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# Islam and Muslims on UK University Campuses: perceptions and challenges

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Both documents stand independently, yet are best understood and used as complementary to each other. The report includes far more analysis of our national survey of students, and addresses policy recommendations more directly; the book includes a more multi-faceted account of our findings, covering a wider range of themes in much more depth. We are extremely grateful to these two research councils for supporting this work: the grant has made it possible for us to collect, analyse and curate the two largest set sets available on this topic in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales at the time of writing.

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# Foreword

In the first two decades of the 21st Century, Muslims have become the principal focus of racial and religious discrimination in the UK. The years since 9/11 have seen a persistent association of Islam with terrorism, exacerbated by the 7/7 bombings in London and subsequent attacks, and a growing Islamophobia has been driven by fear, suspicion and prejudice. Grassroots discrimination echoes the racism of the 1970s and 80s. However, this time, it is reinforced by a series of government policies that address so-called 'radicalisation'. These claim to be wide-ranging but nevertheless increase the stigmatisation of Muslims as narrow-minded, culturally alien and prone to violence, and have been recently identified as negatively impacting civic space, human rights and fundamental freedoms (OHCHR, 2019).

A potential force against this rising trend of Islamophobia has been universities. Higher Education in the UK has a long tradition of promoting critical thinking, ethical responsibility and political empowerment. UK universities have also been significant champions of the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity that has increasingly characterised British life in recent decades. University campuses are typically diverse places, and the experiences of community fostered there can often be much more integrated and inclusive than many of Britain's towns and cities. Unsurprisingly then, many young adults who make up the bulk of university students tend to be more open-minded about, and more comfortable with, cultural diversity than the general population, a pattern reaffirmed by this report.

Despite this image of university life as a haven of progressive thinking, universities' capacity to provide a welcome place for Muslims has, in recent years, been called into question. The UK government's Prevent Strategy, reinforced by the 2015 Counter Terrorism and Security Act, has made it mandatory for all public bodies, including universities, to attend to the risk of 'radicalisation'. As the research included in this report clearly shows, this has worrying consequences for Muslims and many other young people within the higher education sector.

This was the context in which *Re/presenting Islam on Campus*, a major research project led by Professor Alison Scott-Baumann, with Professor Mathew Guest, Dr Shuruq Naguib, Dr Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor and Dr Aisha Phoenix, was undertaken between 2015 and 2018. We felt that the developments described above called urgently for a fresh examination of how ideas about Islam and perceptions of Muslims emerge in universities within the United Kingdom. Much has been said and published about Islam, Muslims and universities, but very little of it has drawn on reliable evidence that is representative of the HE sector.

This report offers the first cross-sector examination of how Muslims are viewed, treated and subjected to processes of inclusion and exclusion within UK universities; it also examines how Muslims themselves view life on UK campuses. It focuses on their experiences of university and on how they are viewed by non-Muslim students. We show clearly that the status of Islam within the UK's universities is framed not just by the experiences of Muslims themselves, but also by the ways in which Muslims are perceived and treated by their peers. Within the context of the coronavirus pandemic, and its disproportionate impact on black and minority ethnic individuals, along with the persistent racism highlighted by Black Lives Matter, the injustices experienced by minority groups have become even more apparent, such as the experiences of British Muslim NHS doctors, nurses and carers. Our evidence explains how unequal treatment can stigmatise individuals and groups.

Our research has revealed much harmony and good practice, some excellent Islamic Studies teaching and warm, sincere interfaith initiatives. However, we also found a great deal of misinformation and misunderstanding. Living in an age of 'post-truth', 'fake news' and an increasing dependence on social media as an arena for political engagement, the risks of misrepresentation are arguably more serious than ever before. The case for evidence-based policy making is therefore especially urgent. We believe this report will serve as a helpful contribution to this process, not least in illuminating patterns of prejudice and in its practical proposals for change, which build on the considerable strengths already represented across the HE sector.

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1. A more substantial treatment of the findings emerging from this project will appear in Scott-Baumann et al, *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*, to be published by Oxford University Press in 2020.

# 1. Executive Summary

## 1. ISLAM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA ON CAMPUS

1.1 Most students view Muslims in a generally positive way, recognising their positive contribution to British society and moral integrity; however, a minority remain ambivalent about Islam as a religious tradition, and have negative views that resonate with stereotypical representations of Islam as intolerant of outsiders and discriminating against women.

1.2 Muslim students are more likely than Christian students to see their religion as core to their identity; they are also more likely than Christian students to see the purpose of universities and the values of faith as compatible, with a quarter saying they have become more religious since they started university.

1.3 While the majority of students view universities as benign institutions that encourage respect for those of different cultural backgrounds, Muslim students, both male and female, often have a different experience; for some, their clothing and general appearance appears to make them objects of suspicion.

1.4 Much of the discrimination and prejudice experienced by Muslims on university campuses is shaped by distinctive assumptions about Muslim men and Muslim women. University management and teaching staff are not always aware of the gendered experiences of Muslims on campus.

### Recommendations:

**1a. Universities need to foster greater awareness among staff and students about Islamophobia: its expression, flawed bases and real consequences for Muslim communities. Universities could begin to address this issue by integrating consideration of overt and less obvious forms of Islamophobia into training about unconscious bias for staff and students.**

**1b. University complaints procedures must make it very clear that those concerned about Islamophobia and associated forms of discrimination or harassment can raise issues with confidence and that they will be listened to and supported.**

**1c. Universities' commitment to equality must include explicit recognition of discrimination based on religious visibility, which takes different forms when directed at men and women.**

## 2. SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS COHESION ON CAMPUS

2.1 The vast majority of students agree that the experience of university encourages respect and mutual understanding among people who have different perspectives on life. Correspondingly, non-Muslim students indicate that they have learnt much from working with and befriending Muslim students, and value those experiences.

2.3 Students see personal interfaith contact as an effective antidote to discriminatory sources of information on Islam such as found in some elements of the mass media.

2.4 Despite widespread positive orientations towards Islam and interfaith relations, we also found clear evidence of unconscious bias, casual racism and explicit discrimination on some university campuses.

2.5 Muslim students are keenly aware of their minority status and of the vulnerabilities that come with it. It is unsurprising, therefore, that they are more likely than Christian or non-religious students to see anti-discrimination measures as more important than unlimited freedom of expression.

### Recommendations:

**2a. University managers should prioritise consultation with students in building programmes intended to promote understanding and respect of religious and cultural differences.**

**2b. Inter-faith activities are important as sources of campus cohesion, especially within religiously and culturally diverse contexts. Organisers need to be mindful of how practical decisions (e.g. concerning representation on discussion panels or use of language in promotional material) may inadvertently reaffirm shared stereotypes about different faith traditions.**

**2c. There should be Muslim student and staff representation on university equality and diversity committees and at chaplaincies wherever possible, as well as increased consultation with Muslims about faith-based provision, e.g. prayer spaces and dietary requirements.**

### 3. RADICALISATION AND FREE SPEECH ON CAMPUS

3.1 'Radicalisation' is commonly understood by university students and staff to refer to Islam; they also associate the UK government's Prevent Strategy first and foremost with Islamic extremism.

3.2 Staff and students across a range of religions and beliefs expressed concern about Prevent, particularly the dangers of reinforcing negative stereotypes of Muslims and encouraging a culture of mutual surveillance on university campuses.

3.3 Among the majority of students, Prevent has only limited visibility within their experience of university. Among those students who are familiar with Prevent, learning about it via their university is strongly associated with viewing Prevent as damaging to university life.

3.4 A significant proportion of those students who claimed no awareness of Prevent nevertheless expressed a view on it; many said they agreed that it was essential to university life; this reinforces qualitative findings suggesting issues of counter-terrorism elicit strong views even when respondents acknowledge limited direct knowledge or awareness of the issues.

3.5 Among students, belief that radicalisation is a problem across UK universities and agreement that Prevent is essential in tackling it are both strongly associated with negative views of Islam and Muslims. In the light of this it must be asked whether government policy on counter-terrorism is helping to maintain negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims and to encourage Islamophobia.

3.6 Prevent appears to have the effect of discouraging free speech within universities. Students and staff tend to self-censor their discussions to avoid becoming the object of suspicion and are sometimes discouraged from exploring, researching or teaching about Islam, especially when linked to terrorism, fundamentalism or military conflict. Therefore, Prevent has the doubly damaging effect of sustaining negative stereotypes *and* disabling the mechanisms universities have for subjecting such stereotypes to critical scrutiny.

#### Recommendations:

**3a. As a feature of university life that appears to have a material impact on the maintenance of civil liberties, students and staff should be consulted about Prevent and about the ways in which it is being implemented at their university.**

**3b. Clear expert guidance must be available to protect freedom of expression in a way that takes account of context and subject matter e.g. differences between legality and offensiveness.**

**3c. Freedom of expression, while core to university life, does not occur in a vacuum, nor within a context in which all groups are treated equally. In light of the heightened vulnerability of Muslims as a minority, we recommend free and frank debate about religion be encouraged, but alongside the principle of mutual respect. Securing freedom of speech within universities requires that all groups feel free and safe to speak from their own perspective *and* are confident that they will be heard.**

**3d. We recommend that universities re-affirm their existing strengths in critical thinking to encourage open debate about all forms of ideology – political and religious – especially when relevant to current systems of national and international governance. Moreover, we recommend that Prevent, if deployed within universities, be done so openly, critically and with sensitivity to local circumstances. It is our contention that this would enrich interfaith dialogue, university education, and social cohesion in campus contexts.**

#### 4. KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION

4.1 More than half of all students acknowledge having a limited, little or no knowledge of Islam. When asked where they get their knowledge from, friends and family, school and the media are especially significant.

4.2 Where students get their knowledge makes a difference to the opinions they form about Islam. It is those who draw most on media and university who affirm the highest levels of agreement with negative statements about Islam and Muslims. The influence of the university experience on the formation of student attitudes therefore demands closer attention.

4.3 Islamic Studies broadly defined constitutes a cross-disciplinary endeavour that occupies a variety of academic fields and adopts a variety of approaches to the study of Islam. However, some of these essentialize Islam and Muslims, resulting in a presentation of both that is reductive, simplistic and ill-equipped to address wider patterns of stereotyping and prejudice.

4.4 Islamic Studies is a male-dominated discipline: the majority of academics in this area are male and their work is referenced more than that of women academics.

4.5 Those teaching Islamic Studies at universities and private Islamic colleges have the expertise and the willingness to strengthen, expand and enrich the study of Islam and can help address and minimise misunderstandings about Islam, but this expertise is underused within the HE sector.

#### Recommendations:

**4a. Islamic Studies should continue to be developed in dialogue with a range of other disciplines, fostering reflexivity and a criticality that takes matters of faith seriously, while engaging with a decolonising discourse in Higher Education.**

**4b. Islamic Studies as a broad subject area would benefit from critical and respectful dialogue as well as collaboration between scholars of Islam based in different institutional contexts, including Islamic colleges. University-based study of Islam will be strengthened by taking seriously the breadth of experience and knowledge represented by these specialist institutions.**

**4c. Women academics in Islamic Studies need support to prosper, through reciprocal mentoring and career guidance, and effective Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policies that recognise the distinctive challenges they face.**

**4d. Islamic colleges should be invited to support mainstream universities in improving understanding of Islam and Muslims among staff and students.**

## 2. Context: Islam and Muslims in UK Universities

There are more than 230,000 Muslims studying at UK universities, around 8-9% of the total student population.<sup>2</sup> They are distributed across the 140 or so higher education institutions in the UK, studying a variety of subjects. Most are home students – British Muslims – although a small proportion – around 1 in 10 – are from elsewhere in the world. Given the number of Muslim citizens within the UK today – roughly 5% of the total population<sup>3</sup> – this means they are somewhat over-represented within universities, a fact that is unsurprising given the relatively lower average age of the Muslim population.<sup>4</sup> With further inward migration, international student recruitment and expansion of British Muslim families, we can expect the number of Muslim students to grow. They are already the second largest religious constituency after Christians, but arguably have a much more visible profile. Indeed, recent changes in the ways Muslims are viewed in the UK generally, and in higher education in particular, demand that their status and experience within the university sector be scrutinised with a fresh perspective.

This report is based on research undertaken as part of the Re/presenting Islam on Campus project (2015-18), which explored how Islam is understood and experienced on UK higher education campuses, and which was driven by a desire to understand the status of Islam and Muslims in a climate of increasing Islamophobia. In this sense it is about the drivers of prejudice and the social forces that contest it. It is also about asking what kinds of places universities are. Our research takes seriously the capacity

of universities to shape social values, both within and outside of the classroom. Ideas associated with religion in general – and Islam in particular – are especially revealing in this respect, because they illuminate the extent to which universities embody values frequently claimed to be at the heart of their purpose, not least critical thinking and cultural inclusivity. The ways in which universities treat Islam as an idea, and Muslims as a religious minority, shed light on how successful they are in achieving some of their principal goals.

Recent research has highlighted a diversity of orientations to religion across UK universities (e.g. Aune and Stevenson 2017; Guest et al 2013; Weller et al 2011). Some of this is long established: the Christian tradition embedded in the life of many older, elite institutions (especially Oxbridge) is starkly contrasted with the inner-city red brick universities like Manchester, Bristol and Leeds, which were founded in partial response to the needs of the industrial age, some on an explicitly secular basis. The presence of chapels and chaplains in universities has mirrored the residue of a British Christianity that is gradually fading from the cultural landscape, and some newer universities include barely any acknowledgement of religion within their institutional structures or academic programmes. But as the secularisation of the academy gathered momentum over the course of the 20th century, apparently leaving only vestiges of Christianity in the architectural and ceremonial traditions of a few older universities, a different trend also emerged, driven by several important factors.

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2. This is an estimate, based on a combination of figures drawn from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and our own national survey. According to HESA, during the 2016-17 academic year, there were 2,729,530 students at universities across the UK. Our own project survey, conducted during the same academic year, found 8.9% of students self-identify as Muslim (based on data weighted according to external measures drawn from the Office for National Statistics). Figures gathered together by Advance-HE, covering a large portion of the HE sector during the same year, produced a figure of 8.43%. In acknowledgement that our own figure may be slightly inflated by self-selection bias, we have compromised at a figure closer to the Advance-HE measure: 8.5%. 8.5% of 2,729,530 is 232,010.
  3. According to figures collected by the 2011 Census of England and Wales, the 2011 Scottish Census, and the 2011 Census in Northern Ireland, there were 2,786,635 Muslims living in the UK, or 4.4% of the overall population. See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religioninenglandandwales2011/2012-12-11> (England and Wales); <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/People/Equality/Equalities/DataGrid/Religion/RelPopMig> (Scotland); and <http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Theme.aspx?themeNumber=136&themeName=Census%202011> (Northern Ireland) [accessed 8/1/19]
  4. According to figures collected by the 2011 Census of England and Wales, the age profile of the Muslim population is both younger than the overall population and younger than that of all other religious groups and those of 'no religion'. 48.4% of Muslims were aged 24 and under, compared with a total population figure of 30.7%, while only 4% were over 65, compared with 16.5% of the total population of England and Wales. Comparisons with 2001 census data demonstrate that the Muslim population is also getting younger over time. See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/fullstorywhatdoesthecensustellusaboutreligionin2011/2013-05-16> [accessed 30/1/19]

Patterns of immigration since the Second World War, especially from the Indian subcontinent, increased the religious diversity of the UK population, and as migrating families became established and more economically mobile, so their children and grandchildren sought opportunities in higher education. By the 1980s, government cuts left universities with a greater incentive to recruit students from elsewhere in the world, who would pay higher, international tuition fees, a trend accelerated with the further marketisation of higher education in subsequent years. These demographic shifts in the student population meant universities were faced with the need to serve a constituency for whom religion was more important than it was thought to be for the pre-existing student body. After the turn of the 21st century, the value of religious inclusivity was reinforced with new legislation. The Equality Act (2010) named 'religion and belief' as one of nine 'protected characteristics': identity markers protected from discrimination. Legally obliged to ensure religious people were not discriminated against, and hence appropriately provided for, student support at universities (including chaplaincy) has seen an extension of provision to take account of these needs (Aune et al 2019). In a somewhat less benign vein, the Counter Terrorism and Security Act (2015) introduced a requirement that all public bodies have 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.'<sup>5</sup> Widespread alarm about radical Islam – especially in the wake of the 7/7 attacks and subsequent crimes committed by men and women acting in the name of Islam – has meant compliance with the government's counter-radicalisation 'Prevent' strategy has focused disproportionately on Muslims (Busher et al 2017; Holmwood and O'Toole 2018). The fact that a small number of these perpetrators have been existing or former university students has been used to justify the heightened scrutiny of Islam within university contexts.

### **The wider context of rising Islamophobia**

Islamophobia is commonly understood to be a form of intolerance and discrimination motivated by fear, mistrust or hatred of Islam and Muslims (or those believed to be Muslims) because of their Muslim identity (or perceived Muslim identity). It has been strongly associated in some discussions with forms of racism, being apparently influenced in many cases by prejudice based on skin colour, clothing or other visible markers of difference (APPG on British Muslims 2018; Runnymede Trust, 2017). Many sources report an increase in Islamophobia in Britain in recent years, linked to a heightened fear of and hostility to Muslims since 9/11, and particularly the London bombings on 7/7 (Doward and Hinsliff 2004; Kundnani 2006). Reviewing a series of public opinion polls between 1988 and 2006, Clive Field detects this as a pattern before 2001, but one that has been heightened in recent years in response to a series of terrorist attacks – some on British soil – attributed to Islamic extremists. For example, the proportion of the population viewing all or most Muslims as terrorists or terrorist sympathisers doubled – to around 1 in 5 – in the two years following the events of 7/7. (Field 2007: 465) This period has also coincided with a rise in support for far-right campaign groups who present themselves as defending 'British values' against a dangerous Muslim community who are intolerant of outsiders, oppressive towards women and inclined towards religious fanaticism (Busher 2015). This tendency to differentiate 'Islam' from 'British values' has been reinforced in recent legislation and policy documents (Richardson 2015). For example, the revised (2011) Prevent Strategy defines 'extremism' as 'the active opposition to fundamental British values'. Given the common association of 'extremism' with Muslim terrorists in the public imagination, it is not difficult to see how this might reinforce the messages promoted by far right groups that oppose Islam by presenting Muslims as outside of the norms of British culture as they see it.

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5. See [https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2015/9780111133309/pdfs/ukdsiod\\_9780111133309\\_en.pdf](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2015/9780111133309/pdfs/ukdsiod_9780111133309_en.pdf) (accessed 21/5/20)

## Religion on campus: from irrelevance to risk

Within this context, religion within universities has undergone a shift, from being perceived by many as an irrelevance or oddity to being perceived as an object of risk. And as government and media rhetoric has heightened perceptions of an 'enemy within', reinforcing a narrative of suspicion about British Muslims and the religion they follow, so universities have become prime sites for a new securitisation of religion and its regulation within public spaces. Our research revealed strong evidence of positive interfaith relations and understanding across campuses, especially among students. However, there is also evidence that the increasing Islamophobia found in wider British culture is also present and pervasive on campus, as observed in a recent report on Muslim Students in Higher Education (Stevenson, 2018). The report highlights that Muslim students experience a range of offences on campus, which often go unacknowledged and unchallenged. As a result, university campuses can be hostile environments for Muslim students, especially those with visible religious identities.

Attempts to monitor the behaviour of Muslims on UK campuses – both by government agencies and by university management – have included some interventions that reinforce a general perception that freedom of speech and freedom of religion are being infringed. The banning of particular speakers from university campuses, the modification of teaching content, and interventions into the activity of student societies, all on the grounds of the Prevent guidelines, exacerbate frustrations among those who wish to preserve the university as a space for free and frank debate, and those who feel they cannot fully engage with campus life because of their faith or beliefs (Scott-Baumann and Perfect 2020).

Much of the ensuing – often heated – public debate about freedom of speech and campus life is marred by alarmist, unsubstantiated claims, and by popular prejudice stoked by tabloid newspapers and social media. The interventions of politicians have rarely been balanced or informed by strong evidence either, often reinforcing a moral panic that presents Muslims as nascent terrorists and university campuses as sites for their radicalisation. This situation is doubly problematic: it is a problem for

Muslims who are unfairly judged and stereotyped, and it is a problem for universities, whose reputation for open, critical thinking and cultural inclusivity has been thrown into crisis. If the alarmist rhetoric is to be believed, not only do we have a national problem with radical Islam; we also have universities that are incapable of calling out flawed thinking and no longer provide students with the critical tools to challenge prejudice and misinformation.

It is these patterns, and their impact on the lives of Muslim students, that are our concern in this report. How is Islam and how are Muslims perceived within universities? And how do universities provide environments in which prevalent assumptions or stereotypes can be expressed, reinforced or challenged? In order to focus our enquiry, we chose three of the perceived contrasts that are most often associated with Islam among non-Muslims, particularly within claims that Muslims fall outside of the norms of British society. These have been translated into three main themes, linked to three stereotypical portrayals of Islam. These themes are radicalisation (the presumption of a propensity to violence); inter-religious relations (the presumption of intolerance towards non-Muslims); and gender (the presumption of misogyny and gender-based oppression). Our aim has been to explore how expressions of prejudice are rooted in perceptions of national identity, which in turn are used to justify acts of exclusion. In very simple terms, how are Muslims constructed as a homogenous group, one often defined in contrast to 'British culture', and then, once falsely identified as such, how are emerging prejudices handled within university contexts? More positively, what do successful attempts to contest such claims look like? When is higher education most effective at combatting them? We pick up this issue in our final section, which includes recommendations that might be taken up by the Higher Education sector.

## 3. Methods

The Re/presenting Islam on Campus project was based on two phases of data collection during the academic year 2016-17: one qualitative and case study based, and one based on a national questionnaire survey. Interviews and focus groups were held with 253 staff and students at HE institutions across the UK. These included 4 very different universities in very different environments, and 2 Muslim colleges, which offer degree programmes within an institutional context with an Islamic character. Our aim was to offer an evidence-based portrait that took account of the breadth of Higher Education within the UK, particularly as this influences the experiences of Muslim students. This breadth was then reinforced with a national questionnaire survey, completed by 2,022 students attending 132 universities across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

### The student survey

We commissioned a national survey of more than 2,000 (N=2,022) students, their distribution across 132 of the UK's registered universities ensuring a spread that covers the variety of the student experience in the UK. The survey was administered by the independent survey company YouthSight, which specialises in professional data collection on issues concerning the lives of young people. The survey was administered in June-July 2017, making use of a quota sampling system in order to ensure a response that was representative of the larger student population in terms of degree level, gender, ethnic diversity and university type. In framing this process, we used known distributions of student demographics obtained from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Survey data were also weighted after collection to correct for any outstanding imbalance in the sample.<sup>6</sup>

The responding sample includes undergraduates and postgraduate students; home, EU and international students. Each respondent completed an online questionnaire and did so anonymously. They answered questions about their attitudes towards university life, free speech, the purpose of higher education, religion in general and Islam in particular, and were asked about their own identities, including in terms of gender, ethnicity and religion. The questionnaire was developed by the project team, in consultation with Youthsight and our

statistical consultant Dr Tarek Al Baghal. It was trialled within two pilot study focus groups of students at two very different universities (neither of which was used as a case study in the larger project). In the main survey, Muslim students were deliberately over-sampled (N=200) in order to ensure a large enough subgroup to allow meaningful statistical analysis. Most of the questions featured in the questionnaire were multi-choice, in order to ensure comparability with related studies and facilitate a statistical analysis of a national picture of student life.

This survey data provides us with the first nation-wide picture of how Muslims experience UK university life and how their non-Muslim peers view them. Its scale allows us to make claims that encompass the entire HE sector and its representativeness means we can have some confidence that its status as an evidence base is strong. However, working at a national level has its limitations; important localised variations can be missed and there are certain kinds of questions that are simply not answerable using survey evidence. We can find out how many Muslim students live away from home during university term time, for example, but we cannot easily identify *why* this might be the case. The first question is a matter of fact and is uncontroversial and not especially sensitive. The second may evoke issues of gender roles, family relationships, or economic dependency that individuals may, quite understandably, not wish to disclose. They also might feel that this issue is impossible to reduce to a single factor or set of factors, and so is not amenable to questionnaire responses that request a tick in a convenient box. In order to get answers to such questions, we need to use different research methods.

### Interviews and focus groups

It is for this reason that, at certain points in this report, we turn away from our survey findings and instead appeal to our qualitative data for insight. This was collected during the 2016-17 academic year via extended one-to-one interviews and focus groups with 253 staff and students at six higher education institutions. The resulting 140 hours of recorded conversations were fully transcribed and analysed for dominant themes and patterns. In order to collect these data, each case study institution was visited for a period of two weeks by two members of the

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6. See the appendix for more details on how the survey sample reflects demographic patterns in the national student population.

project team, who undertook participant observation at a range of events and meetings at which the status of Islam and Muslims was especially pertinent.

The six case studies represent a range of universities and colleges that broadly mirror the variety across the UK HE sector, taking into account institutional history, subject coverage, geographical location and differential presence of Islam as a feature of academic programmes and Muslims as a constituency of the campus population. To this limited extent, the case studies represent the wider sector. In order to gather rich data on the experiences of Muslims, our qualitative sample is deliberately biased in favour of this population in two significant ways. First, we recruited disproportionately high numbers of Muslim staff and students to take part in interviews and focus groups (so that they made up roughly 30% of participants on each university case study). This enabled us to capture a range of Muslim experiences and also reflects our decision to include one Muslim-only student focus group

on each campus. Second, in addition to four diverse universities, we conducted research at two HE colleges of a Muslim character. This enabled us to capture the experiences of those working and studying at specialist institutions oriented towards the study of Islam and organised around the needs of Muslim students. These colleges also included aspects of the study of Islam as an academic endeavour not represented within mainstream universities, and so enabled us to piece together a more comprehensive picture of academic provision in this field.

Each case study institution has been disguised in order to protect the identities of their staff and students and so that all felt able to speak to us openly about views on sensitive or controversial topics. The pseudonyms we used for each case study are listed in table 3.1 below, which also includes the demographic profile of the entire qualitative data sample, incorporating both interviewees and focus group participants.

Campus	Staff	Student	Male	Female	Muslim	Non-Muslim	Total
Central University	17	30	23	23	14	33	47
Heritage University	17	26	19	23	15	29	44
Citywide University	20	17	15	21	14	23	37
Greenfield Campus	17	34	30	21	17	34	51
Olive Tree College	11	20	16	15	30	1	31
City Muslim College	18	25	21	16	37	6	43
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>253</b>

**Table 3.1:** Demographic profile of the qualitative sample, by case study institution.<sup>7</sup>

7. The table includes the raw 'N' numbers, which include a small number of discrepancies (due, for example, to participants identifying as gender non-binary). The final 253 figure represents 253 unique individuals who took part in interviews and focus groups; a small number took part in both.

'Central' is an urban university established in the early twentieth century. It has a culturally diverse and international student and staff composition. 'Heritage University' is also urban, a very old and prestigious university that sees itself as secular and yet has a well-resourced faith centre. 'Citywide' is an urban post-1992 university where one third of the students are white and there is no chaplaincy provision. 'Greenfield' is a rural campus amalgamated from colleges existing since the mid-19th century. There are both international and local white working-class students and a well-resourced chaplaincy centre. The majority of Muslims in the UK and around the world follow the Sunni branch of Islam, with a minority of Shi'a Muslims (Degli Esposti and Scott-Baumann 2019). Our two Muslim colleges reflect each of these traditions. 'City Muslim College' is an urban, mainly Shi'a college with both international and local students, some distance learning provision and curricula that are both traditional and modern. 'Olive Tree College' is rural and mainly Sunni, welcoming students who have undertaken the traditional seminary training (*Darul uloom*) and providing curricula that interrogate both ancient and modern Islam. Both Muslim colleges welcome those of other faiths but are predominantly populated by Muslim staff and students.

The conversations that ensued were invaluable to this research because they permitted complex answers to difficult questions. It was in interviews and focus groups that personal attitudes and experiences could be unpacked and explored in detail and excerpts from these are included throughout this report.<sup>8</sup> Our body of qualitative data is also helpful in illuminating patterns that extend beyond the student population. Our fieldwork included many conversations with staff (both academic and support staff) in addition to undergraduate and postgraduate students. In this way we hoped to build a picture of life on UK campuses that takes into account the experiences of the diverse human actors who contribute to it. In recognising the complexity of campus life, we aim to shed some light on the complexity of influences that shape the status of Islam within university contexts.

To enhance the validity of our qualitative findings, the interview and focus group data were examined from multiple perspectives. Phoenix and Cheruvallil-Contractor conducted a code-based thematic analysis of all transcripts, using NVivo 11 Pro, in order to identify patterns and areas of special interest (see also Davidson et al., 2019). Both researchers were part of the data collection process, (Phoenix being present at all six case study sites), and hence knew the data intimately. The coding results were then shared with the rest of the team for their input. In addition, Lee, who was not involved in data elicitation, drew on her expertise in computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) and offered alternative readings and interpretations of the data where appropriate.<sup>9</sup>

While setting up and conducting focus groups and interviews, we became aware that staff and students welcomed the opportunity to speak relatively freely, with the protection of anonymity, about matters that they believe to be important and also about issues that were worrying them. We also encountered students who told us they believed it was too great a risk to participate in a research project about Islam; some Muslim students in particular were anxious about being placed under surveillance as part of the government's Prevent Strategy. Including in our fieldwork informal conversations and participant observation meant we were able to capture these points of tension that were relevant to patterns of student participation and non-participation in university life.

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8. Following each quotation, in brackets, we provide demographic data about the speaker, including ethnicity, gender, religious identity, and staff/student status.

9. A much more complex and substantive analysis of the qualitative data collected for the 'Representing Islam on Campus' project is included in our forthcoming volume *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain* (OUP 2020).

## Correlating the two data sets

In the current report, we treat our two data sets – the student survey and six university case studies – as complementary. The survey provides a representative picture of the national student population's attitudes and experiences; the case studies provide insights into the lives and experiences of staff and students in ways that afford qualitative depth and nuance. The case studies also generate a three-dimensional perspective on how campuses differ as institutional contexts for work and study, and as contexts in which perceptions of Islam and Muslims are forged.

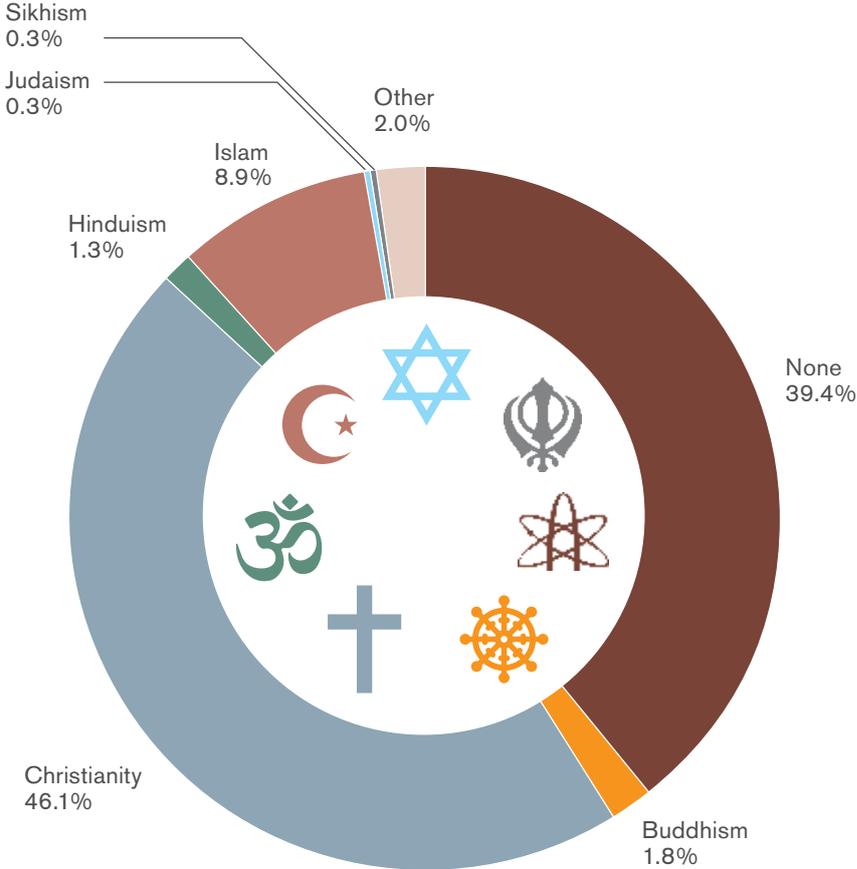
While the evidence from both data sets to some degree converge in painting the same complex picture of university life, the emerging impressions occasionally differ or diverge. This is not entirely surprising, given how a small number of case studies can only ever be representative of the whole sector to a limited degree, especially given these case studies deliberately privilege Muslim voices. In some sections of our analysis, qualitative evidence diverges from the survey because of the distinctive circumstances of particular campuses, which appear as outliers in relation to the national pattern. In other respects, the qualitative evidence appears to differ because the method of data collection enables us to explore an issue in greater depth and complexity. In these cases, the qualitative findings are used as illustrative of one particular context, explored in greater detail. Further research of a more ethnographic nature may be needed to explore these cultural patterns in greater depth; we also address several of the emerging themes in our forthcoming book *Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain*.

# 4. What is the Religious Profile of the Student Population?

This section draws on our survey data in order to build a picture of the religious profile of the national student population. Our interest is not just in how Islam is perceived across the student body, but how differences in perceptions compare across different orientations to religion. Breaking down the survey population by religion also allows us to explore how different faith positions relate to perspectives on the university experience. In this respect we are able to investigate the relationships between university life and religious identity in both directions: how religious identities inform perspectives on university, and how university experiences inform perspectives on religion.

According to our survey, well over half of all students (60.6%) registered at UK universities identify as belonging to a religion. That this is apparently higher than figures for the general UK population (48%, according to the latest available British Social Attitudes figures – Voas and Bruce 2019) is unsurprising, given that a quarter of all university students in the UK are from elsewhere in the world, many from places where religion is accorded much more importance than it currently is in the UK. For the same reason, the religious profile of the student population cannot be taken as a straightforward barometer for the future of religion in the UK. Universities mirror the wider UK context in some ways but are markedly different from it in others.

The breakdown of our survey population by religion is set out in the pie chart below.



**Chart 4.1:** Distribution of respondents to the Representing Islam on Campus survey by self-ascribed religion (2016-17 academic year).

Given most of the above categories of religious identity encompass only a very small proportion of respondents, analysis in this report mainly deals with the 3 most populous: Christianity, Islam, and 'No-religion'. This ensures statistically significant analyses, covers well over 90% of respondents, and enables a meaningful comparative analysis that includes Muslim students, our principal interest.<sup>10</sup> Given how often this 3-way comparison is made in the following pages, it is worth offering a brief portrait of each sub-group, based on our survey findings. This also allows us to base our understandings on reliable evidence, circumventing the stereotypical notions that often shape popular perceptions of religious or non-religious students, including those perpetuated by the mass media.

**Christian students:** Christian students share a common self-ascription insofar as they identify as Christian, and yet they clearly view this identity in a range of different ways. While almost 40% see themselves as 'religious', another quarter see themselves as 'not religious but spiritual', and just under a quarter see themselves as neither. Another 12% are unsure how to answer the question. This collective ambivalence is reflected in answers to the question about the place of religion in their lives, which are fairly evenly distributed between 'very important' (20.2%), 'important in different times and different contexts' (29.3%), 'generally in the background' (20.3%), 'does not feature very much' (20.2%) and 'not at all important in my life' (10.2%). Around 65% say their perspective on religion has not changed since they started university, so for the majority, at least in their own estimation, these patterns of disengagement do not appear to be linked to their university experience. The vast majority – 87% – were also raised Christian. While over a quarter engage in collective worship at least once per week, the same proportion say they never do this, while the other half are scattered along a spectrum of occasional observance in between these two poles. Some 37% engage in private prayer, worship or meditation at least weekly, but almost 30% never do. Just under 60% live away from the family home during university term time, while just over 40% live at home with their family (close

to the national figures for all students). Distribution of Christian students across degree subjects is very close to the general distribution across all students, suggesting their faith has very little to do with their motivation to study one discipline over another.<sup>11</sup>

**Muslim students:** Reflecting patterns of inward migration over the past 60 years, almost 60% of all Muslim students trace their ethnicity to the Indian sub-continent; another 7.3% are of Arab descent. More than 70% of Muslim students see themselves as religious; the figure is almost half this for Christian students, highlighting the destabilisation of the latter category as a designator of religious observance. This is reinforced in the figure of 60% for those Muslims who say religion is 'very important in my life', a figure that is only 20% among Christian students. More than 90% of Muslim students were also raised Muslim, the remainder being converts from other faiths or from a position of non-religion. More than 56% of Muslim students say their perspective on religion has stayed the same since they started university; 12.7% say they have become less religious, while just over a quarter say they have become more religious. Two thirds engage in collective prayer at least once per week; just over a third pray privately several times a day, while another quarter say they pray on their own on a daily basis. There are significant gender differences here, reflecting the tradition of treating Friday prayers as obligatory for men, but optional for women. 75.9% of male Muslim students engage in collective prayer at least weekly; the figure is 58.8% for women. Conversely, a greater proportion of Muslim women students than male students pray privately several times a day (38.1% compared to 31.3%), although figures for daily private prayer are more similar. There are higher than average representations of Muslim students in professionally-oriented degrees, especially medicine, engineering, and business and management. In reflection of much anecdotal evidence that suggests many Muslims attend their local university, according to our survey: less than a quarter live away from their family home during university term time.

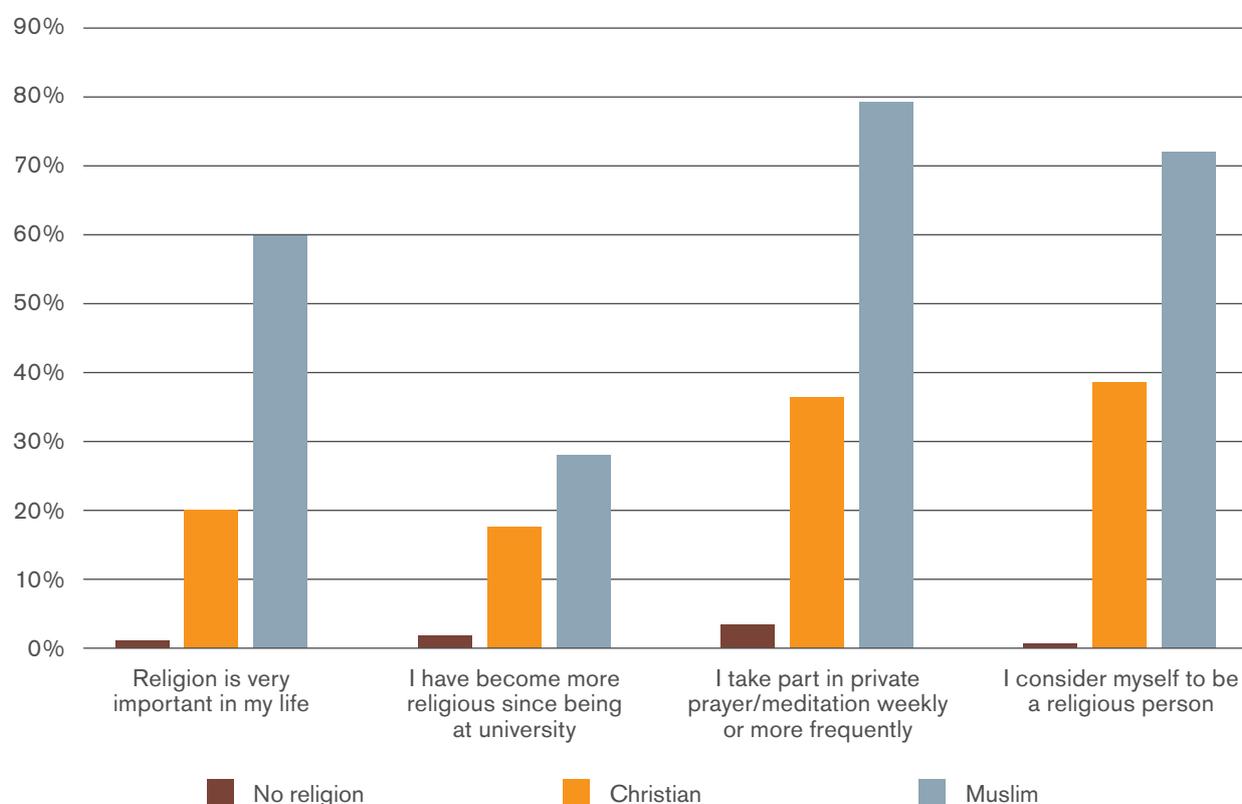
10. Research into UK campus-based religion beyond these 3 categories is not extensive. Aspects of the Jewish student experience are addressed in Sheldon 2016. For an analysis of university chaplaincy provision across faith traditions, see Aune et al 2019.

11. This profile of self-identifying Christian students is very similar to that generated by a project undertaken by Guest et al (2013) based on data collected during the 2010-11 academic year.

**Students of 'No-religion':** Unsurprisingly, students of 'no religion' are least likely to see themselves as 'religious' or 'spiritual'. Almost 75% claim to be 'neither', although the fact that almost a quarter describe themselves as 'spiritual' or are 'not sure' warns against equating this group with a hard-line secularist atheism. More than 45% of them say they were raised Christian, while most of the remainder were not raised in any religion. Almost half say religion is not at all important in their life, and another third describe religion as not featuring very much in their life. Most never take part in private prayer, worship or meditation, nor in public worship or prayer. The vast majority – more than 85% – say their perspective on religion has not changed since they started university (suggesting greater stability of perspective than among Christians or Muslims). In terms of subject area, students of 'no religion' are fairly evenly spread across the disciplines, and while there are slightly higher proportions than the average in biological sciences, physical sciences, maths and computer science, social science and law and

humanities, and slightly lower proportions within medicine, engineering, business and education, the differences are generally very small. 70% live away from the family home during university term-time, a much higher proportion than among Christians and especially Muslims.

The following analysis illustrates the value of comparing these three most populous groups when it comes to self-ascribed orientation to religion. Studies that approach student life in simple terms of the religious and non-religious are in danger of missing important subtleties in this respect. The chart below illustrates how an analysis that groups Christians and Muslims together while treating the non-religious as distinctive would miss important differences among students who align themselves with a particular faith. Simply put, Christians and Muslims express their religiosity very differently and to different degrees, and so we would expect them to relate their faith differently to the university experience.



**Chart 4.2:** Levels of agreement among students who are Christian, Muslim and of no religion to various statements about the place of religion in their lives.

The data summarised above reveal a recurring set of patterns. Muslim students are much more likely than Christian students to see religion as important in their lives, and to take part in private prayer on a regular basis. They are also much more likely to see themselves as having become more religious since they started university. Most strikingly, less than 40% of Christian students see themselves as 'religious', compared with more than 70% of Muslims, a reflection of how 'Christianity' has been destabilised as a category of identity in recent times (Guest et al 2013), no longer retaining religious significance for the majority and perhaps calling on more cultural associations instead.

Now we have set out the religious profile of students at UK universities, we can turn to patterns in the ways that religion is viewed within campus contexts.

## 5. How do Students View Religion on Campus?



“ ...from my experience... people don't really make a significant habit of talking about their own personal religion. I don't necessarily know why. It might be that they don't strongly identify with it or maybe they do and they don't want to share it. They do talk about it a bit with me, but that's because I talk about religion a lot.

(white male Christian undergraduate UK student)

So, for me, the Islam on campus is kind of invisible; that's what I'd say...I was thinking about what I say in this interview, and I was talking to a friend about it, that I don't know really what to say...and he said, 'Well, you know, the other guy we had, friends, he is a Muslim'. So, it's like, well, I didn't know... I think Islam on campus is very much like other people, and the religions don't separate into separate groups... Islam on campus is pretty integrated... It's not really a big deal that someone is of [a] certain religion.

(white male non-religious undergraduate EU student)

The UK has undergone significant religious decline over recent decades, and the view that university education removes the need for religion, or that religion could hinder advances in education, is not uncommon within university circles. According to some prominent atheist academics like Richard Dawkins, religious belief has diminished credibility nowadays because we now know more about the world; moreover, it is the job of universities to advance this knowledge. While catering to religious needs on campus is, for many, an important part of ensuring equality of provision across a diversity of students (Aune, Guest and Law 2019: 31-2), for others it is a step backwards and goes against the educational progress that universities have made. It's probably fair to say that most academics and students would not be as militant as Dawkins on this issue, and research suggests that perspectives on religion among university

managers now span a broad spectrum; however, many still voice a discomfort with religious issues (Dinham and Jones 2010). Students of faith may now be better accommodated within UK universities – in terms of campus prayer facilities, kosher or halal catering, or chaplaincy support, for example – but they still have to study alongside others who deny the compatibility of religious belief and Higher Education.

But what does the evidence tell us? How do students themselves view religion, and what place do they think it should have within the life of their university? Before we examine how they view Islam, it is useful to consider how students view religion in general. Regardless of their own faith or belief, what status do they think religion should have within the public life of the UK and in the life of the university campuses on which they study?

Taken as an element of British life, students (of all faiths or none) are more likely to see religion in general as a force of positive potential, rather than one of division, ignorance or conflict. This becomes clear when we consider responses to a series of statements featured in our survey, specifically designed to test the extent to which students consider religion to be legitimate, benign or dangerous. Respondents were asked to select their answer from a spectrum: agree strongly, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree and disagree strongly. They were asked to respond to the following four statements:

***'Religion should be solely a private matter and has no place in the public life of the UK'***

***'Religion can be an important source of moral values, even among non-religious people'***

***'Religion is based on irrational ideas and superstitions'***

***'The world would be a safer place without religion'***

The first statement is about the proper place of religion in UK society, intended to gauge levels of 'secularism' (i.e. the belief that religion has no legitimate role in public life) among students. The second statement is intended to probe views on the notion that religion might be a valuable human resource independent of whether someone has faith or not; is it recognised as having moral value, even among those sceptical about its ultimate truth or validity? This scepticism about religion is probed further with the final two statements, each gauging levels of agreement with two of the most common stereotypes associated with religion: that it is irrational or non-sensical on the one hand, or dangerous and linked to violence on the other. Responses to these statements across all students are outlined below in table 5.1.

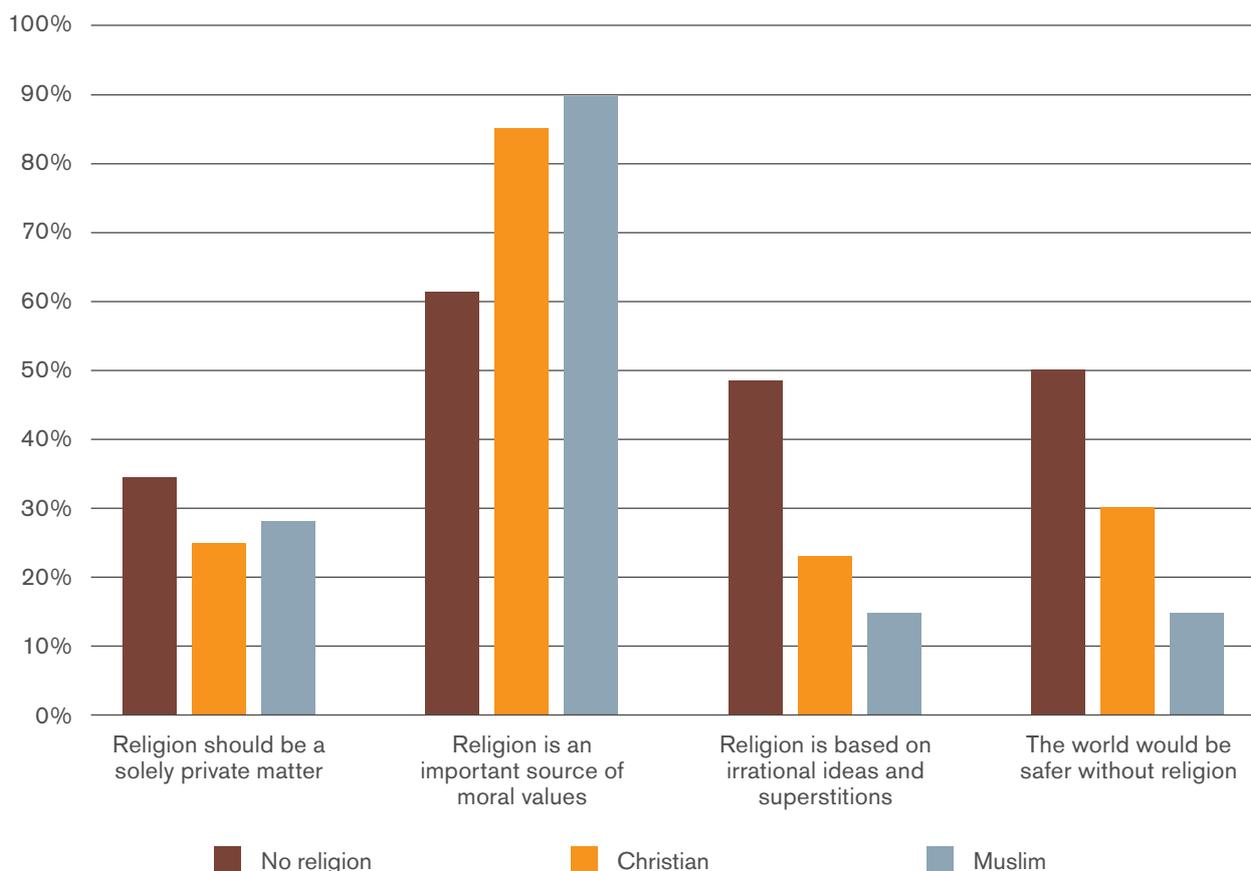
	<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>
Religion should be solely a private matter	12.0%	18.5%	25.9%	34.4%	9.2%
Religion can be an important source of moral values	22.6%	52.7%	13.5%	8.1%	3.0%
Religion is based on irrational ideas and superstitions	10.1%	22.4%	28.0%	24.8%	14.7%
The world would be a safer place without religion	15.2%	22.6%	26.9%	20.6%	14.7%

**Table 5.1:** Responses of all students to various statements about religion.

These general figures require careful handling; however, some important insights can nevertheless be drawn from the emerging patterns. The notion that religion should be a solely private matter attracts support from a minority of students, as is the case for the claims that religion is based on irrational ideas and that the world would be safer without religion. These are not insignificant minorities, and high numbers of unsure respondents (opting for 'neither agree nor disagree') warn against assuming a preponderance of clear-cut views. However, notwithstanding the higher levels of support for the fourth statement, overall, there appear to be more students inclined to a benign and socially inclusive perspective on religion than a critical, suspicious or socially excluding one. This is backed up by responses

to the second statement, which reflect a much more clear-cut majority support (over 75%) for the notion that religion can be an important source of moral values, even among non-religious people. Moreover, this sentiment appears to command strong support across Muslims, Christians and non-religious students, with only minimal dissent, suggesting we may have tapped into something core to the values of this cohort.

Responses to these statements broken down by religion (Christian, Muslim, non-religion) are set out below in chart 5.1. The figures on which the chart is based combine those agreeing and agreeing strongly into a single measure.



**Chart 5.1:** General views about religion among students, comparing Muslims, Christians, and those of no religion; based on agreement with four statements.

Comparing responses among Christians, Muslims and those of no religion reveals further interesting patterns. Taking the statement that **'Religion should be solely a private matter and has no place in the public life of the UK'**, for example, most support is found among those of no religion (34.9%), unsurprising if we assume those of no religion are less likely to support the idea of religion having a role in the public life of the country. Fewer support this statement among Christians (25.8%), while the figure is 27.1% among Muslims. So the differences are marked but not dramatic, again warning against the danger of inferring secularism from a declaration of 'no religion'. In other words, students of 'no religion' are more sceptical about religion having a place in the public life of the UK than Christians and Muslims, but support for this view is still clearly in the minority. On the other hand, the highest level of disagreement with this statement is found among the Christian students (49.6%), with Muslims at 46.4% and the 'nones' at 37.1%: higher measures, but still minority support. In sum, views on the confinement of religion to the private realm appear to vary by orientation to religion, but religious identities are by no means defined by any consensus on this issue.

The other three statements reveal a consistent pattern, with Muslims most favourable in their perspective on religion, the non-religious least, and Christian students somewhere in between. This reflects our other data that indicate Muslim students are more likely to express their Muslim identity in conventionally religious ways, see themselves as religious and see religion as important in their lives than their Christian peers (see chart 4.2 above). It also reflects previous research that suggests high levels of nominal or cultural allegiance among self-identifying Christian students (Guest et al 2013). A couple of further emerging insights are worthy of comment.

First, it is unsurprising that those supporting the contention that **'Religion is based on irrational ideas and superstitions'** are found in the largest proportion (48.3%) among the non-religious. However, more interesting are the figures of 21.4% among Christians and 15% among Muslims, which warn against assuming that religious self-identification always implies traditional theism. Within both populations, there appears to be a small but not insignificant minority affirming a nominal or cultural allegiance to their respective religious traditions.

Moreover, the lack of overwhelming support from among the non-religious (over 20% disagree with this statement) again points to a complex constituency; those agreeing are still – although only just – in the minority. On the other hand, the large difference between Muslim and Christian levels of disagreement (69.4% and 49.8% respectively) might reflect a more embedded nominalism or scepticism among British Christian students and a more prevalent view amongst Muslims that Islam is a rational religion.<sup>12</sup>

Second, views on the connection between religion and violence appear to mark a major difference between students and the wider population. Our data reveal a clear pattern of fairly dramatic escalating disagreement with the statement that **'The world would be a safer place without religion'**, with the 'nones' at 20.4%, Christians at 42.1% and Muslims at 70.6%. The converse statistics follow the same clear pattern: those agreeing among the 'nones' at 50.4%, with the figures at 30.2% for Christians and 15.5% for Muslims. Responses to a similar question used in the British Social Attitudes Survey have 74% of the non-religious agreeing that 'religions bring more conflict than peace', suggesting student 'nones' are generally less persuaded by the close association between religion and violence than the non-religious among the wider British population (Voas and Bruce 2019: 18).

### The Relationship between Faith and the University Experience

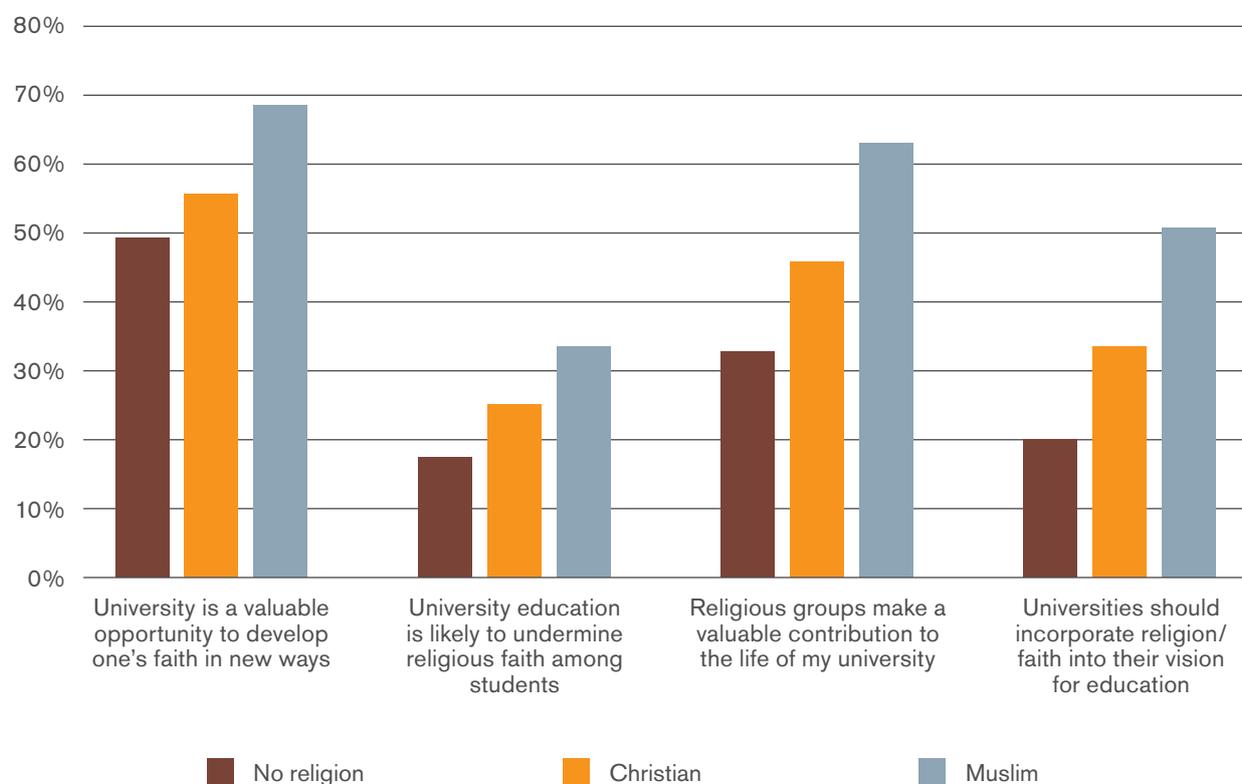
As stated earlier, Muslim students are more likely to see themselves as religious and more likely to exhibit behaviour at university that is associated with living a religious life. This is important, as it underlines the extent to which Muslims emerge as a distinctive minority. Not only are they often highly visible on account of the coincidence of ethnic identities different from the white majority, and on account of religious dress, especially among women; the faith of Muslims is also more likely to be practically affirmed in ways recognisable as such to their peers.

Something else that distinguishes Muslim students is the extent to which they appear to bring their religious identities into engagement with the experience of being at university (see chart 5.2). On the one hand, Muslims are more likely

12. This is reflected in contrasts between practising Christians and practising Muslims (measured by regularity of collective worship and private prayer respectively), with the latter expressing far higher levels of disagreement with this statement than the former.

than Christians or those of no religion to see university as having the potential to undermine faith, suggesting an anxiety about the capacity of higher education to challenge or discredit faith-based perspectives. On the other hand, far more (almost 70% of Muslim students, compared with 56.3% of Christians) see university as a valuable opportunity to develop one's faith in new ways. Muslim students are also much more likely to see religious groups as making a valuable contribution to their university (63.8%, compared with 45.1% of Christians and 33% of those of no religion). And far more Muslims are supportive of the notion that universities should incorporate religion and faith into their vision for education and the formation of the whole person. It is worth noting that, despite these variations, Christians, Muslims and those of no religion are all highly supportive of the notion that 'the experience of university should encourage critical thinking about matters of faith'. In fact,

Muslim students are the most supportive (79%, compared with 70.7% of Christians and 73.2% of 'nones'). So an enthusiasm for approaching university as an opportunity for faith development does not, at least for a significant majority, amount to any shying away from critical reflection about matters of faith. This is an important finding, as it defies a common stereotype – sometimes echoed by university teachers – that being Muslim somehow impairs students' capacity to think critically. On the contrary, Muslim students appear especially inclined to view university life and faith as both compatible and mutually enriching. Indeed, one student at Central University reflected on her experience in France and Belgium where religion is "pushed into the home" and "out of the public sphere"; by contrast, she spoke of a "high level...of debate and discussion on religious identities", which distinguished a more healthy engagement within the British university context.



**Chart 5.2:** Levels of agreement among students who are Christian, Muslim and of no religion to various statements about the place of religion within university life.

Taking into account a range of indicators, Muslim students are much more likely than their Christian peers to treat university as an experience that engages their faith, in both positive and negative ways. It is not necessarily a case of Christians or Muslims being more or less vulnerable to having their faith undermined by university, but that Muslims appear more open to seeing university through the lens of faith, and more aware of how university exerts an influence on their own expression of it.

When it comes specifically to the place of religion in universities, students in general echo the wariness towards a hard secularism that we noted earlier. When presented with the statement 'Universities are secular public spaces that function best when matters of religion and faith are excluded from them', only 31.2% agree, whereas 37.7% disagree (again, around a third opt for the middle position). When broken down by orientation to religion, curiously, almost the same proportion of Muslims and 'nones' agree with this statement (33.3% and 34.2% respectively, compared with 26.8% of Christians). There appears to be a sub-group of Muslims who, if affirming a faith, nevertheless believe it should be kept separate from university life. Reasons behind this position are unclear but might include a wariness towards on-campus Muslim groups that attract controversy, or a concern that granting religion a place on campus inevitably leads to a privileging of Christianity over Islam. However, it's also worth noting that even more Muslims disagree with this understanding of university life (37.8%), compared with 40.6% of Christians and 36.2% of 'nones'.

Some 88.1% of all students agree that 'The experience of university encourages respect and mutual understanding among people who have different perspectives on life', suggesting strong support for a benign model of higher education, encouraging mutual respect and a positive orientation to cultural pluralism.<sup>13</sup> A large majority of students appear to retain the belief that universities are centres of progressive culture fostering a benign outlook on cultural difference. On the other hand, if this suggests a significant level of support for the notion that religion is a benign presence in universities, this does not translate into support for a model of higher education that

integrates religion more concertedly. When presented with the statement 'Universities should incorporate religion and faith into their vision for education and the formation of the whole person', only 29.4% agree, while 40% disagree (yet again, around a third opt for the middle position). When broken down by religious orientation, there is an increasing pattern, moving from 'nones' (20.1% agreeing), through Christians (32.6%) to Muslims (50.5%), with the latter exhibiting by far the strongest support for the notion. The idea of a university education that integrates matters of religion and faith in a positive way clearly resonated with a large proportion of Muslim respondents, far more than among Christian students. So while there appears to be a significant consensus of support for a generally benign view of religion in higher education – it's general acceptance as a legitimate presence and acknowledgement that it brings positive benefits – this is not without limits, and most appear more wary of religion being integrated more concertedly into the aims and central purpose of universities.

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13. The figure is almost identical for Christians, Muslims and those of 'no religion'.

## 6. How do Students View Islam and Muslims?



“ ...most times, we tend to hang out with people of our own religion, and they tend to hang out with their fellow Islam brothers. But, we're all the same, everyone is entitled to the right to worship, a right to religion. So, I think, it would be unfair to take that right away from anybody, or... because another person is of a different religion, you make them bad people, I don't believe in doing that. ”

(black African female Christian undergraduate international student)

Our data suggest that almost a tenth of all UK-based university students are Muslims. However, they are not evenly distributed across the Higher Education sector, and patterns of settlement established by migrants several generations ago are to some degree mirrored in the geographical spread of Muslim students. This is because more than 70% of Muslim students choose to stay at the family home while studying for their degrees, much more than the overall national figure of 40%. This skewed picture is reinforced by the higher than average proportion of Muslim students taking certain degree programmes (e.g. medicine and law), which may lead centres of excellence in these fields to be especially popular while institutions not offering courses in these subjects are less attractive. One implication of the overall trend is that Islam and Muslims are a far more visible and influential presence in some universities than in others, with some institutions barely recruiting any Muslims at all. This is an important factor to be bear in mind as we consider national patterns, as they can sometimes obscure significant local variations that point in different directions.<sup>14</sup> With this caveat born in mind, we present below a discussion of patterns evident at the national level.

As part of the questionnaire survey, we presented respondents with a series of statements about Islam and asked them how much they agreed or disagreed with each one. The six statements were as follows:

***'Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British life'***

***'Islam is incompatible with British values'***

***'The majority of Muslims take their moral responsibilities seriously in a way that is a positive example for all people'***

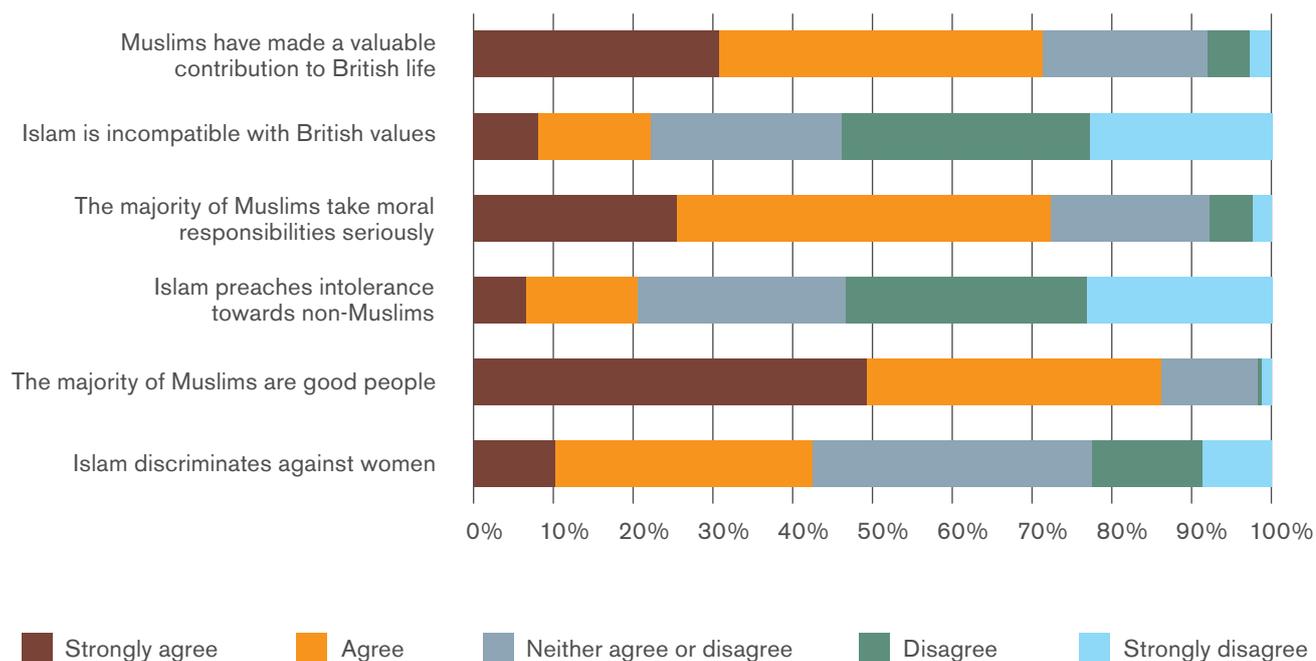
***'Islam is a faith that preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims'***

***'The majority of Muslims are good people'***

***'Islam is a religion that discriminates against women'***

14. We do not have definitive numbers of Muslims in each HEI as this data is not collected widely enough nor publicised by universities for us to make a sector-wide comparison. Our own survey is too thinly distributed to provide a useful measure; in achieving a nation-wide spread of respondents, we inevitably capture only a handful of Muslims at most in each institution and so cannot derive a measure of relative presence in each.

Responses to these six statements among all students are gathered in chart 6.1 below.



**Chart 6.1:** Views about Islam and Muslims among all students, based on responses to six statements.

Each of the statements is worth considering separately in turn.

**‘Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British life’**

More than 70% of students agree that Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British life. Very few students disagree with this statement, suggesting an embedded pro-inclusive stance among this generational and educational cohort. When broken down by our 3-way orientation to religion, no Muslims disagree; among those of no religion, 5.9% disagree, while Christians come out slightly higher with 11.4%. Conversely, the level of agreement among Muslims is very high (93.3%), with only a few occupying the middle ground; 72.8% of ‘nones’ agree, and 66.5% of Christians, with just over 20% of each opting for ‘neither agree nor disagree’. This is a question that appears to highlight significant degrees of consensus across the student population, with minimal dissent.

**‘Islam is incompatible with British values’**

Around a fifth of students believe Islam is incompatible with British values; when broken down by religion, this remains true for Christians, Muslims and those of no religion. An overall majority disagree, but it is not a strong majority (53.9%) and almost a quarter remain unsure. However, the emerging pattern when broken down by religion is rather surprising. Among those of no-religion, 18.4% agree that Islam is incompatible with British values; the figure is 22.9% for Christians. For Muslim respondents, the figure is almost as high (22.6%), suggesting there is a significant proportion of Muslims who either believe Islam to be out of keeping with British values because of a generally jaded or sceptical perspective on their own tradition, or, who believe British values fall short of the more noble values of Islam, so that incompatibility is not a signal of criticism but of religious or moral purity. Whatever lies behind this, this group do

not represent most Muslims, 60.8% of whom disagreed with the contention that Islam and British values are incompatible, with just 16.6% occupying the middle ground. Those disagreeing among Christians amounted to 50.1%, while the figure was 58.5% for those of no religion (roughly a quarter were unsure in each group). So, in a recurring general pattern, for questions that focus on the status of Islam vis-à-vis British culture, Christian students appear to be slightly more sceptical than the 'nones'.

***'The majority of Muslims take their moral responsibilities seriously in a way that is a positive example for all people'***

More than 70% of students agree with this statement. The overall pattern of responses here closely resembles that for the question on Muslims making a valuable contribution to British life. Like the latter, it appears to indicate a focus of consensus, with more than 70% agreeing with the statement, around 20% unsure, and less than 10% disagreeing. Unsurprisingly, Muslims are most supportive of this statement (87.9%), but both Christians and the non-religious also reflect a level of agreement in excess of 70%. Highest levels of disagreement come from the Christians, but this figure is still below 10%.

***'Islam is a faith that preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims'***

There is disagreement among students about whether Islam is a faith that preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims. While more than 70% of Muslims disagree with this statement, the figure is less than 60% for those of no religion, and less than 50% among Christian students. Overall, around a fifth of respondents agree with the notion that Islam preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims, with over a quarter unsure. Christians show the highest levels of support for this statement, at 24.3%, with 'nones' at 14.5%. Muslims, interestingly, come out higher than the 'nones', at 19.5%, perhaps reinforcing the findings from an earlier question in suggesting there is a subgroup of Muslim students who see their tradition as set apart from non-Muslim British culture. What is unclear is whether this is to be interpreted as a position that is critical of Islam or of non-Muslims. Either way, the majority position is at the opposite end of the pole, with 70.6% of Muslim respondents disagreeing that Islam preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims. Some 57.3% of 'nones' take this position, while 47.7% of Christians do.

***'The majority of Muslims are good people'***

The vast majority of students – more than 85% – agree that the majority of Muslims are good people, with just over 10% unsure and less than 2% disagreeing. Broken down by religion, Muslims are predictably more supportive of this statement, but Christians and the non-religious also show clear majority support (at well over 80% for each group) with only a handful disagreeing.

***'Islam is a religion that discriminates against women'***

This statement stands out from the rest insofar as it highlights far higher levels of criticism directed towards Islam than we can discern in the other data. Overall, 42.6% of students agree that Islam is a religion that discriminates against women, with another 34.8% choosing 'neither agree nor disagree'. Only 22.5% disagree. This question also clearly separates the Muslims from the non-Muslims, with a majority of 75.2% of Muslims disagreeing with this statement, compared with only 18.2% of Christians and 16.9% of 'nones'. Conversely, only 16.5% of Muslim respondents agree that Islam discriminates against women, while the figure is 47.1% for Christians and 41.7% of 'nones'. The relatively large proportion occupying the 'neither agree nor disagree' middle ground are mainly made up of Christians and 'nones', with only 8.3% of Muslims opting for this answer (compared with 34.7% of Christians and 41.4% of 'nones'). This is clearly a contentious issue, and suggests there are plenty of non-Muslims who, while positively disposed to Islam in general terms, nevertheless see it in a negative way when it comes to the treatment of women. Just under half of all non-Muslim students believe Islam is a religion that discriminates against women.

This last point raises the question of whether we can see significant differences in responses to other statements among Muslim and non-Muslim students. Summary statistics comparing levels of agreement among all students, Muslim students and non-Muslim students, are detailed in table 6.1.

	All students	Muslim students	Non-Muslim students
Agree that 'Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British life'	71.3%	93.3%	69.2%
Agree that 'Islam is incompatible with British values'	21.8%	22.6%	21.7%
Agree that 'The majority of Muslims take their moral responsibilities seriously in a way that is a positive example for all people'	72.3%	87.8%	70.8%
Agree that 'Islam is a faith that preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims'	20.5%	19.5%	20.6%
Agree that 'The majority of Muslims are good people'	86.4%	95.0%	85.6%
Agree that 'Islam is a religion that discriminates against women'	42.6%	16.5%	45.2%

**Table 6.1:** Levels of agreement with six statements about Islam and Muslims.

In some respects, the patterns outlined above are those we might predict. Responding to positive statements, Muslims are slightly more likely to agree than non-Muslims; responding to negative statements, Muslims are less likely to agree than non-Muslims. That Muslims are generally more likely to see their tradition in a more positive light than non-Muslims is hardly surprising. What is more interesting is the issues that provoke the largest differences between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The one notable exception to the overall pattern is the 22.6% of Muslim students agreeing that Islam is incompatible with British values. Of course, this could reflect a sub-group of self-identifying Muslims who have a critical view of their own tradition, or a sub-group who hold a more positive view which includes a hard boundary between Islam and British values, with the latter viewed more critically. Examining this 22.6% more closely, the latter interpretation appears more likely. The actual numbers are very small (N=22), and so any statistical comparison cannot be established on a robust basis. However, notwithstanding this caveat, respondents falling within this sub-group are comparable to the overall figures for Muslims on most measures of religiosity and exceed them on others.

To sum up, the majority of students as a whole appear to be positively disposed to Muslims as a community, recognising the contribution of Muslims to British society and their moral integrity. Statements that elicit more ambivalence or critical perspectives are those that refer to Islam (rather than Muslims), suggesting a willingness (especially among Christians, but also among those of no religion) to offer a critical view of Islam as a body of ideas or truth claims as distinct from Muslims as people. Such criticism appears especially strong when expressed in the perceptions that Islam is intolerant towards non-Muslims and discriminates against women. It is not surprising to find evidence of these perceptions within the UK context; they constitute two of the most enduring and pervasive stereotypes associated with Islam within western scholarship and popular culture, as traced in studies that explore how 'Islam' has been constructed in the 'West' (Hallaq 2018; Hasan 2005; Yeginoglu 2003). What is more noteworthy is that such stereotypes appear to command significant appeal among university students. Clearly, more work could be done to dismantle and challenge such perceptions, including within universities themselves (see section 9).

### Student attitudes in the national context

A sense of the distinct profile of student perspectives on Islam and Muslims can be formed by comparing it with national survey data covering the general UK population. The 2018 British Social Attitudes Survey asked respondents what their 'personal attitude' was to a range of religious groups. Muslims provoked the most negative response, with 17% describing their attitude as 'very' or 'somewhat' negative (the figure was 4% for Christians). The same survey also revealed the attitudes of younger adults to be more positive than those of older adults: 22% of the over 55s viewing Muslims negatively compared with 13% of 18-34-year olds (Voas and Bruce 2019: 19). Our data suggest university students are, generally speaking, even less inclined to view Muslims negatively. While we do not ask a question in such stark terms, we can build a composite picture of our respondents based on their responses to all six of the statements listed above<sup>15</sup>. Working with this analysis, around 6.5% of students can be described as having a generally negative perspective on Muslims.

A more finely grained comparison is more difficult to construct given the lack of analogous survey data collected around the same time as our own. However, with appropriate caveats in mind, a few approximate comparisons can be made that are illuminating. In an article comparing a range of survey sources on Islamophobia in Britain, Clive Field cites a 2008 survey that finds 38% of British people agree that 'Western and Muslim ways of life are irreconcilable'; this may be compared with the 21.8% of students who agree that 'Islam is incompatible with British values'. He also cites a 2008 survey that found 71% of Britons agreeing that 'Muslim women have lower social standing than men' (Field 2012: 156). According to our own survey, 42.6% of students agree that 'Islam is a religion that discriminates against women'. Field finds that the negative statements that command the highest levels of agreement have to do with the treatment of women within Islam. That also applies to students, and it is the statement on this issue that elicits the strongest expression of concern among survey respondents, although at a markedly lower level than among the general population. In fact, our composite

analysis of responses to the six statements above suggests around 40% of students affirm a generally positive perspective on Islam and Muslims *except for the issue of the treatment of women in Islam*. Put another way, according to the survey data the most resilient and widespread prejudices about Islam focus on gender. This was also clear in our interviews and focus groups, in which university staff and students reported how reactions of fear or suspicion directed towards Muslims on campus often focused on visible signs of Muslim identity that are distinctive to men or women. In this way, the hijab or the beard, for example, become associated with oppression or aggression respectively, as well as with a heightened religiosity that provokes suspicion among non-Muslim peers.

Through numerous accounts, participants pointed out that hijabs, niqabs, and beards among other items have become 'visual markers', attracting unwanted attention, political remarks and pressure to disclose beliefs and values through questioning by others. Muslim women gave many reasons for wearing the hijab, ranging from aesthetic or fashion-related justifications, or reasons to do with cultural identity, to those who view the hijab as an explicit expression of their faith. Yet they felt denied a voice on such matters by the weight of public opinion, which they also experienced on campus. As one student commented,

“ All the things that society tends to put on Muslim women manifests itself on campus with the university students a lot. I've seen that personally with the debates that I've had with students who don't really have an understanding of Islam, but because they've watched the news or because they've, like, read stuff, they tend to think certain things, especially about Muslim women who wear scarves. ”

(Black African female Muslim postgraduate UK student)

15. This composite analysis has been generated using the statistical method of Latent Class Analysis (LCA), a form of cluster analysis that identifies patterns in survey responses based on a given set of variables that measure the same concept. In this case, the responses are to the six statements about Islam and Muslims listed above, which are used as expressions of a broad underlying attitude towards Muslims and Islam. LCA classifies likely response patterns to these survey questions as fitting a particular clustering of respondents. Based on these clustered response patterns, LCA can estimate the percentage of the population in each cluster.

## 7. Students' Knowledge about Religion and Islam



“ I think that, given what students are exposed to, in terms of social media, YouTube, you know, Trump, you name it, it's very, very difficult for them, because that's what their world is, it's thrown at them in all directions... the problem that you're dealing with is also that they have a present conception of something, which is probably a million miles away from reality, but nevertheless it's a dominant image inside of their heads. ”

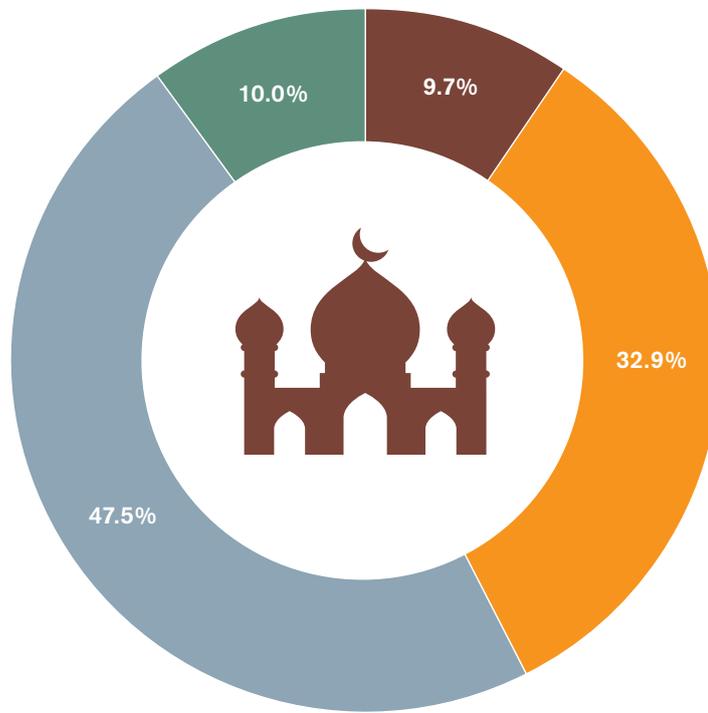
(South Asian female Muslim academic)

Recent scholarship on religion in Britain has commented on the low levels of religious literacy among the population, including within universities (Dinham and Jones 2012). A range of factors are cited to explain this – from the secularisation of British society to the diminished resourcing of Religious Education in schools (APPG on Religious Education 2013) – but many observers agree that this is an especially unfortunate trend given religion's renewed political and cultural significance within national and international public affairs. In the words of sociologist Grace Davie, “at precisely the moment that British people need them most, they are losing the vocabulary, concepts and narratives that are necessary to take part in serious conversation about religion.” (Davie 2013: xii).

This need is arguably most acute when it comes to Islam. Racism and Islamophobic stereotyping draw on misleading impressions of Muslims, including those associated with religious radicalism and terrorism, an inspiration for long-standing patterns of prejudice (Elahi and Khan 2017; Runnymede Trust 1997). Such misguided perceptions of Islam can have serious consequences, from discrimination in the workplace to verbal and physical abuse in the street. The nationalist sentiments enlivened by the context of Brexit have exacerbated existing prejudices against Muslims even further (Weaver 2018).

But how do those who work in universities – students and staff – fare when it comes to awareness and knowledge of Islam? As public bodies bound by the Equality Act (2010) but also by the Counter Terrorism and Security Act (2015), it is easy to see how universities might be pulled in conflicting directions. On the one hand they are obliged not to discriminate on religious grounds and provide for the needs of religious students; on the other they are obliged to implement anti-terrorism legislation whose public profile has reinforced a narrative of suspicion about Muslims. Universities have a reputation for critical thinking and inclusive politics, and yet recent developments in the UK sector – not least pointing to racism and gender-based violence on university campuses (e.g. Law et al 2004; Phipps and Young 2012) – have highlighted the extent to which this image is sometimes more myth than reality.

Levels of religious awareness are difficult to gauge with accuracy. Often matters of religion and belief are not addressed in public and so levels of knowledge or ignorance remain obscured, and those with strong views and loud voices are rarely the best informed. Moreover, those asked directly are not always likely to acknowledge their ignorance, or even perhaps be aware that their impressions are flawed. However, we can begin to get a broad sense of general patterns based on self-evaluation, i.e. how students assess their own knowledge of religion, and of Islam in particular.

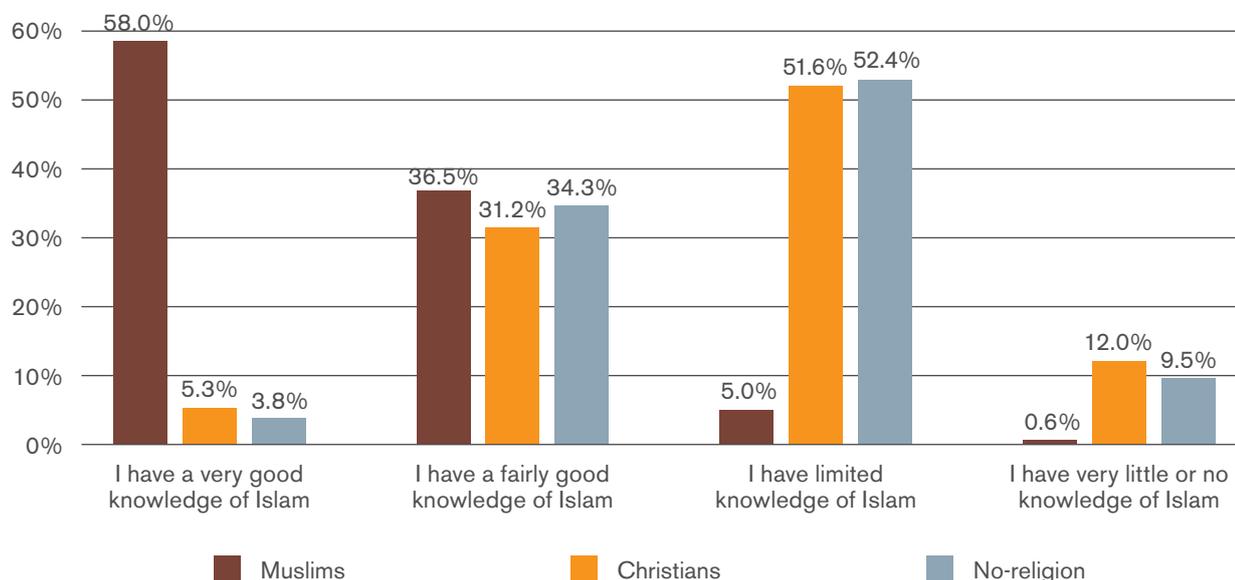


- I have a very good knowledge of Islam
- I have limited knowledge of Islam
- I have a fairly good knowledge of Islam
- I have very little or no knowledge of Islam

**Chart 7.1:** Self-assessed knowledge of Islam among students.

According to our survey data (summarised in chart 7.1 above), 9.7% of students claim to have a ‘very good’ knowledge of Islam; 32.9% say they have a ‘fairly good’ knowledge; 47.5% say they have a ‘limited’ knowledge, while 10% say they have ‘little or no knowledge’ of Islam. So, more than half of all students acknowledge having a limited, little or no knowledge of Islam. According to national polls, the figure for the general British population is closer to three quarters (Field 2012: 151).

Unsurprisingly, Muslim students are much more likely to see themselves as having a very good knowledge of Islam (58%), with another 36.5% claiming to have a ‘fairly good’ knowledge. Christian students and those of no religion follow pretty much the same pattern, suggesting that identifying as Christian makes very little difference to one’s knowledge of Islam. In other words, profession of faith cannot be assumed to indicate greater religious literacy in broader terms (see chart 7.2 below).



**Chart 7.2:** Self-assessed knowledge of Islam among students broken down by religious identity.

Levels of knowledge (at least as self-assessed) vary by context, which is not surprising given how the Muslim population is unevenly distributed across the UK and across its universities. Levels of exposure to Islam as a religion and Muslims as people will differ according to where students are based and the circles they move in. For example, self-assessed knowledge of Islam is significantly different between students at London and non-London universities, with London students more likely to profess a very good or fairly good knowledge.<sup>16</sup> This is not entirely surprising, given the disproportionately high percentage of Muslims studying at London universities (within our sample, 12.4% of respondents were studying in London; the figure among Muslim respondents was 27.8%). Correspondingly, we can expect a higher awareness of Islam within these institutions, both among Muslims themselves and among their non-Muslim peers.

The proportion of Muslims within different types of university differs significantly. For example, an especially

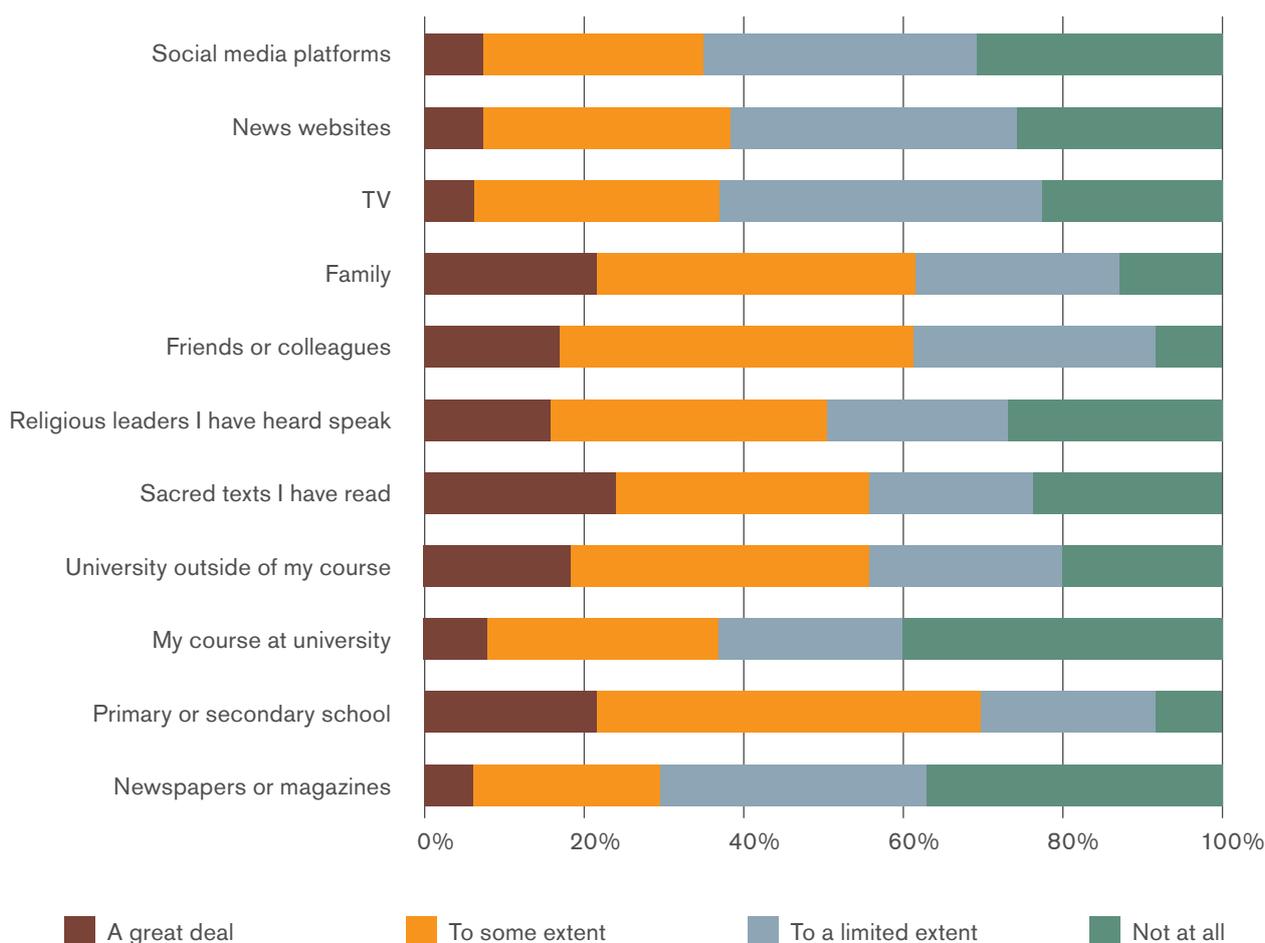
high proportion can be found in the post-1992 (or 'new') universities (13%, compared with the 8-9% figure for the entire sector). This is not entirely surprising. Our survey confirms the common perception that most Muslim students study at a university local to their family residence; as there are far more post-92 universities than any other category<sup>17</sup>, many in urban locations where populations of Muslims are most concentrated, we might expect there to be a higher than average share of Muslims studying at these institutions. There is also a potential link to patterns of social deprivation. Most Muslims in the UK are of Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage, a group Tariq Modood has identified as one of the most disadvantaged in the country (Modood 2003: 104). Those who progress sufficiently in education to secure a place at university may be especially inclined to study locally given the significant extra cost of living away from family. Moreover, we might expect lower proportions of Muslims in elite universities, given established patterns in student admissions that suggest a structural bias against BAME applicants (Boliver 2015).

16. As a city, London is unusual in having multiple universities and as such can be disaggregated from the survey population while still generating statistically significant analyses. We could discover even stronger correlations in Birmingham and Bradford, for example (both of which have larger proportions of Muslims in their population than London), but we cannot test this as we do not have enough respondents studying in those two cities. Therefore, a more closely contextualised analysis of UK HEIs will need to be followed up in future research.

17. Based on a count undertaken for this project, there are over 60 post-92 universities in the UK HE sector in 2020 (almost 80 if the Cathedrals Group universities are included). This can be compared with the Russell Group, which comprises 24 elite research-led universities, while if we count the 1960s or plate glass universities as a single group (established in the wake of the Robbins Report during the 1960s and 70s), this amounts to 25 institutions.

Regression analysis of survey data was used to ascertain the strongest predictors of having a self-assessed good knowledge of Islam. Unsurprisingly, those raised Muslim were much more likely to claim to have a fairly good or very good knowledge of Islam, compared with students raised Christian, in any other religion or in no religious tradition. This also applies to those who worship more, and have more friends of different faiths, while women are less likely to affirm a knowledge of Islam than men. Those who depend on Islamic Studies at university for their knowledge of Islam are more than twice as likely to claim a fairly or very good knowledge of Islam, compared with those who do not.

We also used our questionnaire survey to identify patterns in the sources students draw on for their information about religion and Islam. Self-assessment of one's knowledge is a useful – if imperfect – indicator of religious literacy; asking where people turn to for their information is arguably even more useful, as it potentially allows us to identify correlations between sources of knowledge and professed values or perceptions. Respondents were asked about the sources of their knowledge about religion in general, and then about Islam in particular. The following results emerged.



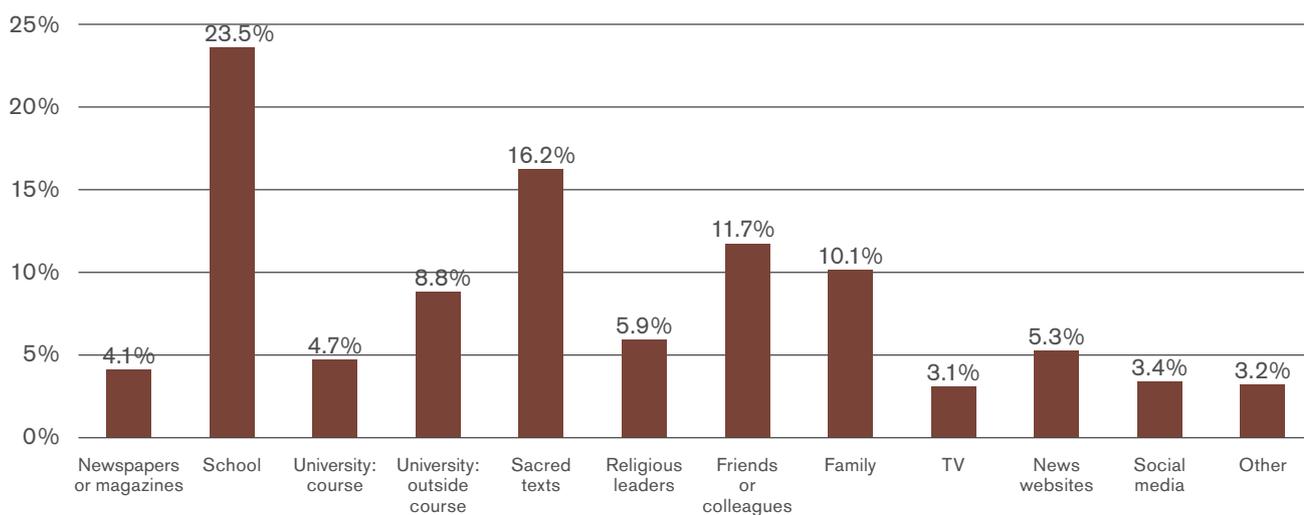
**Chart 7.3:** The extent to which students draw on a variety of sources for their knowledge about religion in general.

Some of the most telling findings relate to the figures for 'not at all': almost 40% of students never turn to newspapers or magazines for information about religion and – contrary to popular perceptions about online resources – almost as many never turn to social media or news websites. Some 40% do not derive knowledge about religion from their course at university, although this is unsurprising given the disciplinary range taught at UK institutions. In fact, with around 50% studying what might be called 'hard sciences' (65% if we include business and management), it is perhaps surprising that so few answer in this way. It suggests students from a greater range of courses than we might expect are drawing on their experience of being taught at university for their knowledge of religion. It would be interesting to know if these students are drawing on course content in their degrees in politics, English or psychology, for example, or on the skills – generic and discipline-specific – they are acquiring during the course of their studies. Researchers in the sociology of higher education might explore this pattern further as it has direct relevance for understanding how the generation of religious literacy occurs.

At the other end of the scale, the source most likely to be drawn on 'a great deal' is sacred texts (23.8%), closely followed by things learnt at school. University degree programmes are only turned to 'a great deal' by a small

minority (8.1%), but this number is significantly higher (18.3%) when students are talking about university as an experience beyond their course of study. Therefore, university courses are surprisingly fertile as an occasional source of knowledge about religion, but only a small minority draw on them 'a great deal'. When we take into account the first two measures ('a great deal' and 'to some extent'), schooling is the most popular source of information by some margin (69.9%), the next most popular sources being family (61.6%) and friends or colleagues (61.3%). University also appears to be significant, more outside of degree programmes, with 55.5% saying they draw on the experience of university outside of their course 'a great deal' or 'to some extent' for their knowledge of religion; the figure is only 37% for their degree course. University is significant as a resource for just over half of students' knowledge of religion but is highly significant only for a minority; in relative terms, the non-academic experience of university is more significant than the courses students take. Interestingly, when non-religious students are excluded from the analysis, none of these measures change significantly, apart from a slightly greater reliance on sacred texts, religious leaders, and family.

When we asked students to select one of the listed sources as the most significant overall, the following results were generated.



**Chart 7.4:** Students' sources of knowledge about religion in general, selecting the one they draw on most.

Replicating a pattern hinted at above, schooling emerges as most significant, followed by sacred texts (an order that, incidentally, is not altered if non-religious students are excluded from the analysis, so school remains most important regardless of religious orientation<sup>18</sup>). Forced to select one out of the 12 options, frequency measures are almost inevitably low, but even with this in mind, the pattern outlined above remains clear: university is significant for a greater number in terms of its non-academic experience than in terms of what is taught on courses. This reinforces the findings of previous research that, in understanding the impact of university on orientations to religion, it is the social contexts of the university experience that are most important, rather than the formal contexts of learning and teaching (Guest, 2015; Guest et al 2013).

Respondents were then asked about the sources of their knowledge of Islam, the selection of options adjusted slightly to account for the different subject matter. Here, 'sacred texts' is replaced with 'Islamic texts' (with the proportion affirming the highest use dropping from 23.8 to 12.4%). It is perhaps unsurprising that those turning

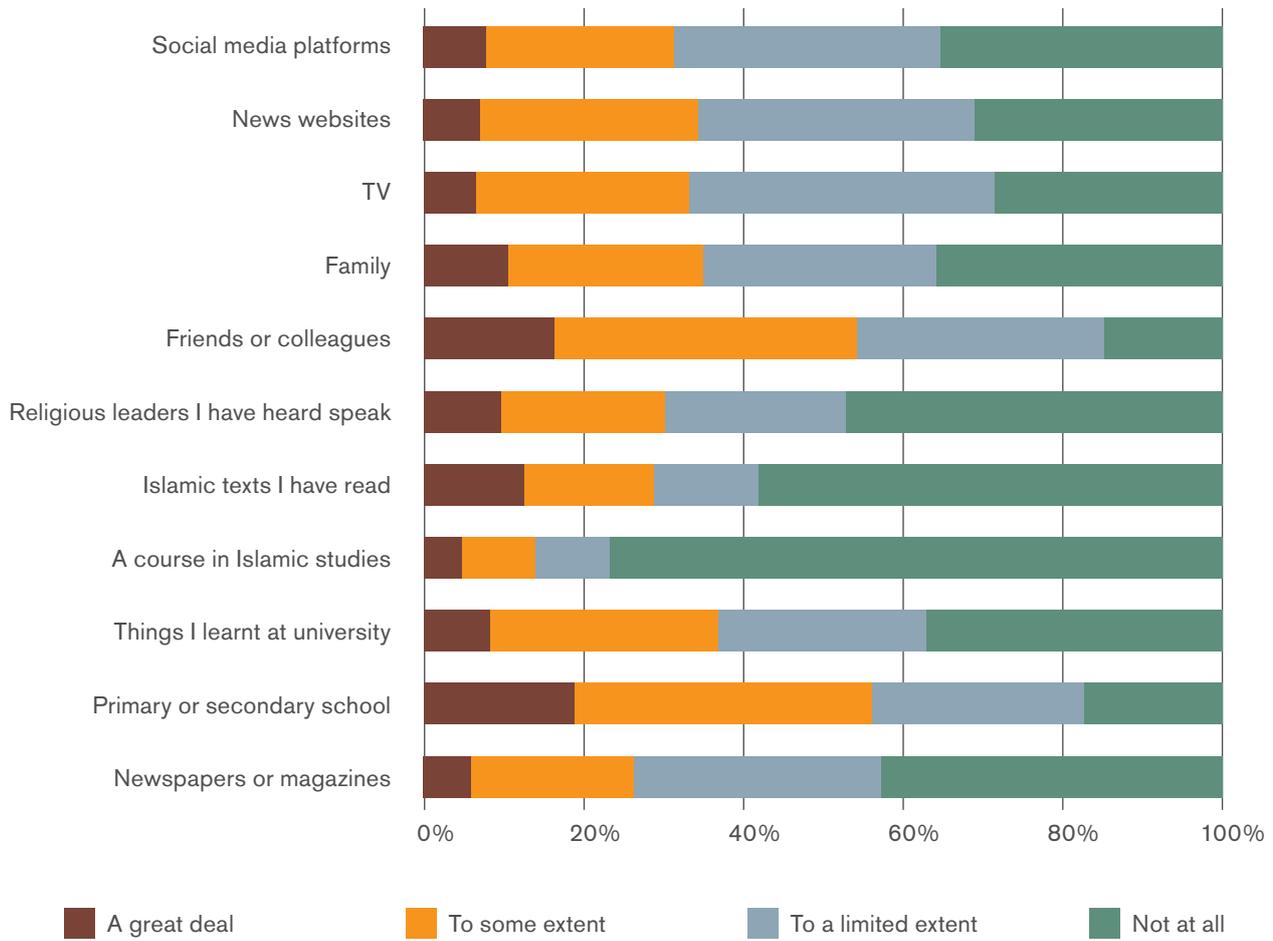
'a great deal' to Islamic texts for their knowledge of Islam amount to just slightly more than the proportion of Muslims in the sample, but it is also worth noting that more than 40% say they draw on Islamic texts to some degree, suggesting an engagement well beyond the Muslim community. We also asked specifically whether students draw on a course on Islamic Studies they have completed; 77.2% said 'not at all', only 4.6% saying 'a great deal', unsurprising given most students will not have engaged in such a course of study.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, patterns in the use of sources informing knowledge of Islam resemble those for religion more generally: schooling is most important, followed by friends and colleagues. Family scores much lower, but this is understandable given expected levels of familiarity with Christianity (or 'religion' in general) over information specifically about Islam within the population as a whole, and the national polling data that suggest three quarters of British people rate their knowledge of Islam as limited or non-existent (Field 2012: 151). This was reflected also when students were asked to state which of the sources they draw on most.

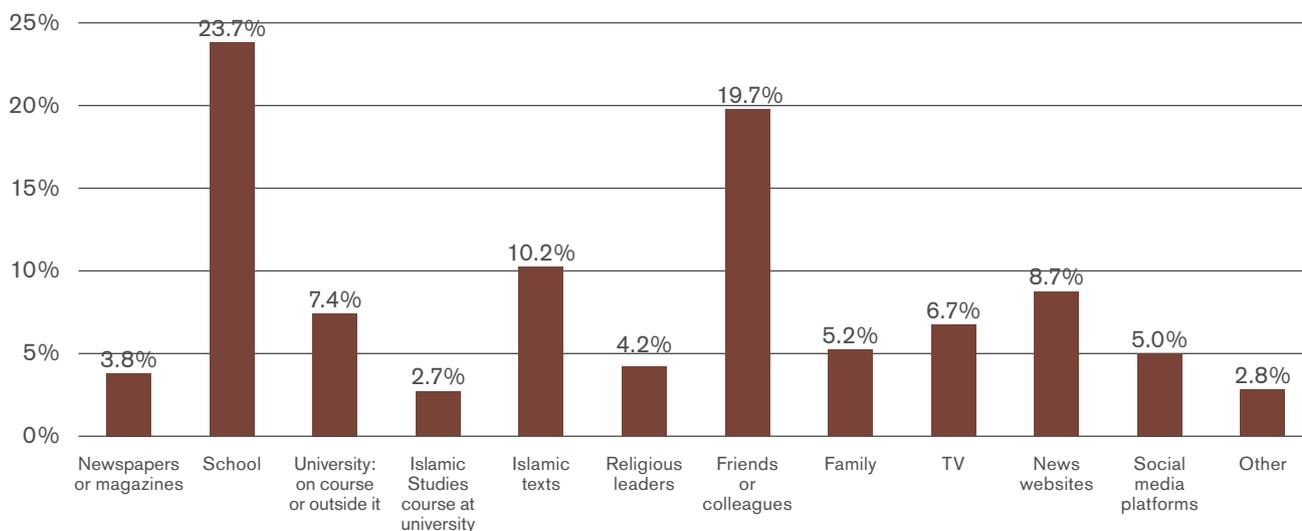
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18. This reinforces the case made elsewhere for the importance of Religious Education (RE) in UK schools (e.g. Clarke and Woodhead 2015; Commission on Religious Education 2018), as it appears to play a major role in influencing the religious literacy of young people.

19. According to figures collected by the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), in 2017-18, those taking degrees in Theology and Religious Studies or Modern Middle Eastern Studies made up well under 1% of the total number of students.



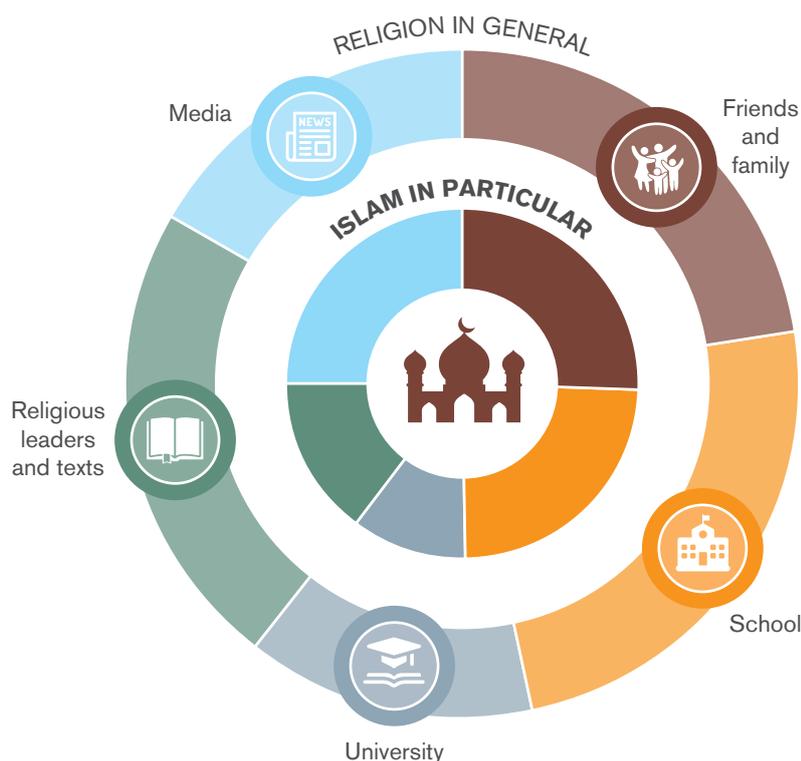
**Chart 7.5:** The extent to which students draw on a variety of sources for their knowledge about Islam in particular.



**Chart 7.6:** Students' sources of knowledge about Islam, selecting the one they draw on most.

A more illuminating set of patterns emerges when we aggregate these various sources into five categories: friends and family, school, university, religious leaders and texts, and media. This allows us to compare sources of knowledge about religion in general and about Islam in particular directly, and also to assess the relative significance of different spheres of experience:

for example, friends and family highlights personal connections outside of formal educational settings; religious leaders and texts highlights sources emerging from an 'insider' religious perspective, indicating the extent to which students view these sources as legitimate and reliable. This generates the following comparisons.



**Chart 7.7:** Sources of knowledge about religion in general and Islam in particular compared.

Source	Percentage who said this was the source they draw on most for their understanding of religion in general	Percentage who said this was the source they draw on most for their understanding of Islam in particular
Friends and family	22.6%	25.6%
School	24.3%	24.3%
University	13.9%	10.5%
Religious leaders and texts	22.8%	14.8%
Media	16.4%	24.8%

**Table 7.3:** Sources of knowledge about religion in general and Islam in particular compared.

By grouping answers we achieve a clearer view of how types of knowledge source compare, while keeping the most popular categories discrete. University emerges as least significant whether students are reflecting on their knowledge of religion in general or Islam in particular. School and friends and family remain most important for around a quarter of students in each case, and this applies to both religion and Islam. Specifically, religious sources (leaders and texts) are more important in informing knowledge of religion than Islam in particular, while the opposite pattern can be seen for media, which is less important for religion but more important for Islam. In other words, while social media platforms

appear less important than might be anticipated, when taken together, mass media sources (combining TV, newspapers/magazines, news websites and social media) are cited as the most important source of information about Islam for a quarter of all students, much more than the proportion saying they draw most on these sources for their knowledge of religion in general. Mass media are as important as friends and family and schooling in informing students about Islam, a finding of potentially serious import, especially given the well documented misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims across these media (IPSOS Mori 2018; Baker, Gabrielatos and McEney 2013).

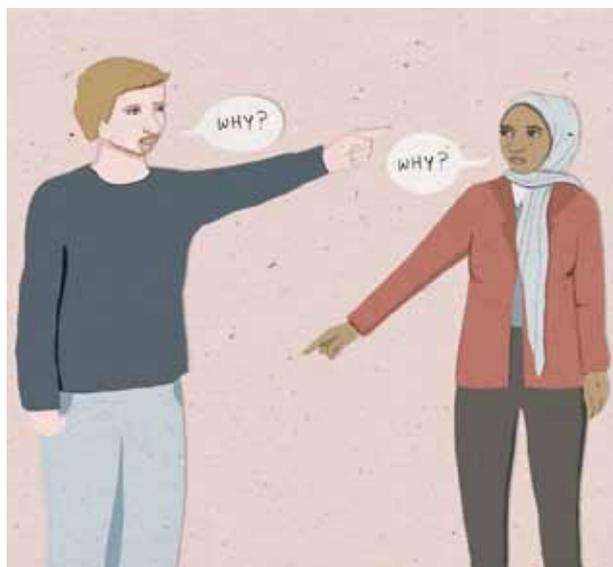
	<i><b>Disagree that Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British life</b></i>	<i><b>Agree that Islam is incompatible with British values</b></i>	<i><b>Disagree that majority of Muslims are a positive moral example</b></i>	<i><b>Agree Islam is a faith that preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims</b></i>	<i><b>Disagree that majority of Muslims are good people*</b></i>	<i><b>Agree Islam is a religion that discriminates against women</b></i>
<b>Family and friends</b> as top source of knowledge	6.3%	14.9%	6.1%	12.5%	1.6%	39.8%
<b>School</b> as top source of knowledge	4.9%	20.2%	5.9%	12.9%	1.5%	36.7%
<b>University</b> as top source of knowledge	7.4%	32.2%	11.4%	32.5%	2.0%	45.8%
<b>Religious texts and leaders</b> as top source of knowledge	6.6%	22.7%	6.3%	23.1%	2.1%	27.9%
<b>Media</b> as top source of knowledge	13.3%	25.1%	10.8%	29.8%	1.9%	55.6%

**Table 7.4:** Proportions of students assenting to 6 statements about Islam and Muslims, cross-tabulated with sources of knowledge about Islam and Muslims. ( $P = < 0.001$ ; \* $P = < 0.01$ )

But what does our evidence tell us about how sources of knowledge relate to attitudes towards Islam? What difference does it make to draw most on things learnt at school rather than family and friends or media, for example, for one's perspective on Islam and Muslims? While our measures here are imperfect, not least because they rely on self-reporting, we would nevertheless expect there to be a relationship between where students turn to for information and the opinions they form. We offer an initial analysis here, focusing on patterns surrounding critical or negative perspectives on Islam and Muslims. The above table returns to the six statements about Islam and Muslims discussed in section 6, but translates students' answers into six negative statements, e.g. 'I agree that Islam discriminates against women'; 'I disagree that the majority of Muslims are good people'. These have been cross-tabulated with the five more general categories for sources of knowledge about Islam: friends and family, school, university, religious leaders and texts, and media. The higher numbers indicate where there are higher proportions of students affirming a negative perspective, e.g. among those who cite university as the source they most draw from for their knowledge of Islam, 32.5% agree that Islam preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims, whereas the figure is only 12.5% among those who draw most on friends and family. The consistent overall pattern is clear: aside from the penultimate statement (which commands almost universal agreement), it is those who draw most on two particular sources – university and media – who affirm the highest levels of agreement with negative statements about Islam. Given the problematic media coverage of Islam that has been noted earlier, perhaps this correlation is not surprising. That 'university' sits alongside media as strongly associated with negative perspectives on Islam and Muslims is less predictable, and perhaps raises a potential cause for concern for Higher Education leaders keen to maintain their sector as a bastion of inclusion and cultural tolerance. We return to this concern in the

final section of this report. But first we want to focus on a particular set of perceptions that are especially worrying, those that have to do with the demonisation of Islam as a religion of violence and terrorism. This depiction, reinforced by both media reporting and sometimes by government rhetoric, highlights a major barrier to religious literacy and inter-religious understanding. We were interested in exploring how far this tendency, which generates an image of Muslims as a 'suspect community', informs how Muslims are viewed within the UK's universities. It is this question that is the focus of the following section.

## 8. The Precarious Status of Islam on Campus: Security and Suspicion



“ ...if I look quite deeply, I wonder if some of what I'm saying comes from a place of almost self-censorship also because it's something that I've become quite used to over time. And by that what I mean is when we talk about Islam constantly in the context of extremism...”

(Pakistani female Muslim postgraduate UK student)

Over the past two decades, the presentation of Islam in UK public life has been contentious and often negative. Media reporting has often presented Islam and Muslims through the lens of terrorism and terrorist threats. Certain policy makers, right-wing campaigners and media publications have been instrumental in perpetuating an impression of Islam as a subversive religion that is inconsistent with 'British values' (Holmwood and O'Toole 2018). Within this context, universities have been identified by influential public figures as contexts in which a dangerous 'radicalisation' has been allowed to develop among Muslim students, fostering extremist views associated with intolerance, offensive behaviour or even religiously-sponsored violence. In a context that remains in the shadow of 7/7 and the global 'war on terror', universities have come under the spotlight as places where radical ideas may go unchecked with worrying consequences. It is within this context that the government's Prevent Strategy has emerged, devised as a regulatory framework for public bodies, and reinforced by the Counter Terrorism and Security Act (2015).

Prevent is the part of the UK government's anti-terrorism CONTEST programme that is concerned with addressing the underlying triggers of terrorist activity. Its aim is to counter terrorist 'ideology' and deter potential terrorists from pursuing acts of violence. This includes the government's

de-radicalisation programme – Channel – which pursues interventionist strategies implemented by local police working alongside community leaders in order to persuade those vulnerable to radicalisation onto a different path. The 'Prevent Duty' refers to the obligations this strategy places on public bodies, which are collectively charged with having 'due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism.'<sup>20</sup> In practice, this means all schools, universities, prisons, local councils, and hospitals are required to submit an annual report to the government and demonstrate that they have systems in place for intervening should episodes of 'radicalisation' come to light.

Prevent has been highly controversial. It has been criticised by civil liberties campaigners, academics, lawyers, Muslim organisations and politicians on the grounds that it constitutes a programme of surveillance that intrudes into the lives of innocent civilians. While Prevent officially covers all forms of radicalisation – religious and non-religious, far left and far right – its association in the public mind with Islam-inspired terrorism has, according to its critics, meant it has disproportionately targeted Muslims (Busher et al 2017). As such it has arguably helped to embed a form of institutionalised and state-sponsored Islamophobia. As one Muslim student commented (echoing reservations made by many staff and students across our case studies):

20. See [https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2015/9780111133309/pdfs/ukdsiod\\_9780111133309\\_en.pdf](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2015/9780111133309/pdfs/ukdsiod_9780111133309_en.pdf) (accessed 24/5/20)

“ I think under Prevent, the fact is, if you're a Muslim, and you start taking your religion seriously, you start practising, you start reading, you start growing a beard, you're really going to be under the spotlight, more than if you're a Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, or Jew...Religiosity is becoming, like, I don't want to say criminalised, but really, really heavily interrogated.”

(white male Muslim postgraduate UK student)

Another referred to Prevent as a 'disaster...a form of state sponsored... social engineering of its Muslim community into something ... that it understands, that it recognises.' (Pakistani female Muslim postgraduate UK student) In other words, Prevent changes the way Muslims are constituted within the public sphere, and recasts them as a 'suspect community' (Hillyard 1993).

Table 8.1 below illustrates the disproportionate effects of Prevent on Muslim communities, especially in the earlier years of its implementation. It appears that a more 'balanced' application has emerged over the past year, reflecting a rise in referrals of a far-right character and decline in referrals of an Islamist one. The latest figures suggest both forms of extremism are given equal attention in discussion, but that more cases are now identified within the far-right category as worthy of further investigation. This marks a shift from earlier patterns, which suggested a tendency for the scheme to inflate anti-Muslim prejudice. For example, in 2017-18, Muslims were two and a half times more likely to be reported under the Prevent Duty than far right activists. The fact that only 5.6% of these Islamist referrals ended up being addressed through Channel underlines the scale of misreporting, and how anti-Muslim prejudice has been given expression via the Prevent Strategy.

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
<b>Total referred</b>	<b>7,631</b>	<b>6,093</b>	<b>7,318</b>	<b>5,738</b>
Islamist referred	4,997	3,704	3,197	1,404
Right-wing referred	759	968	1,312	1,389
<b>Total discussed at a Channel panel</b>	<b>1,072</b>	<b>1,146</b>	<b>1,314</b>	<b>1,320</b>
Islamist discussed	819	760	662	536
Right-wing discussed	189	271	427	542
<b>Total that received Channel support</b>	<b>381</b>	<b>332</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>561</b>
Islamist that received support	264	184	179	210
Right-wing that received support	99	124	174	254

**Table 8.1:** Statistics of Prevent referrals, based on published UK government figures.<sup>21</sup>

21. Figures drawn from <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-statistics> (accessed 10/5/20)

While patterns of referral at the national level may now reflect a more balanced deployment, Prevent continues to attract criticism for its dependence on localised surveillance. As it calls upon non-specialists within public institutions to make judgement calls about when the signs of radicalisation might be evident, the strategy is vulnerable to hasty, ill-informed or prejudiced accusations, leading to wasted police time and the stigmatisation of misunderstood minorities. The dangers are not lost on university students, such as this first year undergraduate at Citywide University.

“ [O]bviously, to prevent any radicalisation is a good thing, but I think the way it's targeted can go wrong. Because, obviously, if you don't understand much about the religion, it can be hard for you to interpret areas of radicalisation. I said to the guy that was in our halls, “Do you know anything about the Muslim religion at all?” And he said, “No,” so I thought it was quite interesting to know that, seeing as he's got such power to suggest an act of radicalisation, if you know what I mean, so that surprised me quite a bit. ”

(white male Christian – but not religious – undergraduate UK student)

Applied within universities, Prevent faces the additional accusation of compromising academic freedom, and cases have come to light of course material being 'flagged' as 'high risk' and academics being deterred from researching or teaching certain 'sensitive' topics.<sup>22</sup> We encountered a number of examples in our field research for this project, including Muslim students self-censoring

in their working and personal lives in order to avoid being stigmatised as suspicious. Such tendencies within university life sit uncomfortably alongside long-standing ideals of intellectual freedom and the popular image of the modern university as a safe context for experimentation, free thinking and social protest.

22. A striking case in point occurred in November 2018, when the University of Reading issued politics undergraduates with a warning about an essay by former Professor of Government at the University of Manchester Norman Geras, issued as essential reading for third year politics undergraduates taking its 'Justice and Injustice' module. Students were warned not to read the essay on their personal devices, to read it in a secure environment, and not to leave it lying around where it might be seen "inadvertently or otherwise, by those who are not prepared to view it". (quoted in Courea 2018) In the face of criticism from the National Union of Students and academics, on the grounds of infringement of academic freedom and encouraging self-censorship, the University justified its policy by citing its duties under the Prevent Strategy and the Counter Terrorism and Security Act (2015), referring to the Geras text as "security sensitive" (quoted in Courea 2018).

## Awareness of Prevent among students

Prevent has attracted impassioned criticism from a range of quarters, provoking equally impassioned defence from others. However, a lack of nation-wide, independent research on its impact has led to gross generalisations being made about risk or the lack of it on the basis of very little evidence. While this project was not concerned with testing the assumptions upon which Prevent is based, nor with examining the validity of episodes of purported radicalisation, it did ask how Prevent has influenced the representation and treatment of Muslims within higher education.

We put to our student survey respondents the following statement and question:

*'Prevent' is part of the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy and it places requirements on universities regarding radicalisation among students. Which of the following comes closest to your awareness of 'Prevent'?*

Respondents were given the following statements from which to choose:

***'I have never heard of Prevent'***

***'I have heard about Prevent through the news media, but have not heard anything about it at my university'***

***'Prevent is something that I've heard about at my university but only via informal conversation or student societies'***

***'I am aware of official events, procedures or communications about Prevent that have been issued by my university'***

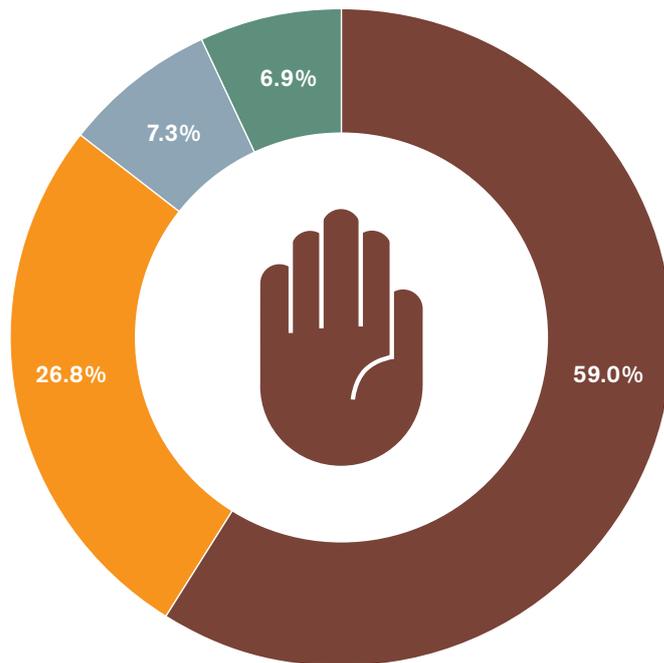
The aggregated responses to this question are summarised in the pie chart (chart 8.1) below.

The most striking finding here is that such a large proportion of students stated that they had never heard of Prevent (a majority of 59%). Another 26.8% had heard of it, but only via news media, suggesting less than 15% of students had acquired some awareness of the Prevent

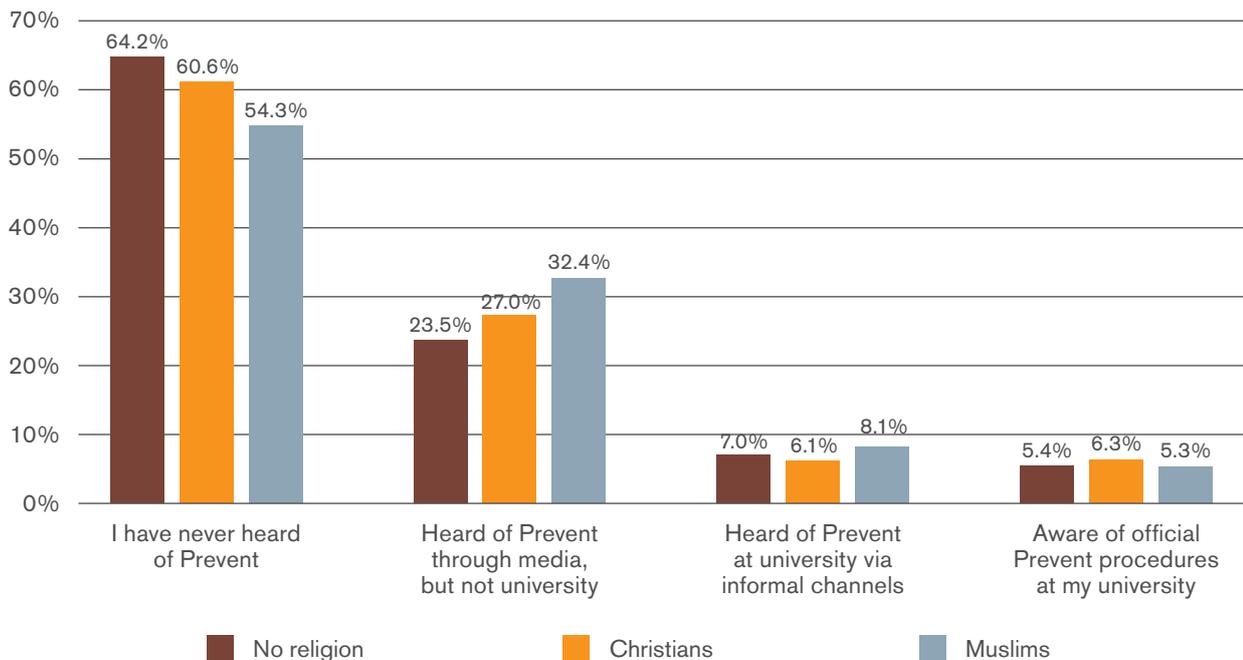
strategy through their university. When broken down by orientation to religion (see chart 8.2), Muslims are most likely to be aware of Prevent in some way (47%), compared with 42.8% of Christians and 37.4% of those of no religion. Muslims are also most likely to say they have heard about Prevent through the media (33.1%, compared with 27.9% of Christians and 23.6% of 'nones'). The proportion claiming to have heard about Prevent at university but only informally or via student societies is similar across all three groups (all around 7-8%). There is minor variation among those claiming to have been aware of formal Prevent-related events at their university (5.5% of Muslims, 6.6% of 'nones', 7.7% of Christians). Therefore, while in general terms Muslims appear more aware of Prevent, this does not translate into a stronger awareness of its presence within the context of their university experience.

These findings demand careful interpretation. We know that Prevent has a presence across all universities in the UK HE sector. We also know that serious concerns have been expressed by students and staff about its impact on freedom of expression, limiting academic enquiry and demonisation of Muslims. Indeed, these concerns were shared with us by many individuals across all of our six case study campuses. So the fact that, at a national level, the majority of students have never heard of Prevent suggests that, whatever its influence, it is exerting this influence in a way that is not visible to a large proportion of students. Put another way, while anti-Prevent campaigns are widespread, they do not appear to have raised awareness among most of those in universities who are impacted by the Prevent Strategy.

Our qualitative findings from six case study sites – as well as other existing research – suggest this lack of awareness at a national level may not be as surprising as it might first appear. The variety of geographical and cultural circumstances that different universities find themselves in means they face varying degrees of institutional proximity to Prevent as a mode of state scrutiny. In many places it is embedded in the governing structures of the university – featuring in its student welfare or safeguarding policy documents – but remains relatively invisible to most students. In others it has triggered political resistance among students and staff in a way that has made its way into teaching and learning and the more general student culture of campus life, including within contexts of student activism. Prevent is nationwide as a bureaucratic measure; as a dimension of student experience of which students are fully conscious, it has a more uneven visibility.



**Chart 8.1:** Awareness of the UK government's Prevent Strategy among students.



**Chart 8.2:** Awareness of the UK government's Prevent Strategy among students by 3 main religious groups (No religion, Christian, Muslim).

## Views of Prevent among students

Hearing about Prevent is one thing, but what kind of views do students have about this counter-terrorism programme? Anti-Prevent campaigns have developed momentum in recent years, and student-led groups have been central in bringing them to national prominence. There have been numerous anti-Prevent campaigns by Muslim organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain, CAGE, and Prevent Watch (Qureshi, 2017). Organised campaigns like Students Not Suspects and Preventing Prevent have been promoted by the National Union of Students and maintain a strong presence on some campuses, especially those which have a significant population of Muslim students. But what do students in general think about Prevent? Has activists' criticism of on-campus surveillance and the demonisation of Muslims filtered down into the student population across the UK? Has being 'anti-Prevent' become normative or commonplace? Or do we overlook the diversity of student attitudes by assuming the anti-Prevent activists speak for the entire student population?

We put three statements to our respondents, plus an option of 'don't know', and asked them which best captured their view of Prevent:

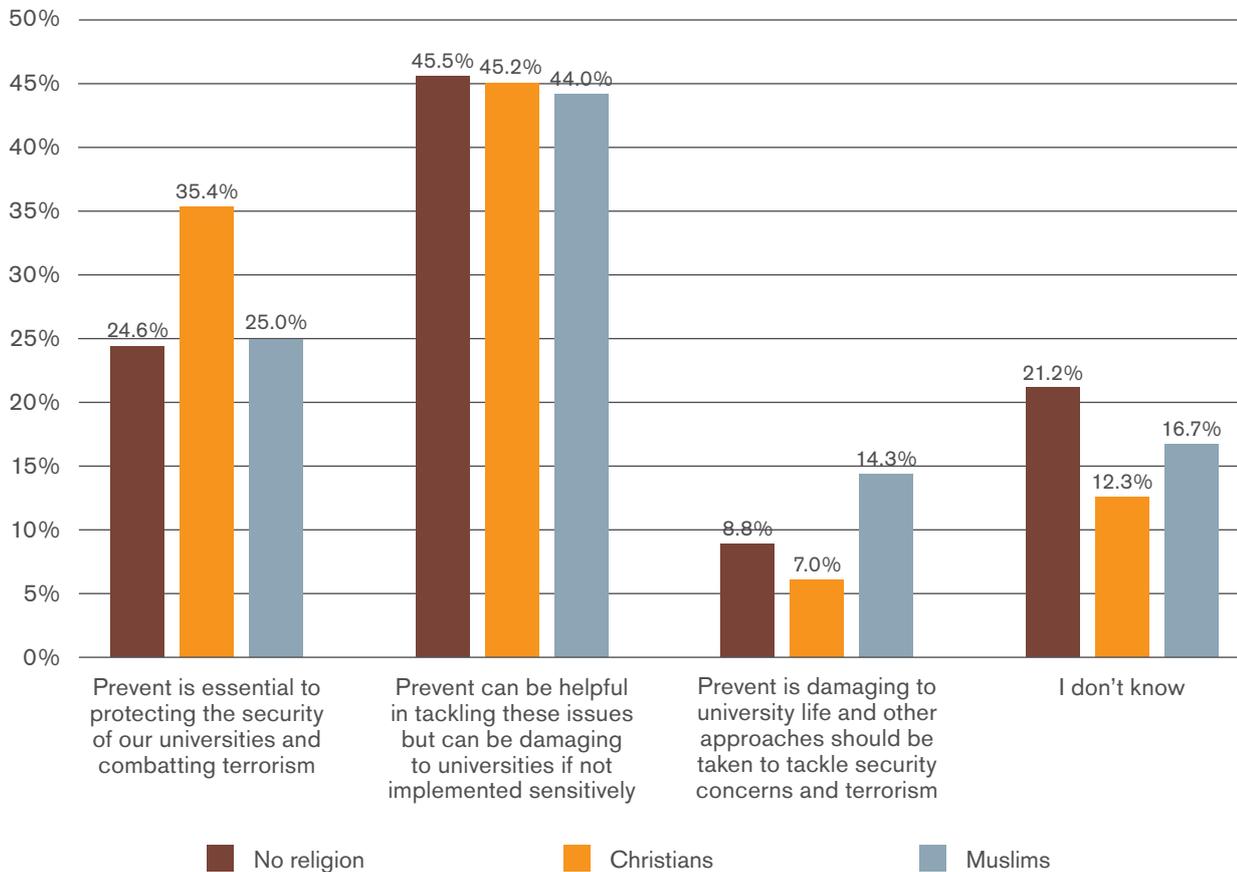
***'Prevent is essential to protecting the security of our universities and combatting terrorism'***

***'Prevent can be helpful in tackling these issues but can be damaging to universities if not implemented sensitively'***

***'Prevent is damaging to university life and other approaches should be taken to tackle security concerns and terrorism'***

Among those of our respondents who said they had heard of Prevent, a variety of views were expressed, falling across these contrasting statements. 30.1% agreed that 'Prevent is essential to protecting the security of our universities and combatting terrorism'; 44.9% agreed that 'Prevent can be helpful in tackling these issues but can be damaging to universities if not implemented sensitively'; 9% agreed that Prevent is damaging to university life and other approaches should be taken to tackle security concerns and terrorism; 15.9% said they didn't know.

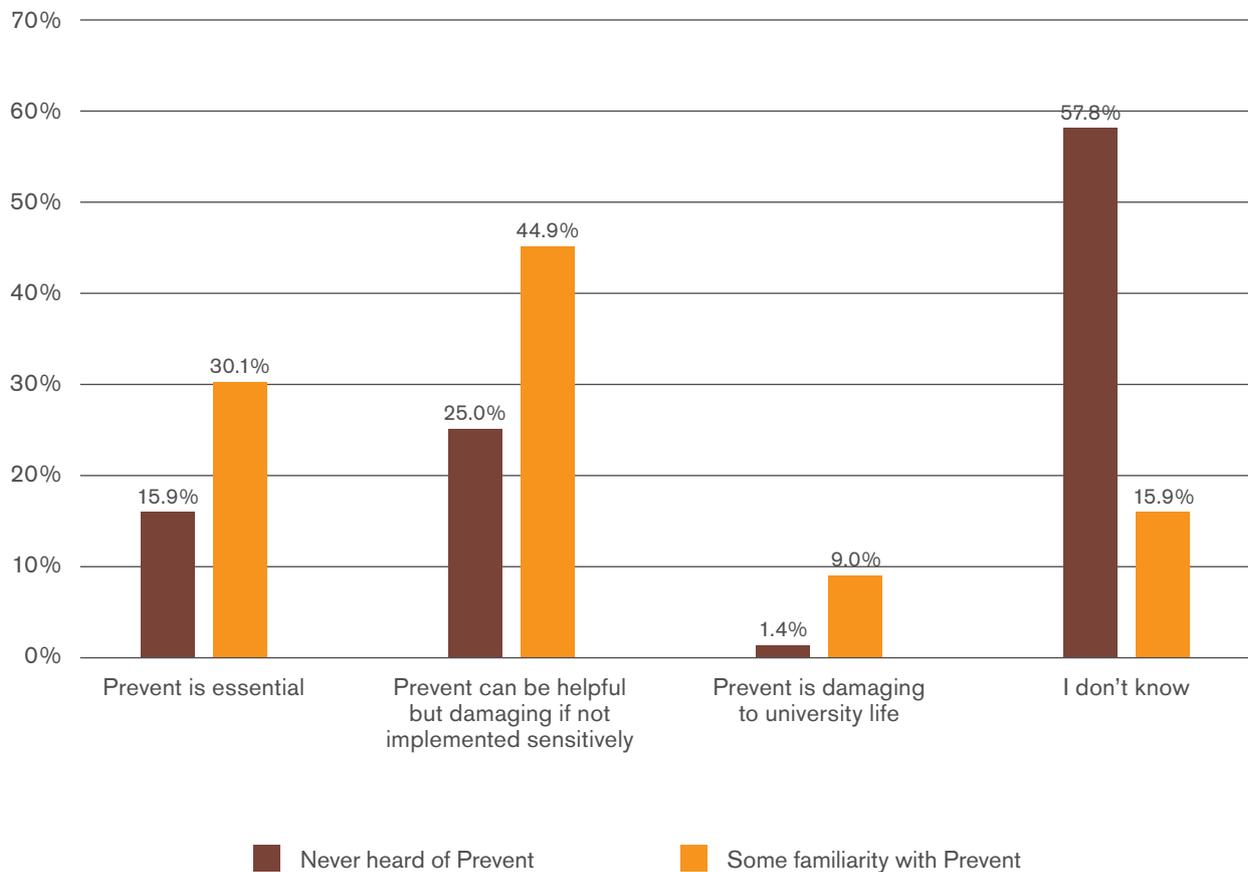
This is a striking finding: given the high profile and impassioned campaigns against Prevent within some universities, it is remarkable that less than 10% of those respondents familiar with Prevent unequivocally condemn this government strategy. Responses broken down by religion are given in chart 8.3 below. It is true that Muslim students are more likely to condemn Prevent than Christians or those of no religion, but the figure is still very low (less than 15%). Moreover, Muslims are slightly more likely than those of no religion to see Prevent as essential to the security of universities (25% compared with 24.6%), although Christian students are much more likely to support Prevent than the other two categories (35.4%). The middle option, which describes Prevent as helpful but also possibly damaging to universities if not handled sensitively, attracts almost exactly the same proportions from all 3 groups. Those of 'no religion' stand out as more likely than Christians or Muslims to be uncertain about this issue.



**Chart 8.3:** Students' views on Prevent, by 3 main religious groups (No religion, Christian, Muslim).

While this survey data might imply only moderate levels of anxiety about Prevent among students, upon closer examination the evidence invites a more cautious response. As we were going through the survey data, we found that, even though a large proportion of students said they had never heard of Prevent, a large number of

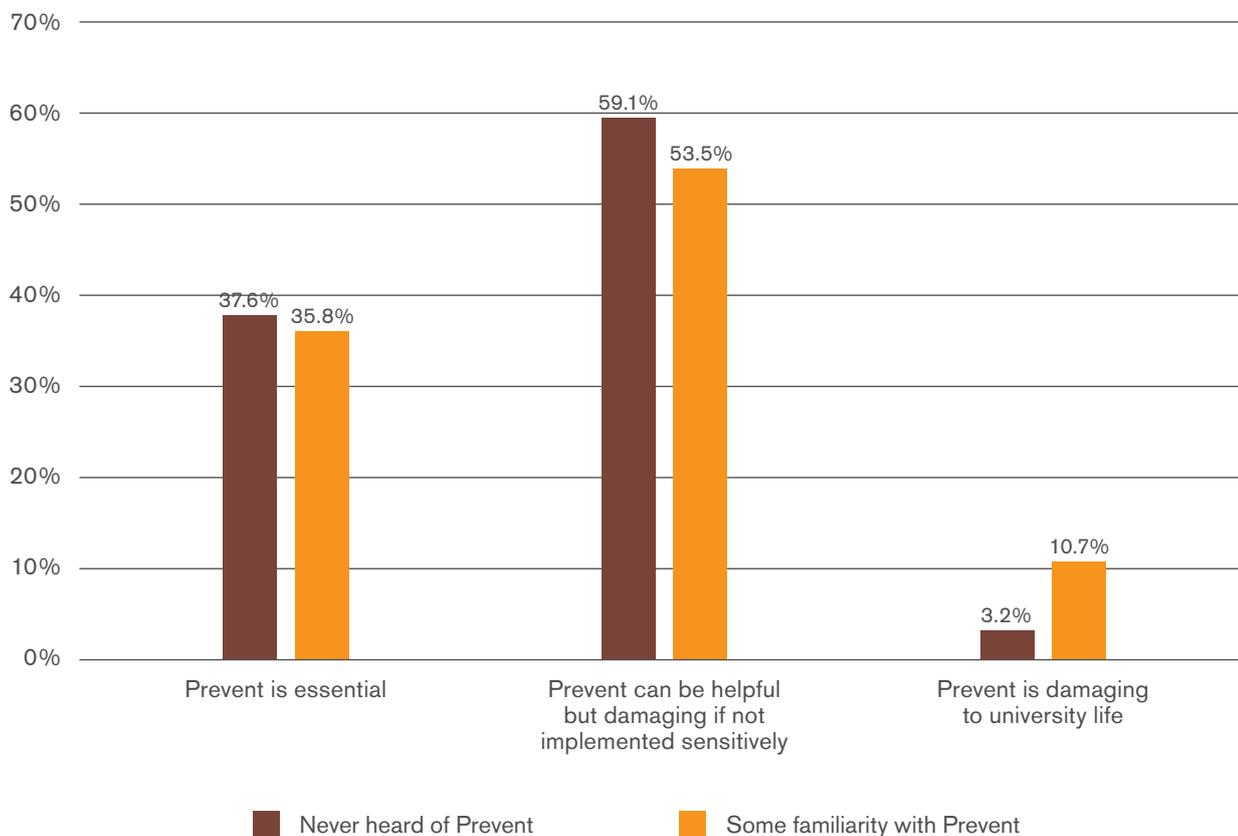
these students nevertheless ventured an opinion on it in their response to the following question. Moreover, their views on Prevent follow interesting patterns; these are set out in chart 8.4 opposite, compared directly with the views of those students who claimed some prior familiarity with Prevent.



**Chart 8.4:** Expressed views on Prevent, comparing students who claim prior familiarity with those who claim to have never heard of Prevent.

As we might expect, among those who had never heard of Prevent, the majority say they 'don't know' when asked their opinion on it; however, it is a slim majority. Over 40% of those with no prior knowledge nevertheless offered an opinion. Among those offering an (uninformed) view, 15.9% say Prevent is essential, 25% opt for the middle statement suggesting Prevent can be helpful but only if implemented sensitively, and only 1.4%

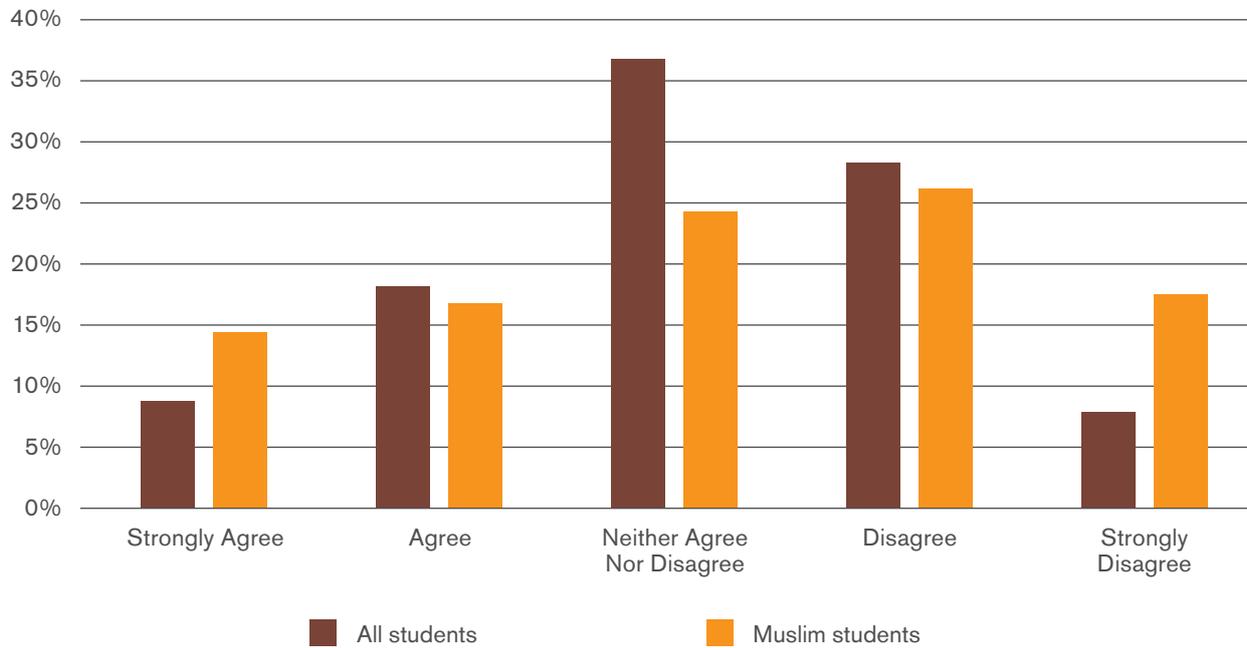
unequivocally condemn Prevent. If we exclude the 'don't know' responses, and so compare the distribution of views among the two groups (those with prior awareness and those without), students with no prior awareness are actually *more* likely to say Prevent is essential to university life than those who claim some familiarity with it (see chart 8.5).



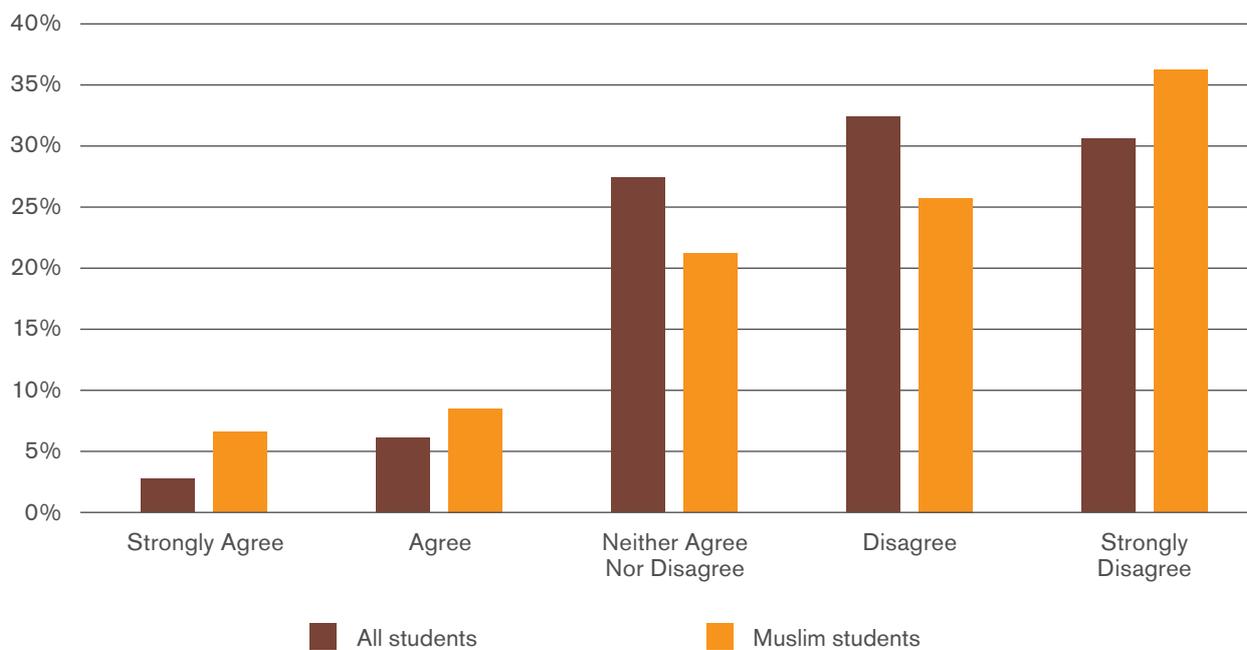
**Chart 8.5:** Expressed views on Prevent, comparing students who claim prior familiarity with those who claim to have never heard of Prevent (excluding 'don't know' responses).

Two conclusions can be drawn from these patterns in our survey data. First, many students are perfectly comfortable expressing a view on a government counter-terrorism initiative even when they admit they have no prior awareness of it. Lack of knowledge does not appear to be a sufficient reason not to voice an opinion. Second, among those offering a view, those with no prior awareness of Prevent are more inclined than those with prior awareness to view it as essential to protecting the security of universities and combatting terrorism. This echoes findings from our case study research, which suggest many students have internalised an anxiety about radicalisation in universities, even when they have no experience of encountering radicalised individuals nor university procedures about such matters. It would seem that, even if Prevent itself is not familiar to some students, the notion that radicalisation is a problem that needs addressing in universities has been sufficiently highlighted in the media and in government rhetoric that anxiety about this issue is widespread.

Put another way, issues concerning radicalisation appear to generate a reliance on information circulating beyond the immediate locale, including information encountered via mass media (which, as demonstrated earlier, is an especially common source of information about Muslims). This pattern is echoed in survey findings on perceptions of the HE sector as a whole, compared with students' own immediate university context. Responses to our questions on whether radicalisation is a problem suggest a pattern of viewing this as an issue happening *elsewhere*, rather than one occurring in one's own university (see charts 8.6 and 8.7 opposite). This suggests fears and concerns may have less to do with immediate experience, and more with information disseminated via media and the initiatives of universities themselves. In other words, 'radicalisation on campus' operates as a narrative, which students are cognizant of and may believe, but which they do not recognise as part of their lived experience on their own campuses.



**Chart 8.6:** 'In my view, radicalisation is a serious problem within UK universities'



**Chart 8.7:** 'In my view, radicalisation is a serious problem within my university'

By contrast, when Prevent *is* an identifiable feature of campus life of which students are conscious, this appears to foster suspicion and wariness towards Prevent. Notably, regression analysis exposes a strong relationship between learning about Prevent via university official channels and viewing it as damaging to university life. While the frequency measures are small, the correlation, controlling for a range of other relevant variables, is much stronger, suggesting, compared with those who do not know, getting one's information about Prevent from official university channels is a much stronger predictor of viewing Prevent as harmful than getting one's information from informal or media sources. So Prevent as applied within universities appears to instil not compliance but cynicism, students consequently more persuaded of its potential to damage university life.

To sum up, acknowledged ignorance about Prevent appears to be associated with support for it, while familiarity with Prevent (especially via official university channels) appears to be associated with strong opposition to it. It may be tempting to conclude that, from the point of view of compliance with government policy, keeping students in a state of ignorance might have its advantages, for those most familiar with Prevent are also most likely to oppose it. However, there are two major reasons why this pattern is a worrying one. First, that students who are openly ignorant of government policy would uncritically support it is hardly a positive finding, given universities' pride on educating young people in critical thinking. Second, our research also demonstrates that this uninformed acceptance of a narrative of suspicion is strongly associated with negative views about Islam and Muslims. We turn to the evidence for this relationship in the following section.

### **How do perspectives on Prevent relate to perspectives on Islam and Muslims?**

Several published studies have pointed to the capacity of the Prevent Strategy to reinforce negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims (e.g. Busher et al. 2017; Coppock and McGovern 2014; Heath-Kelly 2013). These have pointed to the dangers of placing referrals in the hands of ordinary public sector workers, the inevitable bias stoked by Islamophobic media coverage, and the risk of encouraging belief in a suspect community given pre-existing patterns of racism. What these studies have not done is chart systematically the relationship between perspectives on radicalisation and perspectives on Muslims. Our survey allows us to do this among a representative sample of the student population based across UK universities.

We do this below by returning to the six statements we considered in section 6, each expressing a claim about Islam or Muslims. For the sake of this analysis (and following the method used in the previous section), these have been translated into statements of agreement or disagreement equating to a set of negative statements about Islam or Muslims, as follows.

1. ***'I disagree that Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British life'***
2. ***'I agree that Islam is incompatible with British values'***
3. ***'I disagree that the majority of Muslims take their moral responsibilities seriously in a way that is a positive example for all people'***
4. ***'I agree that Islam is a faith that preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims'***
5. ***'I disagree that the majority of Muslims are good people'***
6. ***'I agree that Islam is a religion that discriminates against women'***

To see how far these views are associated with the government's counter-terrorism strategy, we correlate students' responses to these statements with their views about radicalisation as a problem in UK universities and about Prevent as an initiative intended to address this problem. The aim is twofold: to find out whether those most sympathetic to the claim that radicalisation is a real and widespread problem are also most likely to express negative views about Islam. And to find out if those most in support of Prevent as a strategy for addressing radicalisation are also most likely to express negative views about Islam.

The notion that radicalisation is a serious problem in UK universities is taken first, cross-tabulated with levels of assent to the 6 statements above in table 8.2.

As can be seen in table 8.2, for every measure, those students who agree that radicalisation is a serious problem in UK universities are significantly more likely to hold negative views about Islam and Muslims than those who hold a different view concerning radicalisation. To take one of the most striking examples, among those who see

	<b><i>Disagree that Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British life</i></b>	<b><i>Agree that Islam is incompatible with British values</i></b>	<b><i>Disagree that majority of Muslims are a positive moral example</i></b>	<b><i>Agree Islam is a faith that preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims</i></b>	<b><i>Disagree that majority of Muslims are good people</i></b>	<b><i>Agree Islam is a religion that discriminates against women</i></b>
Agree that radicalisation is a serious problem in UK universities	16.6%	42.1%	13.7%	40.8%	4.1%	58.7%
Neither agree nor disagree	5.8%	17.3%	6.8%	15.0%	1.3%	37.6%
Disagree that radicalisation is a serious problem in UK universities	4.1%	11.2%	4.2%	11.2%	0.3%	35.7%

**Table 8.2:** Proportions of students assenting to 6 statements about Islam and Muslims, cross-tabulated with views on radicalisation as a problem in UK universities. ( $P = < 0.001$ )

	<b><i>Disagree that Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British life</i></b>	<b><i>Agree that Islam is incompatible with British values</i></b>	<b><i>Disagree that majority of Muslims are a positive moral example</i></b>	<b><i>Agree Islam is a faith that preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims</i></b>	<b><i>Disagree that majority of Muslims are good people</i></b>	<b><i>Agree Islam is a religion that discriminates against women</i></b>
<b><i>Prevent is essential to protecting the security of our universities and combatting terrorism</i></b>	12.5%	34.8%	14.5%	36.4%	3.0%	57.7%
<b><i>Prevent can be helpful in tackling these issues but can be damaging to universities if not implemented sensitively</i></b>	5.1%	18.9%	6.9%	18.3%	1.3%	38.6%
<b><i>Prevent is damaging to university life and other approaches should be taken to tackle security concerns and terrorism</i></b>	4.4%	19.8%	4.4%	13.2%	3.3%	32.2%

**Table 8.3:** Proportions of students assenting to 6 statements about Islam and Muslims, cross-tabulated with views on Prevent in UK universities. ( $P = < 0.001$ ;  $*P = < 0.005$ )

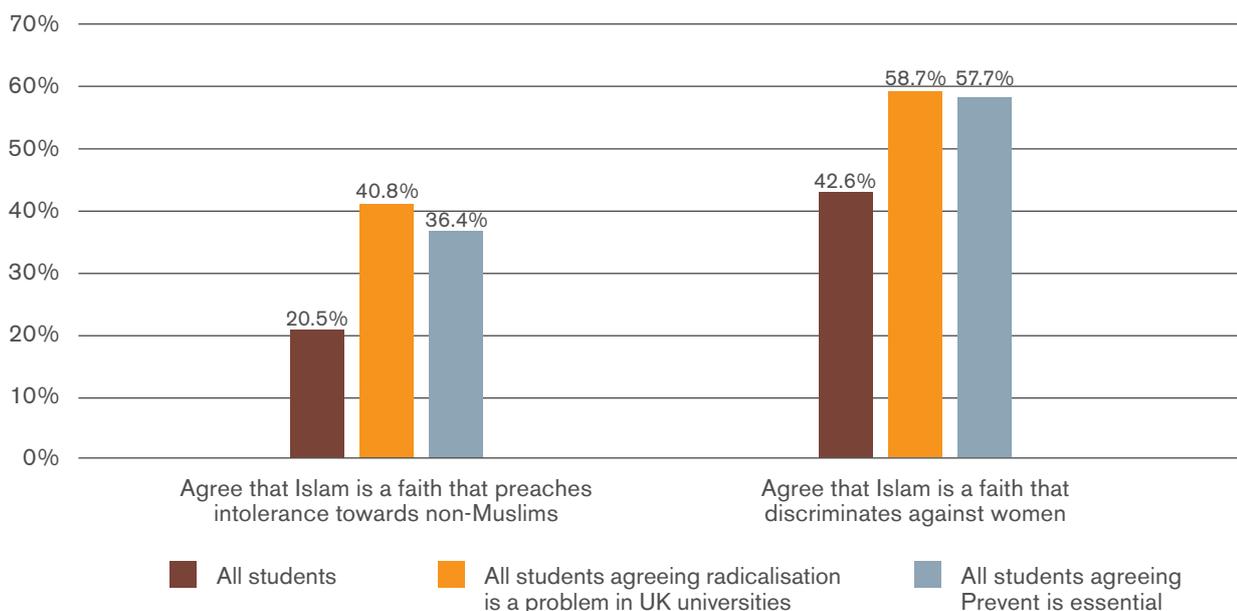
radicalisation as a serious problem in universities, 40.8% agree that 'Islam is a faith that preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims'. Among those who opt for 'neither agree nor disagree' for the question on radicalisation, the figure agreeing with this statement is 15%; for those who disagree that radicalisation is a serious problem in universities, the figure is 11.2%. The degree of difference is less dramatic and the figures lower for statements about Muslims rather than Islam, as is the general trend across the survey data. It is also important not to overstate the proportion of students who fall into this group. For most of these statements, the majority of students opt for a response that is positive or neutral. But among those affirming a negative view, there is considerable overlap with those who view radicalisation as a serious problem.

A similar, if not quite as consistent, pattern can be found when we correlate responses to the six statements with views on the Prevent Strategy in universities (see table 8.3). Again, it is the statements about Islam – rather than Muslims – that generate the most significant differences, but the overall trend is the same. Put simply, those who agree that Prevent is essential to protecting the security of universities are significantly more likely to affirm negative views of Islam and Muslims than those who hold a more moderate or critical view of Prevent. For example, the more supportive students are of Prevent in universities, the more likely they are to agree that 'Islam is a religion

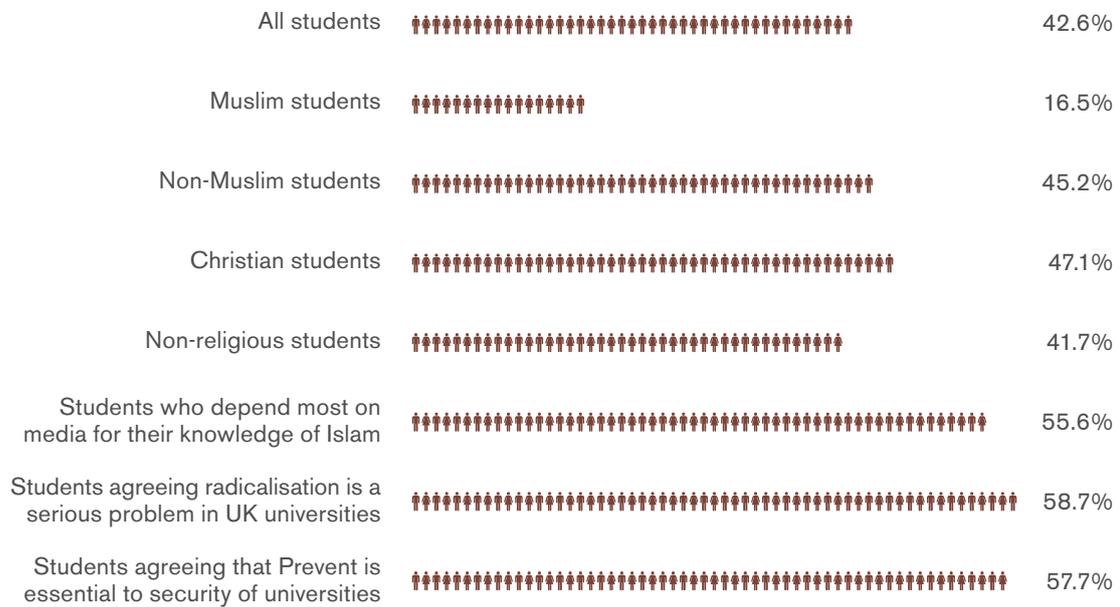
that discriminates against women' and to disagree that 'the majority of Muslims take their moral responsibilities seriously in a way that is a positive example for all people'.

The significance of these patterns is illustrated more vividly below in chart 8.8, which takes two of the six statements and compares responses among three different constituencies of students.

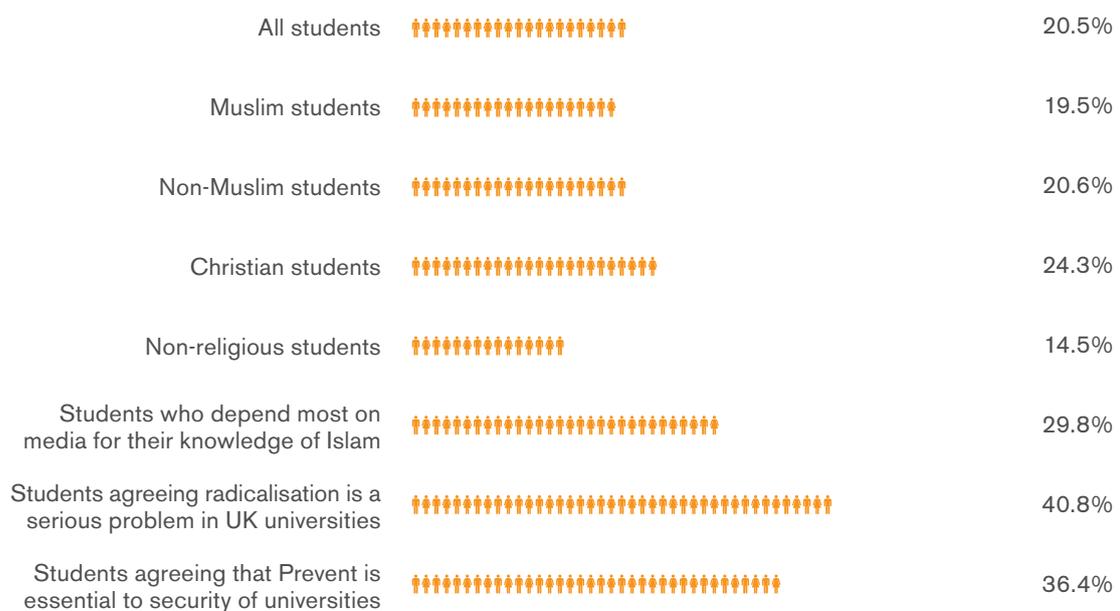
To conclude this section, we have examined compelling evidence that belief in radicalisation as a problem in universities and agreement that Prevent is essential in tackling it are both strongly associated with negative views of Islam and Muslims. We cannot draw any conclusions about the direction of causation using this data, i.e. whether embrace of these convictions about radicalisation and Prevent fosters negative perspectives about Islam, or whether pre-existing negative views about Islam make individual students more inclined to hold such convictions about radicalisation and Prevent. Either is perfectly possible, and further research will need to be done in order to shed more light on this relationship. However, what this correlation does suggest is that an embrace of the narrative about counter-terrorism upheld by the UK government may play a significant role in sustaining negative generalisations about Islam and Muslims among university students. We are not the first researchers to make this argument, but this is the first nationwide survey to provide evidence in support of it.



**Chart 8.8:** Levels of agreement with two statements about Islam, comparing all students, all students agreeing that radicalisation is a serious problem in UK universities, and all students agreeing that Prevent is essential for protecting the security of universities.



**Chart 8.9:** Those agreeing that Islam discriminates against women.



**Chart 8.10:** Those agreeing that Islam preaches intolerance towards non-Muslims.

## 9. Emerging Challenges: Empowerment, Respect and Knowledge

The status of Islam and Muslims across the UK HE sector reflects a decidedly mixed picture. Our findings reflect other research that highlights varying degrees of campus inclusivity and faith-related provision (Aune et al 2019; Stevenson 2018), mirroring the institutional and demographic diversity of UK universities. Alongside this, a deeper, more embedded tendency marginalises Islam as a by-product of the enduring biases of ‘western’ scholarship (Thobani 2014), a complex problem beyond the immediate scope of this report. Among students, the majority believe Muslims have made a valuable contribution to British society, and the vast majority believe Muslims are good people. The dominant perception is a positive one, albeit with some notable reservations among a sizeable proportion, particularly concerning the status of women. This generally positive orientation is mirrored in a generally positive orientation towards matters of religion and faith as a whole. The majority of students are not sympathetic to a hard secularism that demands universities exclude religion from campus. Muslim students are especially opposed to this, the majority agreeing that university is a valuable opportunity to develop one’s faith in new ways and that the experience of university should encourage critical thinking about matters of faith. Students in general are comfortable with religious identities being a part of campus life and many see faith communities as making a valuable contribution. Muslim students are especially keen to bring their faith into constructive dialogue with all aspects of their university experience, something that defies a common misconception that Muslims are resistant or hostile to ‘western’ higher education.

On the other hand, more than half of all students acknowledge having a limited, little or no knowledge of Islam. This puts students ahead of the general population – for whom the figure is closer to three quarters (Field 2012: 151) – but it remains a sobering insight given our increasingly diverse population and the abundance of false, tendentious or inflammatory portrayals of Islam and Muslims within British public life. It also suggests work needs to be done in improving Religious Education in UK schools, which is a supposedly compulsory element of primary and secondary education. Moreover, the mass media appears to be a significant source of information for knowledge about Islam, a source well documented as perpetuating a range of stereotypes and false assumptions that have been detrimental to community relations across the country (Bilge 2010; Saifuddin Ahmed and Matthes 2017; Scharff 2011). Such trends, considered alongside the evidence of widespread

suspicion of Muslims uncovered in our case study research, reinforce Muslim students’ sense that they are only partially welcomed within university contexts.

Taken together, these findings suggest a number of challenges facing UK universities. We summarise them here as (i) empowering voices and discouraging self-censorship; (ii) building respect and understanding across campus communities; and (iii) enhancing religious and cultural literacy, especially concerning Islam. We focus this, our final section, on addressing each of these in more depth, unpacking each challenge in light of our evidence, and propose some tentative solutions that make full use of the educational resources available to the Higher Education sector.

### Empowering Voices

“ I think that students should feel comfortable in talking about their views. This is what university is all about, isn’t it, to be able to share their views, and talk with others about them, without feeling under surveillance, or under pressure of not saying something that isn’t acceptable in any way. ”

(Arab female Muslim academic)

“ ... a lot of Muslims... feel that they can’t air their views, they can’t voice their opinion, because they’ll be labelled extreme. ”

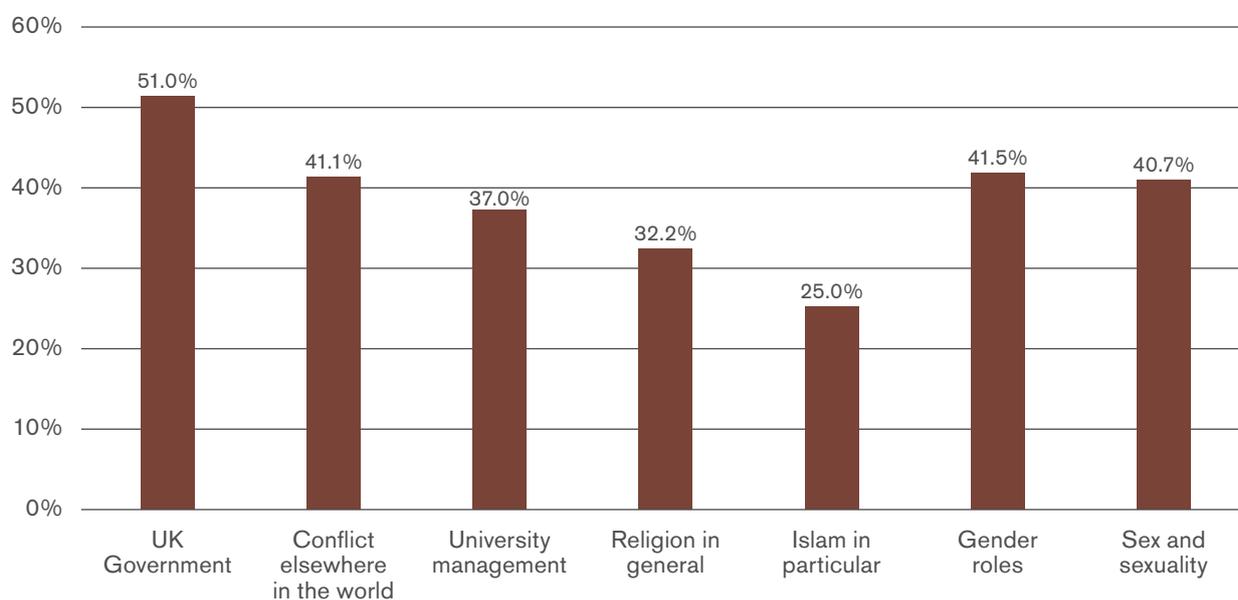
(white female non-religious postgraduate UK student)

A recurring theme in policy discussions about higher education in the UK is free speech. There is a persistent anxiety expressed by government ministers that sensitivities surrounding certain issues result in an ill-judged suppression of free debate, and that this is contrary to the tradition of free enquiry that we have come to expect our universities to uphold. There are good reasons for concern, although the drivers of this pattern are complex and, to some degree, reinforced by government policy and rhetoric.

As our case study research revealed, anxieties about the Prevent strategy have had a chilling effect on campus life, especially among Muslim students, some of whom have consciously modified their engagement with higher education in order to avoid being labelled an extremist and subjected to unfair discrimination.

Reviewing recent controversies surrounding freedom of speech on university campuses, particular issues emerge as especially sensitive. We asked our survey respondents how free they felt they were to express their personal views on various topics within university contexts. We asked them about the UK government, conflicts in other parts of the world, university management, religion in general, Islam in particular,

gender roles, and sex and sexuality. Only a tiny minority – less than 5% – said they did not feel free to express their views on each of these topics. The only exception was the topic of Islam. 7.8% said they did not feel able to express their views on Islam within university contexts, although two thirds said they felt either entirely free or free in most contexts to voice their opinions on this topic. Examined the other way around, when gauging the proportion of students who feel ‘entirely free’ to speak out on these issues, ‘Islam’ scores lowest (see chart 9.1 below). So, the topic of Islam does stand out as distinctive in having a special status within the university. This picture was reinforced by qualitative data, and in interviews and focus groups Muslim students stated that they often felt obliged to self-censor.



**Chart 9.1:** Proportion of students saying they feel ‘entirely free’ to express their personal views within university contexts on a variety of topics. (all students)

This caution about speaking out about Islam is mirrored in a cautious approach to free speech evident among Muslim students. Muslims are significantly more likely to agree that 'Protection from discrimination and ensuring the dignity of minorities can be more important than unlimited freedom of expression' than Christians and those of no religion (87.8%, compared to 75.1% and 73.4% respectively). A similar pattern is found in relation to the statement 'Students should be allowed to opt out of classes or assignments if they are personally uncomfortable with the material being taught'. Here, 62.5% of Muslims students agreed, over 20 percentage points higher than Christians and those of no religion (both just over 42%). Muslim students appear especially aware of their minority status and of the vulnerabilities that come with it.

Our interviews and focus groups provide more detail, with many students and staff expressing concern about the chilling effect that they believe counter terrorism policy is having upon their ability to pursue a rigorous education, speak freely and have difficult conversations about Islam and related topics more generally. These individuals volunteered to take part in our project, some because of serious concerns they have, and decided to bear witness to difficulties they experienced both first and second hand. Moreover, this body of individuals included both Muslims and non-Muslims, reflecting how emerging anxieties extend across the student population. They expressed two forms of motivation: the wrongness of restricting discussion about Islam and the damage that such restrictions do to wider cultures of debate within universities. These concerns were evident in all six of our case study institutions.

Addressing this complex problem is no easy task, especially as it involves a re-building of trust and a change of campus cultures that requires a collective and collaborative effort. It arguably requires a new model of university citizenship. While universities are used to change of an administrative kind, and perpetual bureaucratic revision appears almost habitual in many institutions, culture change is much more difficult. The student population changes completely every few years and is constantly in transition; budgets are strained and short-term planning is often prioritised, as managers anticipate policy changes that accompany cabinet reshuffles, changes of government and spending reviews. Longer term change therefore needs to draw on and be embedded in institutional realities that transcend changes in the student population and changes in Westminster. Put another way, universities need to have a more robust and enduring sense of their own identities and the values they stand for.

## Building respect and understanding

*I have got some Muslim friends, and it's only by talking about why they wear the hijab, why they're doing this, why they're doing that, I realise that we share so many values... We just have different ways of dealing with it in the end – the very last step in like a chain of actions. So I think it's very important to get to know other people and know what they stand for to know how much we share and so we can relate to each other.*

(white female non-religious undergraduate EU student)

One advantage of researching a range of campuses has been the insights into how universities with different demographic profiles encounter different kinds of challenges as well as opportunities. Both Islam as an object of study and Muslims as a constituency of students or staff appear in very different ways and to very different degrees on each of our six case study campuses. Our interviews and focus groups revealed a great deal of interest in interfaith matters, especially at Heritage University and Greenfield Campus. While these two sites are very different – in terms of history, shared ethos, student demographics and surrounding locale, for example – our conversations with students and staff revealed some common features with respect to assumptions about interfaith relationships. They understood that positive interfaith relations are not merely a question of providing space: moral judgements are required in order to provide good interfaith support on campus. On both sites they drew attention to the need to avoid the tendency for Christianity to claim its authority in managing interfaith initiatives on behalf of other religions and explained how this could be avoided through proper representation and consultation.

Many Christian and non-religious participants told us that certain personal encounters (e.g. making friends with classmates or flatmates; cultural exchange events; faith and chaplaincy centre opportunities) could and did help them understand other faiths and cultures better, leading them to suggest that more exposure to different religions and cultures would be a solution to the current tensions

on campus. In making this point, they characterised the challenges at hand as a matter of ‘intercultural literacy’.

Muslim participants, on the other hand, shed light on barriers and limitations that were not acknowledged in public discussion and yet they were experiencing them first-hand, such as “being alienated” in multi-faith spaces (despite the possible good intent behind the creation of such spaces) or noticing how people tiptoe around questions about Islam. They stressed that mutual respect for all religions is necessary if interfaith and chaplaincy initiatives are to be properly inclusive. Moreover, in contrast to Christian and non-religious students who view inter-religious challenges as cultural matters, Muslim students believe that the pressures they face in their day-to-day lives are of a *political* nature, and that is not because they engage in political activities but because their religion has become politicised in public discourses and a subject of policy decisions beyond them.

One way in which universities might address the problems of inclusion and participation we observed would be to consider ways in which this kind of division between culture and politics might be challenged. Islam and Muslims have been constructed in public life as a political issue because of wider narratives about terrorism and radicalisation. As we observed in the previous section, those students whose views align closely with these narratives are more likely to hold negative views about Islam and Muslims. Therefore, challenging these narratives critically and responsibly needs to become an important part of building more positive interfaith and intercultural relationships. And while universities include a significant minority of students and staff who are sympathetic to the idea that radicalisation is a cross-sector problem and who support the Prevent Strategy as a response to it, there are more who are more sceptical. Universities contain the human will and intellectual capital necessary to build more positive perspectives on cultural and religious difference. Indeed, our case studies reveal examples of this already happening:

“ ...it just feels that there’s a little bit more curiosity amongst students here. They’re more open-minded. They’ve come to learn about other cultures, not just physics or chemistry or whatever. They’ve come to learn the languages, the music, the cultures from around the world...”

(Bangladeshi male Muslim postgraduate UK student)

While generating curiosity about cultural difference and the tools with which to explore it are key to building more inclusive universities, the specific challenges outlined in the current report also highlight the importance of additional resources. We consider two of these below.

### **Enhancing Islamic literacy**

The deficit of religious literacy in the UK has been mentioned earlier and has been highlighted in a range of other recent publications (e.g. Dinham and Francis 2015). We hope to have made a strong case in this report that this is especially concerning when considering Islam and Muslims. In addressing emerging challenges, two dimensions of the HE sector seem especially worthy of note: the academic teaching of Islamic Studies as a scholarly source of Islamic literacy; and Muslim colleges as specialist institutions uniquely placed to enhance and enrich broader engagement with issues concerning Islam within the wider sector.

### a) Islamic Studies as an Academic Subject

“ Some of the institutions which are sometimes in the news, because of apparent radicalisation of students, the case has been made, well, why aren't they teaching more about Islam, because if there's nothing in the curriculum of the institution, then anybody who is trying to take Islam seriously will immediately be looking at stuff on the internet, and so on, and there's no human interpreter who can interpret that or challenge it. ”

(white British male Christian academic)

We assume a broad definition of 'Islamic Studies', encompassing a range of subject areas from politics and international relations to law, history, theology and religious studies, constituting a cross-disciplinary field taught at the majority of UK universities (Bernasek and Bunt 2010). In order to analyse Islamic Studies curricula in some depth within the research for this project, we focussed upon three of our six case study institutions: the two universities (Heritage and Central) which offer named degrees in Islamic Studies, and one of the two Muslim colleges (City Muslim College) in our sample because its provision is broader and its student community is larger than that of the other college. A survey of curricula in Islamic Studies was conducted in each institution, augmenting our qualitative research into teaching and learning practice.

Our analysis reveals a rich academic resource but one that is distinguished by internal tensions related to securitisation, secularism and gender. All highlight the potential of Islamic Studies to make a valuable contribution to wider Islamic literacy, and how greater engagement with scholarly debates about reflexivity and critical theory could further enrich Islamic Studies. We discuss each aspect in brief below.

In the mainstream universities Islamic Studies has shifted its focus from language and history and is currently placed very firmly within a political frame of securitisation

and fear about radicalisation. This shift came about as a response to 9/11 and wider policy-related concerns about national security. Such a change in emphasis had been latent in the field for some time but this marked shift – reinforced by government initiatives (Department of Education and Skills 2006) – anticipated a move in staff expertise towards politics, international relations and security studies, which had already happened to an extent in the United States (Safi 2014). Islamic Studies remains a relatively small field in the UK, covered within many disciplines and thus is often institutionally dispersed. Many staff involved in Islamic Studies covering textual, historical and cultural approaches to Islam took a view against securitisation, suggesting a deeper, richer account of Islam can combat societal misperceptions as well as extremist ideas. This was emphasised by staff based at both of the Muslim colleges we studied. While some remain very suspicious of Prevent, many believe that expert understanding of sacred texts and religious histories is central to countering extremist ideas within communities. They understand their dual identity to be their great strength: they can explain Islam from the believer's point of view and they can also contextualise it in relation to their experience as British citizens, international scholars and students.

To turn to our second point, we found a tension between the Islamic Studies curriculum on offer and the demographic profile of the students studying it at university. Many Muslim students are now attending Islamic Studies classes, and they are often devout, yet the teaching of Islamic Studies often presents Islam as incompatible with modern life, and channels a scepticism towards Islamic traditions with an asymmetrical focus on the historical reliability of Islamic canonical texts. Among those who teach Islamic Studies, modern 'Western' scholarship is often considered to be more authoritative than the Islamic legacy or than current Muslim scholarship that is perceived as confessional. This illustrates the still unresolved tension in the curriculum between insider and outsider, believer and non-believer. This dichotomy is maintained by influential understandings of what constitutes critical thinking. In particular, 'critique' is viewed as necessary for good scholarship and is also considered to be a secular habit that is impossible for the religious scholar to adopt (a stereotype we also found rehearsed among some lecturers reflecting on their experience of teaching Muslim students).

Finally, our research revealed a clearly gendered aspect at the heart of Islamic Studies provision: many teaching staff are white, non-Muslim males. In our curriculum survey, we found only a third (34%) of all relevant modules (135 of 400) are taught by female staff across the different departments. The number increases considerably within departments of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies where 48% of modules (73 of 149) are taught by women. This higher percentage, nonetheless, conceals the gendered structure, where female staff are responsible for 70% (53 of 75 modules) of all intensive language teaching (of Arabic, Turkish, Persian, mainly) and only 30% of specialised (non-language) modules (22 of 74) – a figure which unsurprisingly corresponds to the national figure for academic posts held by women in Islamic Studies (30%) (BRAIS, 2019). In City Muslim College, all full-time members of academic staff, bar three, are male, and two of the three women are involved in language teaching. This asymmetry is particularly striking at Muslim Colleges where most students on validated programmes of Islamic Studies are women. Lack of female academics was often noted by staff and student participants as characteristic of Islamic Studies in general and having more qualified female academics seemed to be a shared goal. As one lecturer put it, ‘I have the opportunity to help, you know, Muslim women become scholars in whatever field they want to, and, in a sense, facilitate combatting that imbalance that exists...’

In addition, our research found gender to be a significant factor in both teaching content and learning styles. Not only are there more male tutors teaching Islamic Studies at both mainstream universities and Muslim colleges, but also, teachers make particular assumptions about the critical abilities of female students who are visibly Muslim. That said, we also note some growth of interest in gender among those teaching Islamic Studies. In 2009, there were only 16 such modules (1% of 1,101) across 161 UK institutions (Bernasek and Bunt 2010, 14). In 2017, we documented 17 modules (4% of 400) in just three of the six case study institutions. We recommend planning for goals that improve gender balances in teaching staff, curriculum and use of literature; indeed, our evidence shows there is momentum building in this direction and that it is particularly valued by female students.

Therefore, we wish to highlight Islamic Studies as a rich seam of scholarly endeavour, one that could enhance Islamic literacy across the sector. However, it also exposes some enduring challenges. Muslims are often thought to be uncritical, the teaching of Islamic Studies is highly gendered and approaches to the study of Islam can be essentialist and othering, discounting Muslim scholarly voices and revolving around politics, security studies, and terrorism. Despite their significant impact upon teaching and learning, the pedagogy of Islamic Studies is often implicit and rarely is it openly discussed. We recommend explicit, informed analysis of pedagogical approaches to criticality, gender and securitisation as vitally important in Islamic Studies; indeed, this will considerably strengthen wider understanding and appreciation of the field.

#### **b) Muslim Colleges**

“...the people who founded this place have kept it a place for young Muslims or young people from abroad to come and progress. ...[it] was established as a research centre for scholars to re-look and revisit all the traditional values and systems and methods of following our faith and how it can be revisited and lived in the 21st century.”

(Indian female Muslim, member of support staff at Olive Tree College)

The inclusion in our study of two Muslim colleges was intended to complement the four mainstream case study universities and to demonstrate the importance and calibre of higher education available beyond the university. The UK has around 40 independent colleges of an Islamic character, 30 of which are centres of Islamic religious training (called *Darul Uloom*s) while the rest combine traditional scholarship with modern ‘secular’ thought (Mukadam, Scott-Baumann, Choudhury and Contractor 2010). The two colleges in our study are among a small number of the latter group that receive accreditation

from mainstream organisations, including validation of qualifications, staff training, research methods training, quality control and sharing of resources such as libraries. Our two case study institutions affiliate themselves to one of the two major branches of Islam: one Sunni (with Pakistani connections) and one Shi'a (with Iranian connections). Each college offers support to students who have undertaken strict theological training, seeking to bring prior knowledge into conversation with broader intellectual contexts and thereby to contextualise Islamic theology within contemporary Britain.

In both cases, each college has spent years working towards accreditation in the belief that partnerships with mainstream universities are valuable for many reasons, despite the obstacles encountered. This trend is vulnerable to unforeseen circumstances and few such validations endure in the long term (Shah 2019:11). Both colleges have undoubtedly benefited from being able to offer students validated courses, and standardised procedures have facilitated accountability. The influence has, however, been one-directional, with universities providing useful standardisation, benchmarking and training in pedagogy but not drawing upon the Muslim colleges for their expertise. The colleges employ Islamic scholars with excellent knowledge of classical and modern Arabic, innovative combinations of intellectual study and community endeavour, and expertise that could be used to inform mainstream campuses about Islam, Muslims and even how to identify and combat extremism by using theological arguments from within the Islamic tradition. The accrediting universities do not, however, avail themselves of these resources.

In the contemporary British context, tinged by Islamophobia, it is important to note that staff and students at these two Muslim colleges clearly felt at ease in the Muslim-friendly setting provided and reported no experience of discrimination. At both colleges there was a preparedness to offer guidance to those who might be on a path to extremism. Both colleges have traditions of attracting students from a range of Muslim affiliations and of other faiths, albeit in small numbers and fluctuating from year to year.

There is a government funded initiative to support improved understanding between Muslim colleges and mainstream universities. In 2019 the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government commissioned a working group to identify the barriers to Muslim religious seminaries achieving accreditation for their courses from British universities, 'which government will then seek to act on'. (Integrated Communities Strategy Green Paper, March 2018: 61) We recommend that this be taken one step further, and that the universities consider how to make use of the skills possessed by Islamic scholars as a means of complementing shared expertise and fostering wider religious literacy between HE providers. (Mukadam and Scott-Baumann 2010, Scott-Baumann et al 2019).

## 10. Conclusions



“ I think that one of the social functions of the higher education sector should be the socialisation of good citizenry, engaged citizenry in a democracy. But, part of that socialisation process is to recognise the diversity that exists in our societies and learn to rationalise it for oneself. ”

(Asian male Muslim academic, Olive Tree College)

A key feature of democracy is that it protects the right of citizens to talk relatively freely, especially about topics that worry them. Our focus upon Islam was determined by the interest in Islam on campus shown by government and society and the lack of evidence about presumed risk on campus. The citizen's voice should play an important part in resolving emerging difficulties. The university campus has historically played a crucial role in this and our interviews and focus groups were conducted in the hope of furthering that tradition. We provided a safe space for those who are directly affected by developments on campus, and who have not been consulted or listened to about important moral issues (El-Enany, 2019). Contributing to “testimonial justice” was central to this project. We hold that the student and staff voice should be heard and their opinions sought about policies that shape the cultures they inhabit. This is an ethical principle that informed our empirical work; we hope the latter will help in bringing further problems into the light and in enabling positive change.

The picture we have painted of the way Islam and Muslims are perceived within the UK HE sector is by no means all bad. We found university communities that function safely and harmoniously for the majority

and where inter-cultural and inter-religious relationships sometimes flourish. The majority of students also affirm positive orientations to Islam and the Muslims alongside whom they work and study. However, we also found that Muslims are discriminated against and that common negative stereotypes are echoed by a significant minority of staff and fellow students. We also uncovered a worrying correlation between the language of policy and the language of prejudice. Our findings reveal a two-step process, informed by wider Islamophobic rhetoric and government policy on counterterrorism. First, widespread societal discrimination against Muslims and other minority groups becomes embedded in institutional structures, reinforced by the Prevent Guidance. Secondly, the discussions and debates that would facilitate the challenging and dismantling of such discrimination are actively discouraged by the same policy framework. Staff and students often linked the Prevent Duty Guidance with a reduction in freedom of expression through self-censoring and restricted academic choices, and both Muslims and non-Muslims felt there ought to be the possibility to discuss and challenge such restrictions without incurring a risk of being stigmatised or reported.

We believe there is a strong argument for Prevent to be discontinued in its current form. The evident damage this programme has done to university life clearly calls for a rethink at the policy level. Prevent has caused significant harm by reinforcing common stereotypes of Islam and Muslims and by curbing freedoms of speech and expression on campus. However, the emergent problems run deeper than this. Within the cultural imagination, including on campus, a close link between Muslims, radicalisation and terrorism is already firmly embedded. The evidence discussed in this report underlines the close relationship between belief in a narrative of suspicion about Islam, support for Prevent and patterns of Islamophobia. Moreover, and despite many critical voices, a minority among university staff and students are convinced that Prevent is a sensible solution to a very real problem. A change in policy alone will most likely do little to redress entrenched prejudice and uncritical acceptance of claims made by media, campaigners and politicians that Islam is a social problem and Muslims a suspect community. For this reason, our recommendations (set out at the start of this report) focus on culture change within universities. Key here is communication and dialogue across different levels of the University, which when clear and respectful fosters understanding, trust, cohesion and engagement, strengthening campus life. It is imperative that such communication is encouraged and protected, especially in the post-coronavirus world where we must create new inclusive communities in which we can make sense of new realities.

This need to communicate must work both ways, as senior managers may not be aware of the positive advantages that many students see in having a variety of cultures and religions on campus. For staff there is evidence that equality, diversity and inclusion training can be made more relevant to the decolonising curriculum by inclusion of minority voices (Scott-Baumann, Gibbs, Elwick and Maguire 2019). Indeed, staff and students are ambitious for stronger, more cohesive campuses, and for university life to be informed by clear moral principles. Religion is clearly viewed as a part of this insofar as cultural inclusion is a shared ethos, even if fewer see religious matters as integral to the purpose of higher education. Our findings also show clearly that many students accept and indeed appreciate the many ways in which campus life prepares them for citizenship. In the shadow of corona virus it is difficult to know how campuses will reshape themselves in the immediate future, but increased co-operation and understanding among those of different cultural and religious backgrounds must remain central, both as a goal of education and a dimension of campus life.

# Appendix: The demographic constituency of the survey sample

Our student survey was administered during the 2016-17 academic year, and we can compare the sample with figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in order to establish representativeness in broad terms.

## Gender

	HESA figures for 2016-17	Representing Islam on Campus survey (2017)
Male students	43.3%	43.5%
Female students	56.7%	56.5%

Gender of respondents compared with HESA figures from same academic year (2016-17) (Full Person Equivalent)<sup>23</sup>

## Ethnicity

	HESA figures for 2016-17 (excluding 'unknown's')	Representing Islam on Campus survey (2017)
White	61.5% (77.2%)	81.4%
Asian	8.3% (10.5%)	10.4%
Black	5.6% (6.9%)	3.3%
Other (including mixed)	4.2 (5.3%)	4.9%
Unknown	20.4%	-
N	2,729,530 (2,157,493)	2,022

Ethnicity of respondents compared with HESA figures from same academic year (2016-17) (Full Person Equivalent, ethnicity 5-way classification)

## International/EU/home students

	HESA figures for 2016-17	Representing Islam on Campus survey (2017)
Home (UK)	72.8%	86.7%
Other EU	10.0%	8.8%
Non-EU (international)	15.7%	4.6%
Not known/stateless	1.5%	-

Student status of respondents compared with HESA figures from same academic year (2016-17) (Full Person Equivalent)

## Undergraduate/postgraduate status

	HESA figures for 2016-17	Representing Islam on Campus survey (2017)
Undergraduate students	76.2%	75.4%
Postgraduates	23.8%	22.7%

Undergraduate/postgraduate status of respondents compared with HESA figures from same academic year (2016-17) (Full Person Equivalent)<sup>24</sup>

23. While a sizeable number – over 1,000 – identified as 'other', as this amounted in proportional terms to a very small fraction of a single percentage of the national figure, it is excluded from HESA's percentage calculations. Among our own survey respondents, none opted for the 'other' category, although 5 individuals stated that their gender is different from the one they were assigned at birth.

24. A small number (N=37) of our survey respondents, amounting to 1.8%, opted for 'other', hence the two figures here not adding up to 100%.

### **Degree subject**

<b>Subject Area</b>	<b>HESA figures for 2016-17</b>	<b>Representing Islam on Campus survey (2017)</b>
Medicine, dentistry and related	15.3%	12.5%
Biological sciences (including veterinary science)	10.9%	10.3%
Physical Sciences	4.1%	6.9%
Maths and Computer Science	6.3%	8.0%
Engineering and technology	9.3%	10.1%
Social science and law	13.5%	16.8%
Business, management and related	16.6%	8.3%
Languages	4.6%	2.9%
Humanities	3.7%	10.3%
Creative Arts and Design	7.6%	6.6%
Education	6.5%	4.8%
Other	1.7%	2.6%

*JACS<sup>25</sup> subject area of respondents compared with HESA figures from same academic year (2016-17)  
(Full Person Equivalent; some categories combined for comparison)*

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25. Joint Academic Coding System, a system for classifying academic subjects jointly maintained by the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS).

## Religion

While HESA now collect data on the religion of students, universities typically treat this as a voluntary question at registration, and so the national picture is not complete. Figures for 2016-17 – collated within a report published by Advance-HE – cover 61.88% of all students in HE, but this includes those who opted for ‘prefer not to say’ or left the field blank (which made up 29.6% of the returns).<sup>26</sup> Excluding these ‘non-responses’ still leaves us with coverage of almost half of all students studying at UK universities, although a more granular breakdown is not publicly available and so it is impossible to measure patterns of non-response. Consequently, it is difficult to ascertain whether particular types of university, students of particular status or of particular ethnic or religious backgrounds are especially over or underrepresented. That said, the figures provide us with a useful, if imperfect, benchmark which, alongside other national data, help build a picture of the religious constituency of those studying at UK universities.

Comparing these figures to our own survey data produces the following table.

	<b>Advance-HE figures for UK universities (2016-17)</b>	<b>Representing Islam on Campus survey (2017)</b>
Buddhist	1.95%	1.8%
Christian	33.9%	46.1%
Hindu	1.97%	1.3%
Jewish	0.43%	0.3%
Muslim	8.43%	8.9%
Sikh	0.8%	0.3%
Spiritual	1.4%	-
Other	1.68%	2.0%
No religion	49.45%	39.4%

*Advance-HE figures for religion of students at responding HEIs (excluding non-responses and ‘prefer not to say’), compared with Representing Islam on Campus survey data.*

A note on interpreting these figures is necessary at this point, not least as the Advance-HE figures differ from our survey figures in several important respects. Most importantly, our proportion of Christians is much higher than Advance HE while those opting for ‘no religion’ appear correspondingly smaller. Inclusion of the ‘spiritual’ option (included in the Advance-HE figures but not within our survey) cannot explain such a significant difference as only 1.4% opted for this answer. Comparative analysis of the figures suggests this difference is probably due to the way in which the questions were asked. As the Representing Islam on Campus survey question followed a separate question asking if students considered themselves religious, spiritual or neither, it may be the case that students who attach a cultural rather than religious significance to Christianity are happy to affirm this affiliation as they have already disavowed any religious/spiritual meaning in the preceding question. Working with this analysis, the roughly 10% proportion to whom this applies would appear as the increased 10% allocated to the ‘no religion’ category within the Advance-HE data. Indeed, this is backed up in a cross-tabulation analysis, which reveals that 24% of all respondents opting for ‘Christian’ within our survey also say they are ‘neither religious nor spiritual’, a figure that amounts to 224 individuals, almost exactly 10% of the total population surveyed. This could also plausibly explain the difference in figures for Buddhism (some of whom might have opted for ‘spiritual’ in the Advance-HE data), although the differences here are very slight. In fact, the proportional differences between the number of Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh students in both surveys were all well under 1%, suggesting the disparity addressed above is an issue distinctive to popular understandings of Christianity and ‘non-religion’, the two overlapping for a significant number.

26. See [https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018\\_HE-stats-report-students.pdf](https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018_HE-stats-report-students.pdf) (accessed 3/12/18)

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