

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



Vice-Chancellor's GENDER EQUALITY FUND Final Report 2022

Report Title:

*Muslim women's experiences of
tertiary education at Western
Sydney University: A student
perspective*

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Recommendations

1. *Co-design with students, academics and the Centre for Western Sydney a Muslim student handbook as a resource for students that includes information about the Muslim Student Association, food outlets, chaplaincy, and general information about the university.*
2. *University/School/Cluster Academic Muslim liaison to support Muslim students across the university. The role would be occupied by an academic who self-identifies as Muslim.*
3. *Cultural competence/sensitivity (Specific to CALD populations and Muslim students – given the number of Muslim students at Western) training for staff*
4. *Publish an article in the 2024 Future Maker's magazine*

Executive Summary

The project explored the experiences of Muslim Women as students at Western Sydney University (WSU). A qualitative methodological approach guided the project and was considered well suited to a study such as this as it aimed to explore Muslim women as students experiences of tertiary education as WSU.

Data were collected through a simple open-ended survey. Demographic data was also obtained such as age, year of study, first in family status, marital status, prior study/degree and cultural background. Overall, 57 students completed the survey with 8 students providing open ended responses.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis and four themes emerged; **Welcoming and friendly environment: Facilitators to learning, being Muslim, challenges to learning and a way forward.** The majority of participants acknowledged the inclusive and welcoming environment at Western which enabled and facilitated learning, however there was also a sense of exclusion felt among other participants, necessitating a change to be more culturally sensitive to the needs of Muslim students.

Muslim students have additional needs compared to non-Muslim students which needs to be accommodated and performed. There needs to be an increased awareness of Islamic holidays, such as Ramadan and Eid. Therefore, an increased understanding amongst staff and students can be a source of comfort and support for Muslim students during important Islamic celebrations and commitments.

Research Report

Over the past few years there has been an increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse students in higher education programs worldwide. Like the society that surrounds them, universities as institutions have to adapt themselves continuously to a changing environment, including a religiously diverse one. Muslim students transition to tertiary education is not a streamline process as many face religious obligations that could impact on their acculturation to university life. Cole and Ahmadi (2010) argued that helping students to develop and maintain a religious identity could have a positive effect on student outcomes (Closely aligned to the TEQSA Good Practice Guidelines 1, 2, 3 & 8). However, there is often anxiety among Muslim students about the stereotypes that are attached to Muslim identities that may affect a student's academic performance (Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006). But this can also result in students distancing themselves socially, resulting in them feeling a disconnection from the university community and the university as a whole. Steele's (1997) research also supports this through his work on stereotype threat. He argued that when a student perceives his or her group to be regarded as inferior, academic performance can suffer.

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In this literature review, there were some studies conducted in Muslim countries. However, limited scholarly attention was given to the needs of Muslim students in Western countries and none in the Australian context. Some of the overarching themes and issues explored include discrimination, religious accommodation and inclusiveness, socio-cultural and religious barriers, as well as modesty which are discussed below.

In addressing racism and discrimination, Pharris (2008) argues that Islamic dress codes are often regarded in the West as a form of oppression for women; however, she also notes that the wearing of the veil is a context-specific activity and can also be a means of resisting predominant oppressive and discriminatory practices in the nursing context (page 66). Pharris uses the case study of Sheena who was a nursing student and a patient complained of her smelling like 'curry' while that was not true (page 87). Aziz (2001) also addresses racism and discrimination by sharing a personal anecdote where she was asked by a coordinator in her clinical trials during her undergraduate degree if she was going to wear *that* with her uniform. The coordinator was referring to the woman's hijab. This made the author feel very discriminated against and vulnerable. To resolve such issues that may arise in the nursing context, Clarke, and Saleh (2019) apply the critical race and feminism discourse to illustrate how wearing the hijab can be a point of resistance for female Muslim nursing students.

In an Australian study conducted on the experiences of Muslim students in tertiary education conducted by Asmar, it was found that Muslim women wearing the hijab were concerned about discrimination both on campus and off campus due to their visibility (Asmar, 2001) (Asmar, 2004). Some women also felt spotlighted by teaching staff due to their religious garments and if they refused to shake hands with the opposite gender (Asmar, Proude, Inge (2004)). The national survey also asked Muslim students whether they felt valued at university and only 23% women agreed that they felt valued at university, (Asmar, Proude, Inge (2004)).

Muslim women also noted the lack of adequate dedicated prayer facilities (Asmar, 2004). This finding emphasised the importance of providing both formal and informal

support for Muslim women in the tertiary sector. A study conducted by Possamai et al. (2016a, 2016b) also found that female students reported a higher level of discrimination. These findings are also consistent with the recent Islamophobia in Australia III report, which reports that the majority of victims of Islamophobia are women. (Iner, 2019).

Significance

The current literature to date has explored Muslim student's experiences of tertiary education in the United Kingdom and Canada. Little research has explored female Muslim students' experiences of tertiary education in Australia especially in Western Sydney, which is the region that most of our students reside in. The proposed research project will add to the body of literature and fill in the gap. It is anticipated findings from the project will inform university policies and guidelines to support and foster learning, inclusivity and cultural cohesion for female Muslim students.

Research question

What are the experiences of Muslim Women as students at Western Sydney University?

Methodological design

A qualitative methodological approach informed the study. This refers to the knowledge or meaning that an individual creates of their world (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Qualitative research is grounded upon the assumption that meaning can only be formulated through our engagement with the world (Crotty, 1998: Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A qualitative approach is well suited to a study such as this as it aimed to explore in-depth Muslim women as students experiences of studying at WSU.

Data were collected through a simple open-ended survey. Demographic data was also obtained such as age, year of study, first in family status, marital status, prior study/degree and cultural background. Overall, 57 students completed the survey with 8 students providing open ended responses.

Findings

Data were analysed using thematic analysis that related to students' experiences of studying at Western Sydney University.

Welcoming and friendly environment: Facilitators to learning

The majority of participants had a positive experience at Western. Students felt included and comfortable in a supportive environment.

“There haven't been any drawbacks, which I'm glad about because I think that western culture gives you this nonstereotypical experience where you feel comfortable studying and being on campus. As a female Muslim student, I think it's been a great experience where everyone is friendly and nice and you feel welcomed to actually communicate with other cultures”.

“I've been a student at Western for about 4 years, and I can vouch for the amazing and caring staff and peers who will work with you until you receive the support you need. I feel like my interactions with Western have improved from when I first arrived to now because I am now more outgoing, have a voice with the staff, and am making friends and getting along with other students”.

Being Muslim

Studying at WSU and being a Muslim came with ease for many participants. The culture at Western was accepting, participants did not feel the need to conceal their identities.

“When I interact with staff, students, and friends as a Muslim girl, I feel like it just demonstrates how people accept and welcome me. I have come to realise that my personality really affects how people will interact with me as an individual. I don't conceal because I'm proud to be Muslim, and to a point, hiding my identity just means I'm hiding myself from reality. Sometimes, you have to face challenges in order to become a better version of yourself”.

WSU is quite supportive of Muslim culture as each campus via MSA as well as prayer rooms in all campuses. The diversity of students throughout the campuses makes it all more inclusive.

We live in a world where Muslims are persecuted, but Western is a place where stereotypes and racism don't really exist. I respect and value Western for its work in helping me develop a strong sense of self-awareness and appreciation within myself.

Challenges to learning

Some students experienced a sense of hesitancy from academics to engage with them as a result of their religious orientation.

“Friendly for the most part, however sometimes I feel like I am just viewed as my religion and not a full person”.

A way forward

Some participants had recommendations for Western to be inclusive and responsive to cultural beliefs and practices.

“More cultural exhibits with Western culture would be a good idea, in my opinion, as they don't really exist. People often praise Western culture for its multiculturalism and sense of community, but I believe that this is something that should always be on display, not just during special occasions. Another suggestion is to make Muslims more aware of the locations of prayer rooms, which aren't always well-marked or equipped with signs that would let people know where they are especially first years within having that sense of belonging with knowing they are connected somewhere here”.

Conclusions

Muslim women as students felt studying at Western as a supportive and welcoming environment. Often, students were able to practice their beliefs and were treated equally and inclusively. At times, there was a sense of hesitancy from academics due to their religiosity. The Muslim Student Association was a safe space for women to retreat and practice their beliefs. Muslim students have additional needs compared to non-Muslim

students which needs to be accommodated and performed. There needs to be an increased awareness of Islamic holidays, such as Ramadan and Eid. Therefore, an increased understanding amongst staff and students can be a source of comfort and support for Muslim students during important Islamic celebrations and commitments.

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Appendix

Link to the survey link

https://surveyswesternsydney.au1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1MIsMxhsLRv

[YruS](#)