, it is also important to note the gendered nature of engagement (and a lack thereof) in the project. Participant 3 felt that 'getting more men participants', was fundamental. They continued that 'we need to find out why [there is less engagement]', beyond assuming that 'they don't care.' For this Participant, the key was active engagement and conversation with people, and they stress the importance of 'word-of-mouth, going to speak to people', in generating male, British Muslim student engagement. For this Participant, incentives to take part in the survey or interviews might be seen as 'just a distraction', because the institution is 'just trying to sell me something.'

For context, the DMU ISoc Brothers were less active in the academic session of this study (as it had been in the previous session). It should also be highlighted that the Prayer Room recruited significant Ramadan volunteers from the Brothers, and yet this project did not manage to reach them. This speaks to a disconnection with the project and the institution beyond the programme of study and the Prayer Room itself. In this, a separate study is needed about gendered engagement in projects working in the contexts of faith and race and ethnicity.

- *The importance of voice*

Voice was crucial for Participant 2, both for the British Muslims in the project, and the fieldwork participants. The project, they desired to 'give voice to the community'. Yet they also highlighted that whilst 'we can have voices… there should be more action to be honest', in order to challenge 'the lack of actual inclusion' in the institution. For Participant 2, this was related to a deep reflection on their own relationship with their faith, self and community, and the connection between voice and action was made clear in reflecting upon the symposium and engagement in the focus group. Through the process:

> [i]t gave me a lot to reflect on. A lot of views I had before changed, like views about my identity. All that got changed for the better to be honest.

In enriching the sense of identity formation, and developing a stronger belief in agency through the project, the engagement of student advisers in the formation of the research methods, participant recruitment, and data analysis gave an emerging sense of 'how we change things so it would be better for participation and stuff' [Participant 2]. However, Participant 1 would have preferred more direction over activities, and Participant 3 would have benefited from 'getting advice from the work that [the staff team] have done but we don't see behind-the-scenes, I think that would like get us more like active.' This was a request for more engagement in relation to the research process and lessons learned from previous projects, and Participant 2 agreed noting that whilst there was good communication around the symposium, for example, it would be good for the student advisers to understand 'how did you manage to end up choosing to do a symposium.'

- *The student advisers and co-creation*

Participant 1 was clear that there was an interaction between the development of the project and 'insight' and 'experiences as first-year British Muslim students', mediated through the advisers. This sense of the advisers developing through the project was

reflected by Participant 2, who described the project approach as enabling them to feel useful

> not just as research advisers but also as British Muslim students, and it made us feel more involved in our own community, and in the Uni[versity] itself, which was something.

Here, a sense of agency and flexibility was revealed, alongside a sense of pragmatism. Participant 2 felt it important that the team were able to make changes to recruitment or research methods, based on dialogue, and that this still yielded 'useful insight, through changing the ways you know we were working, and just changing it as it goes along.' The importance of dialogue was reiterated by Participant 1, who noted that the project focus upon co-creation:

> further solidified the fact that I need to find a way to engage more in conversations, and like this type of work that's very, I think it's very direct, and you can see the effects of, and you can speak to people involved. I think I don't get that in the degree that I'm doing.

Yet, from both Participants 1 and 2 there was a reminder that self-care needs to be factored-into the research process, in particular where it is participative, touching upon potential sensitivities, and exploring potential vulnerabilities be lived experiences. Participant 1 noted that co-creation in the project 'helped us also like derive some topics that needed to be discussed', in a generative and inclusive way, in order to reflect upon 'the fact that some of our participants had experiences on campus that also were not very pleasant'. In response, Participant 2 stated: 'so the thing is this was very eye-opening', and highlighted that although some issues resonated, others were new to them, 'even though we are part of this community.' Here, there was a strong sense of eyes being opened, and identity is being developed.

- *The student advisers and identity*

Participant 3 made an honest appraisal of the way in which their own approach to engagement had shifted. They noted that they were 'not that very talkative', and that most of the time, they tended to hold back on getting their 'points across', unless absolutely necessary. However, they expressed a communal sense that the culture and practice of this project was important 'because you get to express your opinions as well, to voice then fully you can make change.' Opinion was also important for Participant 1, who believe that the approach, and centring voice enabled them to be 'reflective of our journey and our experiences with the project, but also our first-year experiences, and as British Muslims.' As a result, they stated: 'I feel very fulfilled'.

However, the most telling insight came from Participant 2, who was very open about previously finding

> it normal, that it's okay that I'm on the sidelines trying to change or tweak my life in a way that would work out with their uni[versity] because you know I can't expect the uni[versity], and I can't expect this community, in living in the UK as a British Muslim student, I can't expect everyone to have all to accommodate me and my identity.

Through the project, this Participant had a strong sense that 'it's not as normal to, you know, not accommodate at all, you know, or accommodate it in the bare minimum way.' A sense of testimonial justice had emerged, in explicit relation to voice: 'so it is okay for me to speak up and ask for change'. They reiterated the point made earlier about British Muslim students having to make compromises, in terms of: first, picking vegetarian options in The Food Village because they couldn't trust the halal certification; and, accepting that the secular assumptions of the institution and its teaching timetable meant that they could not pray on time; third, suffering the lack of additional prayer spaces in buildings, meaning that they would have 'to just pray at home.'

In expressing this uneasy compromise, where the worldly overflowed spiritual needs, Participant 2 was clear that 'it's not, it's not normal, but also it is normal'. To many, these might appear trivial or insignificant, but they were signifiers of '[A]ll those little stuff that had to change' that would 'not affect other people.' Crucially, in engaging through reflection and dialogue on the project, this participant was clear that 'it gave me more confidence to embrace my identity as a British Muslim, and to stand my ground'. If nothing else, this is a beautiful revelation.

5.4.4 Where now? The visibility of issues

Building from this sense of confidence around identity and co-creation, Participant 3 was clear that discussion had enabled movement 'because we know what key focus areas are, and we just need to work on projects.' This is also reiterated by Participant 4, who wished to extend the research to experiences of international students. Again, this described a desire for agency, and the need for action, which for Participant 2 was crucial because of the lack of change to this point, and a desire to challenge the University.

Yet, for this participant, such challenge was conditioned by power and the limits of agency, because 'at the end of the day, since [British Muslim students are] a minority of sorts they are always going to shy away from actively going out of their way to improve stuff.' As a result, they felt 'we can only hope' that change will come, and until that time, the internalisation of compromise and accommodation by individual British Muslims would continue. There was clearly some dissonance expressed here, because in discussing 'more institutional inclusion for us', Participant 2 highlighted that 'there's lots of little tweaks that they could make', in terms of prayer rooms in different buildings, halal food provision, and so on. This Participant was clear that this 'does not need a major change and they could do that you know.'

Building from this, Participant 3 noted that in other spaces, like airports, there are always multi-faith rooms. Here, they were clear that such provision 'doesn't just have to be stuck with, Muslims and stuff. You can just say it's a multifaith room and be inclusive to everyone.' They were incredulous that there was not more provision: 'I don't know why it's so hard. The University is massive and there's loads of rooms.' Reflecting upon this, Participant 1 noted that the University is lucky that the British Muslim population on campus continues to accept the lack of progress and provision. One reason for this is that 'many people have complaints, but they simply do not want to raise them, because of possible policing or disciplining by the institution.'

For Participant 3, this lack of provision was not just represented by the University, but also 'DSU as well', in terms of how the ISoc was supported and included fully in the life of students on campus. In addressing this, key would be 'next steps' predicated upon dialogue with senior management. Yet, for Participant 1, such steps are conditioned by the fact that the diversity offered by British Muslim students has 'upheld the good PR for DMU.' Thus, in moving an authentically inclusive agenda forward, this participant stressed the importance of dialogue between different groups of Muslim students. Such dialogue mattered because

> I think DMU would be very surprised to find out how dissatisfied our experience has been, it's not just the prayer facilities, which is the bare minimum, but I think there's nothing really to enhance, to enhance our student experience other than just coming in to campus, going to our lessons, and going to the prayer room.

6. Discussion

The findings from this research reveal a complex terrain of being and belonging within the university context, and a range of ways in which the first-year, British Muslim student experience is both shaped and experienced. This impacts the stories that the University can tell about itself, in relation to the student experience as a whole, and also in relation to EDI work. It also impacts stories that Muslim students set free within the institution, about their experiences and how those might be enriched. This idea of stories and storytelling has a rich connection with ideas of critical theory, but it also situates narratives and experiences alongside cultures and practices from the perspective of indigeneity, decoloniality and relationality (Andreotti 2021).

The complexity and rich range of experiences of first-year, British Muslim students was highlighted in the survey findings. These elevated a deep intention and intentionality to feel and live a Muslim identity, within the institution. The survey results show that *being* Muslim helped inform the decision to pursue higher education (Mubarak 2007). The respondents mentioned the importance of choosing a university that enables their engagement with their faith and provides the facilities they need for this, to support well-being (Iqbal and Modood 2023; Javaid *et al*. 2024). Another important factor is the context of diversity and proximity, and the local availability of a Muslim community. Respondents across the interviews also stated that they find comfort in the diversity of the University and more broadly in Leicester, as a 'welcoming and friendly environment'.

In this, certain anchor points were crucial, including: the availability of the Prayer Room, the role of the Imam and the Islamic Society; the large capacity of the Prayer Room, access to the *Quran*, and the breathing space; and, the opportunity to engage with faith-based activities, including *Jummah* Prayers and Ramadan *Iftar*. Thus, participants highlighted a relationality to themselves, enacted through their faith and relationship to Islam, and also in demonstrating care for their communities.

However, for some, this was a very visible enactment, for instance, as a female Muslim student. For others, it was more hidden, in particular where those same groups of female Muslim students did not, visibly, conform to stereotypes (Chaudry 2020). The interviews also revealed a sense of some students policing their behaviour, precisely because of their visibility (Osman, 2025). Here, we are reminded that Allen (2023, p. 178) concludes that women are more likely to experience Islamophobia, through a range of 'gendered manifestations' of through the interactions of visibility and vulnerability. It may be that the significant engagement in this research of female students as participants and advisers, brings this element to the fore. One issue to consider for future research, is how to engage, more fully, with male, Muslim students, mindful that student engagement in institutional research projects is increasingly problematic.

This sense of being was emergent for first-year students, as a mode of becoming and transitioning to a deepened sense of faith, inside a space that demanded more independence from them. In this way, some were clearly able to articulate a desire to challenge misconceptions. This was also highlighted in the interviews, where, in particular,

engagement in the Prayer Room and Islamic Society were pivotal moments in deepening faith, and also challenging stereotypes. Crucially, in both the interviews and surveys, the availability of Muslim-friendly spaces, like the Prayer Room, and the role of the Imam, enabled a feeling of being at home in the University, even if this was seen as adjacent to the institution. Yet, as identified by Alam and Chaudry (2025) at the University of Bradford, this is also a selling point for the University.

Being at home inside particular spaces, framed by culture and practice, was central to the student adviser focus group, which highlighted that the relationship between the University and its Muslim students needed work (Guest *et al.* 2020). In particular, some spaces, like the Food Village, and some practices, like the lack of appropriately-certified, halal food, tended to be more alienating. For the focus group participants, this was amplified by the lack of prayer room facilities across different buildings on the campus, which disrupted engagement in the curriculum. This echoed findings from the survey, in which students reported: first, that they felt comfortable in Islam-friendly spaces, such as in walking through Leicester or the campus, given the diversity of the population; and second, that they also felt less comfortable in curriculum-related spaces, like classrooms.

Learning and teaching was identified as an area of concern. The curriculum, and the classroom spaces of the curriculum, alongside the ability to access student support that wraps around the curriculum, were complicated for these British Muslim students (Gholami 2024). In the interviews, students highlighted the importance of individual academic and professional services' staff in supporting their learning, but were not clear that this was generalised across the staff as a whole. Moreover, this was reflected for some in the ways in which the timing of block teaching impacted their ability to undertake *Salah* (prayers), even though this only required a short break, and to live through their faith.

For many British Muslim respondents this means that they have to choose between their engagement with their education or practicing their faith in the facilities provided. In addition to this, despite the availability of the prayer room facility, perceptions of its closure on weekends creates a barrier for Muslim students who need to engage with the library resources and who feel that they have to compromise on *Salah*. This suggests that further communication and support to enable the engagement with intercultural encounters can help make them feel included and more confident to engage academically. The ways in which teaching and learning were timetabled, and the lack of appropriate timetabling around Ramadan, called into question the institutions focus upon supporting diversity and inclusivity through equality in curriculum design, delivery and assessment.

As a result, there is a sense that certain spaces are Muslim-friendly, but these are adjacent or tangential to the core of the student experience, in learning and teaching (*ibid.*). This means that some students have to undertake more emotional and cognitive work, in order to navigate the secular assumptions of the timetable, placement opportunities, engagement with student support, group work, assessment deadlines, and so on. This low level of engagement with academic support services requires further investigation but can possibly be due to limited understanding of how to navigate these and/or lack of confidence, or problems in managing academic workload with other personal commitments. This can also be due to difficulties in managing time, and in balancing academic workload and other job

commitments. Here, Kauser et al. (2021) demonstrate that racially minoritised students are less likely to seek support and more likely to use cope alone/get-by strategies.

Understanding this in more detail impacts issues of retention (Hall *et al.* 2025). This is especially relevant to our British Muslim student participants, as most of them identified as ethnically minoritised. This is also amplified across all methods, where staff are reported as lacking religious literacy, or the motivation to support students in prayer, because of their own assumptions or projections. Aligning with the findings of the Loughborough University-Aziz Foundation project investigating Muslim student and staff lived experiences, this calls for much more development work in relation to faith (Arshad *et al.* 2025). It makes clear that the secular content of the curriculum, which might be accessed in multiple ways, appears to be more important than the faith-based and spiritual content of an individual student's life. Here, there is a need for the University to consider how, whilst its spaces might be open and inclusive, the cultures and practices that wrap around those spaces deny inclusion and equality for some.

Focus group participants felt this was important in ensuring that they did not feel conditional inside the University, and would not have to do compromise, or even self-police, their being and doing on-campus. Building faith-rich cultures across institutions, grounded in dignity and respect, emerge as crucial components of an authentic religious literacy (Islam 2020; Malik and Wykes 2018). This enacts ways of developing relationality and belonging, perhaps described as bonding capital (Mellor 2010). Here, survey outcomes highlight how an authentic belonging in particular, Muslim-friendly spaces, enable these students to breathe, in order that they can then find the energy to engage again in other, less-friendly cultures and practices.

In spite of this, it is important to centre the reality that was raised by interviewees, about pushing beyond simply satisfied settling, and becoming independent through a richness of relations with themselves, their communities, and their faith. Throughout the research process, the research journals highlighted the importance of developing and deepening relationality, grounded in explicit values. There was awareness about the negative representation of Muslim people in the media (Ali and Whitham 2018; Chaudry 2020), which participants attempt to challenge through their day-to-day practices by adopting Islamic values of kindness, respect, and caring for the community. Of course, this carries an additional emotional and psychological component, beyond the practical, secular barriers faced by these students as they navigate *deen* and *dunya*.

In the focus group, participants connected this to the idea of co-creating the research is a participative endeavour, predicated upon legitimacy, authenticity, identity, and voice. These four words feel crucial in understanding the findings of this research, and the ways in which they feed into an institution's engagement with religious literacy, as a critical engagement with the question: what is to be done? This question is complicated, because of low participation rates within the institution, and in particular low engagement by Muslim students who identify as male. Whether this points to issues of voice and agency, or trust in institutions not to police or surveil (Abbas *et al.* 2023; Chaudry 2022), or a more general disengagement needs further analysis.

That said, engaging with this question is fundamental, because throughout this research, participants highlighted a deep, personal, familial, communal set of motivations to enrich their lives. For some, this was connected to student outcomes. For others, there was a deep connection with family and faith, and a sense that belonging would be enriched inside a diverse and inclusive city and University. It must be remembered that for many of these participants, Leicester was their home before DMU became their institution of choice. In fact, the choice of DMU was often predicated upon a sense that it was known, safe, and communal.

We might, then, describe this in relation to 'satisfied settling' where '(Muslim) students have justified (unconsciously) not having access to a richer and more fulfilled university experience in relation to religious needs' (Islam et al., 2019, p. 94). Beyond this, our participants identified finding a welcoming community in this university space, which creates a sense of comfort, especially in comparison to previous experiences in school and college. Yet, they also identified a need for generative, institutional intentionality to be widened beyond the Prayer Room and Islamic Society. This might be realised, for instance, in the institution and De Montfort Student Union creating opportunities and activities to that are culturally-relevant to British Muslim students.

In this we explicitly connect our work to that of Alam and Chaudry (2025), in their project at the University of Bradford on countering Islamophobia on campus. Alam and Chaudry emphasise the differential experiences of risk on campus for Muslims, which feeds though into issues of trust, voice and resilience for individuals and in-community. At DMU, our student participants highlighted a desire for partnerships to might encourage a full range of students to socialise with and to engage in activities beyond their classroom learning, as part of their university experience, as an act of critical hope (Dinerstein 2015; Islam 2024).

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

Space for voice and authentic dialogue remains an integral issue within the findings of this project. In analysing the experiences of Muslim participants across the surveys, interviews, focus group (and in a subsequent symposium), the movement from 'satisfied settling' to more critical engagement was notable. Participants' confidence in speaking about authentic experiences and feelings emerged in safer, co-created spaces, as opposed within the more traditional data collection methods of surveys and interviews. This is the power of insider-research infused with a critical, autoethnographic reflexivity and sensibility.

In this, although the project was designed to offer safe space for uncovering Muslimness amongst first-year British Muslim students, for some of our participants, this was the first opportunity they had to reflect deeply and authentically on their identity. As a result, the feeling of 'satisfied settling' was prevalent throughout the majority of their reported experiences, but was challenged over time. For the advisers, there were reflections on change and the confidence to express a desire for agency. There is a clear shift in language from the start of the project to the end, with the focus group discussions representing a refreshing movement from asking to demanding change.

This suggests that opportunities for student co-creation, as intended with role of the student advisers, made space for voices to be heard in more critical and nuanced ways. This is reflected particularly in the findings of the focus group (and subsequent, internally-funded symposium), in which there was a clear shift beyond 'satisfied settling', (much more visible in the survey and interviews) to more generative and forthcoming discussions on the ways in which the institution needs to do better (focus groups and symposium outputs). Unfolding self-awareness and personal growth was felt and seen through such spaces in which co-creational dialogue was encouraged.

Dialogue within and across institutions is a critical way in which British Muslim students can enrich our understanding of the student experience, beyond a normative or reductive sense of identity. This matters because this Aziz Foundation-DMU audit has shown the range of ways in which that experience is shaped. Working with this reality helps the institution expand its repertoire of stories about itself, in particular given its focus upon EDI and decolonising. Such an expansion would act as a celebration of being and becoming inside the institution, and extend the physical and psychological warmth and safety of the Prayer Room across the fabric of the institution.

We are especially mindful here of the ways in which this project and its outcomes map across to the other two institutional projects funded in partnership with the Aziz Foundation, at the universities of Bradford and Loughborough (Alam and Chaudry 2025; Arshad *et al.* 2025). In both cases, we see connections in relation to culture change, faith-based literacy, and the differential ways in which inclusion and belonging were experienced. Connecting with these important projects, the DMU findings emphasise the need to go beyond performativity, in order to develop a 'more expansive and committed approach toward dismantling the machinery and design of Islamophobia' (Alam and Chaudry 2025, p. 59).

In this, there is clearly work to be done on the spaces and infrastructure of the institution, to ensure that it is Muslim-friendly. However, there is also work to be done culturally and practically, to ensure that in a society that faces increasing pressures from far-right ideas and ideologues, the University can continue to be seen as authentically representing the needs of its British Muslim students. This includes the ways in which it supports those who are very visible, for instance female Muslim students, in moving beyond any sense of vulnerability in the institution. Again, where the institution can help those students who are transitioning to a deepened sense of faith, or who are seeking to understand their engagement with their faith, to challenge misconceptions and celebrate their identities, this can only enrich the stories of the institution.

Here, it is helpful to move beyond the idea that the University is a single institution or a monolith, and instead to consider it as an ecosystem. In so doing, it becomes possible to see how the Prayer Room, DSU, Food Village and the core institution might work together in dialogue, to ensure that British Muslim students feel comfortable and at-home, beyond 'satisfied settling'. Crucially, this will involve academic and professional services' staff, in thinking about their religious literacy, and in ensuring that the secular assumptions traditionally imposed by higher education institutions do not force the students to choose between faith and study. Engaging with a renewed religious and faith-based literacy has the potential to impact issues of retention, progression, awarding and outcomes, predicated upon dignity and respect.

7.1 Project recommendations

1. **Religious literacy**: ensuring that all staff are aware of the ways in which faith interacts with academia to create a more nuanced identity is important. This should be factored into the Post-Graduate Certificate in Empowering Education, and the work of the DMU Education Academy, and, crucially, in developmental offerings to professional services' staff. The religious community should play a central role in shaping these developmental offerings. This is especially important at key times of celebration, like Ramadan and Eid. Here, institution-wide communications should be used, with reminders that the Imam is available to discuss impacts and possibilities. CPD and communications should be co-created with the Imam, as well as Muslim staff and students. In building such faith-based literacy, the place of Islamic celebrations and role models/news, in institutional communications needs to be addressed.

2. **Prayer Spaces**: DMU is a diverse institution. It must consider its approach to prayer spaces, to address issues like: ensuring that students are aware that the DMU Prayer Room on campus is open during evenings and weekends to current students and staff to offer their mandatory congregational prayer timetable; and, key support services and facilities, like the library, having dedicated spaces for prayer. Other institutional communication channels might also highlight the importance of Prayer Rooms, for instance, at open days. Additionally, to invest in future engagement with the Muslim student community at DMU, we recommend that future expansion of the campus or campus-based capital projects should ensure that faith provision is built into the designs. We recognise that having more local prayer spaces would require appropriate facilities in each building otherwise they would not be suitable. Moreover, this may also compromise

numbers in the main prayer room in Portland, where current facilities are fit for purpose. Possibly, having a reflection room in the library available to all faiths is an option, especially during exam period for the late night and early hours of the days. This should be discussed.

3. **Faith and study**: it is important that the curriculum and the timetable reflect the needs of British Muslim students to pray, with an understanding that this has differential effects at different times of the academic year (e.g., in Winter when prayer time is short). Having more local prayer spaces would help. Although block delivery works for some students, 3 hour classes significantly impact prayer times, especially in Winter. At this time, during afternoons, breaks at appropriate times for prayers (including at Ramadan) would be beneficial.

4. **Assessments and reasonable, faith-based adjustments:** assessments and exams that fall on Eid day, or demands from academic staff that students attend on Eid, creates Islamophobic tensions for some students. Staff need to make reasonable, faith-based adjustments, as with other protected characteristics, or students need to be reassured that prayer times can be adjusted to ensure no detrimental impact on attendance and attainment. For example, sometimes extensions to assessments in Ramadan do not work, because ten days extension will largely still affect students who spend the last ten days in heavy worship and then have Eid celebrations.

5. **Curriculum development:** productive work with the DMU Education Academy should focus on how faith-based perspectives inform EDI-adjacent initiatives like decolonising (for example, in embedding intersectionality beyond race and ethnicity), and those focused on student voice and belonging. This should also include support for teams in implementing more Islamic Muslim perspectives into programme and module content (e.g., in professional programmes like law and accountancy/finance). This might also include further opportunities with DMU's partner institutions and DMU Global, to engage students from diverse cultures with a worldwide audience. In this, co-creation work can centre student agency and developing authentic critical dialogue with the institution.
6. **Student well-being**: student-facing services and personal tutoring practices should consider how to understand and support the wellbeing of British Muslim students across their student experience, including the responsibilities and systems that these students have to navigate, in balancing *Deen* and education. We recognise that the Imam works closely with the Healthy DMU team to build relationships, including through referrals.

7. **Dialogue with established Muslim agencies**: a number of students highlighted the positive role of the Imam, Prayer Room and ISoc. The University might engage in positive dialogue with these agencies, for instance in contributing to *iftars* (which have a huge impact on home students who have moved away, and on international students).

8. **DSU/ISoc relationship**: students highlighted a wish for more integration of their ISoc/Prayer Room experience with other student societies, including the DSU. This will include support for an appropriate, collaborative approach to be taken towards Muslim

student experience of freshers' week and inductions. Here, Muslim-friendly events would include an appraisal of events that were free of alcohol, and where halal-certified food was available.

9. **Halal food**: the University should discuss with food providers the provision of more inclusive, Muslim-friendly options, including in more stringent labelling of Halal, or sourcing local Halal food such as HMC-certified. This should be in partnership with students and staff who require this as part of their religious diet.

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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Survey questions

Muslim Friendly Universities Audit

Informed Consent

You have been invited to take part in a research study which aims to develop a better understanding of how British Muslim, first-year students experience their Muslimness in HE spaces. Higher Education spaces refers to the physical, and virtual environments and the institutional system in place within which you study.

You have been chosen to participate in this research as someone who identifies as a British Muslim first year undergraduate student at DMU. The purpose of this study is to consider how universities can enhance their engagement with the richness of British Muslim student identities.

This survey is structured into 2 key stages. The first collects some demographic information from you, so that we know whose voices are represented within the study and can explore intersectional relationships within the data. The second seeks your experiences and perspectives as a first-year British Muslim student, to explore the factors that impact your lived experience on campus.

Your engagement with this research is very valuable to the University, and will help us to improve student experience for the wider Muslim community at DMU, and future students.

It is important to understand, however, that your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any point before completing the survey, without giving a reason. Unfortunately, as the survey is anonymous, once you have submitted your responses it will not be possible to remove your data from the study. Please note any quotes from your responses to this survey will **always** be anonymised so that you cannot be identified.

By reading the following statements and continuing to the survey, you give the project team consent to use the data you provide.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point in the study, but any data I have shared up until this point cannot be removed.
- I agree that non-identifiable quotes may be used in publications, presentations and further data collection.
- I agree to the focus group being digitally audio recorded.
- I understand that by participating in the focus group I will keep other participants' identities anonymous and their experiences confidential to protect them from any harm.
- I understand that data collected during the study will only be looked at by the research team.
- The data will be stored on DMU FigShare, a secure online repository for research data. It will be held for a maximum of 6 years, at which point it will be deleted.

About You

1. Faculty of study *
    - Art, Design and Humanities
    - Business and Law
    - Computing, Engineering and Media
    - Health and Life Sciences

2. Religious Belief *
    - Muslim
    - No religion
    - Buddhist
    - Christian
    - Christian - Church of Scotland
    - Christian - Roman Catholic
    - Christian - Presbyterian Church in Ireland
    - Christian - Church of Ireland
    - Christian - Methodist Church in Ireland
    - Christian - Other denomination
    - Hindu
    - Jewish
    - Pagan
    - Sikh
    - Any other religion or belief
    - Prefer not to say

3. Gender
    - Male
    - Female
    - Other
    - Prefer not to say

4. Ethnicity*
    - Indian
    - Pakistani
    - Bangladeshi
    - Chinese
    - Any other Asian background
    - Caribbean
    - African
    - Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background
    - White and Black Caribbean
    - White and Black African
    - White and Asian
    - Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background
    - White English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British
    - Irish
    - Gypsy or Irish Traveller
    - Roma
    - Any other White background
    - Arab

- Any other ethnic group
- Prefer not to say

5. Disability status *
   - Learning difference such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D
   - Social/communication conditions such as a speech and language impairment or an autistic spectrum condition
   - Long-term illness or health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, or epilepsy
   - Mental health condition, challenge or disorder, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety
   - Physical impairment (a condition that substantially limits one or more basic physical activities such as walking, climbing stairs, lifting or carrying)
   - D/deaf or have a hearing impairment
   - Blind or have a visual impairment uncorrected by glasses
   - Development condition that you have had since childhood which affects motor, cognitive, social and emotional skills, and speech and language
   - No known impairment, health condition or learning difference
   - An impairment, health condition or learning difference not listed above
   - Prefer not to say

6. Sexual Orientation *
   - Bisexual
   - Gay or lesbian
   - Heterosexual or straight
   - Other sexual orientation
   - Prefer not to say

7. Where are you living during your first year of study? *
   - University-maintained property
   - Private halls
   - Parental/guardian home
   - Other rented accommodation
   - Own residence
   - Other

8. Have you joined an Islamic Society? *
   - Yes
   - No
   - I plan to

9. Do you use the Prayer Room? *
   - Yes
   - No
   - I plan to

Your University Experience

10. The following section of this survey will ask you to consider how comfortable you feel being yourself, as a British Muslim student, in different situations across your University experience. Please rate your comfort level for each. *

	Not at all comfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Comfortable	Very Comfortable
In your accommodation	○	○	○	○
Walking around campus	○	○	○	○
In the Student's Union	○	○	○	○
In the library	○	○	○	○
In the Food Village	○	○	○	○
In the Prayer Room	○	○	○	○
In lecture theatres and classrooms	○	○	○	○
Socialising with other students	○	○	○	○
Engaging in Lectures/Seminars/Workshops	○	○	○	○
Making time to practice your faith on campus	○	○	○	○
Participating in social activities beyond the classroom	○	○	○	○
Accessing support for your learning and development	○	○	○	○

11. Would you like to share any specific examples relating to your responses above?

12. Did being British Muslim impact your choices when applying to study at university? Such as the course of study, or university you attend? *

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

13. Would you like to tell us more about your choice to study at university?

14. What does it mean to you to be a British Muslim at University? *

15. Is there anything that we haven't asked you about your experience of your Muslimness as a first-year student that you would like to share?

Appendix B: Interview prompt sheet

Date:

Time:

Participant:

Student adviser interviewer:

Intro Checklist:

Confirm that the participants have received and read the participant information sheet.	
Confirm that the participants have signed the consent form.	
Confirm that the participants are ok with being audio-recorded.	
Remind the participants that they can skip any questions they are not comfortable answering.	
Remind the participants that their data will be stored safely, they will remain anonymous and their identity will not be revealed at any point.	
Offer the chance for the participants to ask any questions before you start the interview.	
Inform the participant that you are about to start the recording and start it.	

Warm-up prompt:

Why did you choose to participate in the interview?
Notes:

Interview Questions:

1. Take a moment to think back on the time when you were applying to university. **What qualities were you looking for in an institution and its campus**?

Possible prompts around:

1. Why **did you choose to come to DMU?** Did **Open Days influence** your choice?
2. Did University or local **Islamic facilities and services influence your choice**?

2. Do you think that **your Muslim identity has impacted your student experience** since you arrived at DMU in October? If it has impacted you in your first term, in what ways?

3. Do you think that coming to **university has impacted your religious practices**? If so, in what ways?

4. Do you feel that **you have to act a certain way within university spaces** because of how others might see you as a Muslim?

Possible prompts around:

1. Some students mentioned that they consider themselves as **representatives of Islam**. What do you think about this?
2. **Staying strong in faith/deen away from home**
3. **Challenging misconceptions of Islam**

5. Can you tell me about your experience of **balancing your education with your religious practice**?

Possible prompts around:

1**. Opportunities experienced on campus** to support them, e.g., ISoc, Prayer Room, student services

2. **Challenges** faced on campus

6. In your experience so far, **have you felt acknowledged and supported** as a Muslim at DMU? Please think about this **both within your course** and **wider campus engagement.**

Possible prompts around:

1. **ways to improve** the British Muslim student experience
2. **whether your experience meets your expectations**
3. How do you think the university could **support you in maintaining your religious practices while managing academic responsibilities**?

7. Finally, is there anything about your experience of DMU, as a British Muslim student, that we haven't asked you about that you would like to share?

General prompt questions:

1. Could you provide an example of…
2. What do you mean by ….
3. Can you expand on ….
4. How did that make you feel?
5. How did you respond to this?

Closing the interview:

Remember to thank the participants for their time and contribution	
Confirm that the participants know that they have 2 weeks to decide if they wanted to withdraw by emailing Richard (contact details in the PIS).	
Ask them if they wanted to comment on anything related to the interview.	
Remind participant of the resources and support available for them if needed (see PIS).	
We will have a symposium on the 4th of June to discuss what can we suggest for the university or to co-create a strategy together and we want to know if	

it is something you'd be interested in participating in, you will get one day worth of payment.	

Post interview:

After the interview take 5 minutes to reflect on how it went, possible questions to consider:

1. **What was the atmosphere like during the interview?**

2. **Is there anything that the participant has said that you find interesting**

3. **Is there anything that the participant has said that you find surprising?**

Appendix C: Focus group questions

For the focus group, the researcher conducting the session will make a personal research memo noting the atmosphere in the room, the distribution of participants within the space, any specific non-verbal cues that may be of analytical significance and an initial summary of the discussion.

Initial Warm-up question

- Following yesterday's symposium, what reflections do you have on the event and the discussions held? What stood out for you?

Part One – Project Outcomes

Themes arising from the study will be summarised and shared with the Student Advisers the day before at the project symposium. They will also be given a physical copy at the beginning of the focus group.

- How do you relate to the emerging themes from the study?
    - Do they resonate with your own first-year experiences?
    - Is there anything that does not reflect your experience?
    - Is there anything missing from your own experiences?
- What do you feel are the key themes from the study? What is most important to share?
- How do you reflect upon the outcomes of the project for students, staff and the University?

Part Two – Research Experience

- What are your reflections on the approach taken to engaging British Muslim first-year students in this research?
- What do you feel were the main challenges and successes for the research team, and particularly for yourselves as Student Advisers, in this project?

Thinking about what motivated you to engage in this project, what do you feel you have personally gained from your engagement with the study?

Appendix D: Research journal prompts

Positionality statement. To begin the research journal exercise, we will each write a reflexive position statement, introducing ourselves as researchers and contemplating how we arrive at this study – the identities we bring, our prior experience and our insider/outsider status. You may wish to refer to the Decolonising DMU guide on Positionality and Position Statements to support this.

For each of the remaining stages of reflection, a series of prompt questions will be offered to support the reflexive process, organised under themes that have been loosely aligned with project activity.

Motivations

- What motivated you to engage in this project about the experiences of British Muslim first-year students?
- Why is this project important to you?
- What do you aim to achieve through your engagement in this work?
- What would you like to gain personally from the experience?

Methods 1

- How are we making methodological choices, and what are the implications for the study?
- What do you feel the main challenges are for the research team in this project?
- What do you feel are the main opportunities for the research team in this project?
- How might you locate yourself in relation to the intended participants of this study? How might they view you and your role in the research?

Analysis 1

- How do you relate to the emerging themes from the survey? Can you see your own experiences reflected in them? In what ways does your experience differ?
- How are your relationships (within the research team and with the participants) influencing the research?
- What do you feel are the main challenges for the University emerging from this project?
- What do you feel are the main opportunities for the University emerging from this project?

Methods 2

- How are we making methodological choices, and what are the implications for the study?
- What do you feel the main challenges are for the research team in this project?
- How are your relationships (within the research team and with the participants) influence the research? What power dynamics are at play?

- How do you relate to the wider environment within which this study is taking place? How does your perspective on it influence the research?

Analysis 2

- How do you relate to the emerging themes from the focus groups?
- How are your relationships (within the research team and with the participants) influencing the research?
- What do you feel are the main challenges for the University emerging from this project?
- What do you feel are the main opportunities for the University emerging from this project?

Dissemination

- What do you feel are the key themes from the study? What is most important to share?
- What do you feel are the main challenges for the University emerging from this project?
- What do you feel are the main opportunities for the University emerging from this project?

Final Reflections

- How do you reflect upon the approach that this project took to engaging British Muslim first-year students?
- How do you reflect upon the outcomes of the project for students, staff and the University?
- What do you feel you have personally gained from your engagement with the study?

Appendix E: Job description for Student Advisers

	Duties of the role
Overall purpose of the role	Working with The Aziz Foundation, De Montfort University is undertaking an audit that focuses upon the wider, student experience of British Muslim, first-year undergraduate students at the University. The primary intention is to understand how these students experience their Muslimness in higher education spaces. The project team is seeking to recruit four British Muslim Students, who are in their second-year of study at De Montfort University, as student advisers to the project. These advisers will act as research assistants to help in the authentic planning of fieldwork, supporting recruitment, and peer review and dissemination of outputs.
Main duties and responsibilities	• You will engage in project team meetings to help plan the survey that will be available to first-year British Muslim Students at De Montfort University. • You will support the recruitment of first-year British Muslim Students for an audit that focuses upon their student experience at De Montfort University. • Building on the survey, you will support the recruitment of eligible students for one of two focus groups that will explore how these students experience their Muslimness at De Montfort University. • You will help peer review projects outputs, including conference presentations, briefing papers for academic staff and University leaders, an action plan for the University, and a final project report. • You will engage in relevant training and development, alongside mentoring opportunities, in order to develop your project management, research and dissemination skills. • Perform any other duties commensurate with the job grade as reasonably required from time to time. • Treat all DMU staff, students, contractors and visitors with dignity and respect. Provide a service that complies with the Equality Act 2010, eliminating unlawful discrimination, advancing equality of opportunity and fostering good relations with particular attention to the protected characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief (or none), sex and sexual orientation. • All members of staff are responsible for their contribution to improved environmental performance and in reducing greenhouse gas emissions at DMU. It is therefore required that all members of staff are aware of how the Environmental Policy relates to their own

	Duties of the role
	role at the University. Staff conduct must reflect the values inherent in the Environmental Policy and where required staff must cooperate with environmental compliance and conformance requirements to help minimise our emissions to air, water and land. • The postholder should have a positive attitude towards health and safety, and be aware of and comply with all health and safety policies for the university, as applicable. There will be a requirement to complete all mandatory health and safety training as deemed to be relevant for the position held. The postholder is expected to help maintain a safe working environment for staff, students and visitors by working closely with the local safety coordinator as required. Any accidents or dangerous incidents must be reported promptly through the university's reporting system.
Skills and experience	• Please note that full training will be provided in relation to public speaking and engagement, and there will be support available in the form of mentoring. • This student adviser role is open to any De Montfort University, second-year Muslim student with British nationality. You must be interested in supporting the first-year British Muslim student experience, through reflection on your own experience. • This is an opportunity to help develop skills and experience in relation to research and evaluation of the student experience, and the dissemination of findings. • You must be self-motivated and have excellent spoken English. • You must have a strong commitment to inclusive team-working.

Appendix F: Person specification for Student Advisers

Area of responsibility	Requirements	Essential or desirable				
				A	I	D
Academic Background	British Muslim student enrolled on the second year of a De Montfort University undergraduate programme.	Essential		✓		✓
	Have a good understanding of the British Muslim student experience in higher education.	Essential		✓	✓	
	Experience of contributing to group-work as part of undergraduate work.		Desirable	✓	✓	
Knowledge / Skills / Abilities	Ability to network effectively with first-year undergraduate students to promote research initiatives	Essential			✓	
	Ability to communicate research findings with a range of different audiences		Desirable	✓	✓	
	Ability to reflect on the personal experience of a project.		Desirable			
Planning and organisation	Good organisational and administrative skills, including liaising with the project team	Essential		✓		
	Ability and experience of working to deadlines.	Essential		✓		
	Ability to work effectively in a team to achieve the goals of the project.	Essential		✓	✓	
Other	Be committed to equality and diversity within the workplace and across the research project.	Essential		✓	✓	
	Willingness to develop own skills as a student adviser.	Essential		✓		

Suggested reference: Hall, R., Ansley, L., Loonat, S. and Nemouchi, L. (2025) Being and Becoming: British Muslim Students' First-Year Journeys in Higher Education. Leicester: The Aziz Foundation and De Montfort University