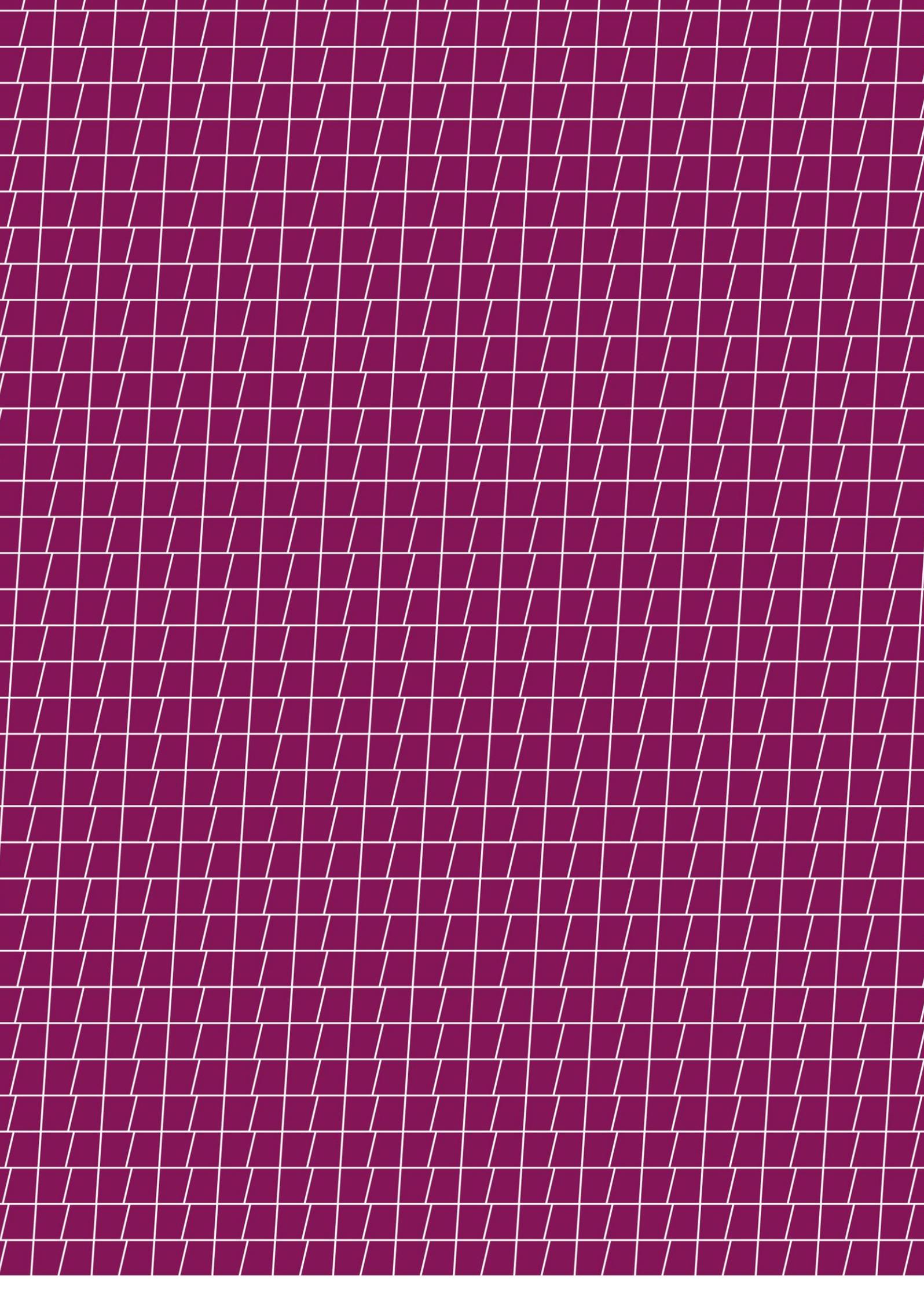


The experience of Muslim students in 2017-18





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*This research project is a collaboration between
NUS' Women's and Black Students' campaigns.*



“Verily, with
every
hardship
comes ease.”

Qur'an (94:5)

Foreword

When we were first elected into our roles at the National Union of Students (NUS), it became increasingly apparent that the organisation failed to grasp the day-to-day realities of Muslim students on campus – and, by extension, the needs of Muslim communities as a whole.

Although there are an estimated 330,000 Muslim students in higher education and further education in the UK, there seemed to be little information (or understanding) about the ‘Muslim’ student experience. This research was therefore commissioned by the Black Students’ Campaign and the NUS Women’s Campaign as an attempt to bridge this gap and to resolve questions such as, “What does it mean to be Muslim in Britain today?”

Perhaps it is worth restating that the decision to roll out this survey began as early as October 2016 – amid increasing concerns about the normalisation of Islamophobia in society, as well as the scrutiny and racism levelled at Muslims in public positions (including NUS officers).

One cannot deny, for example, that there has been a dramatic surge in anti-Muslim sentiment – both within UK educational settings and in society as a whole. The last few decades are littered with stories of physical violence against Muslims, the over-policing of minority communities and systematic inequalities.

There is often a tendency within activist spaces to explain Islamophobia as a recent political phenomenon – one that emerged with the election of Trump and the resurgence of the alt-right. However, anti-Muslim attitudes have existed for as long as Islam has existed. We cannot afford to explain Islamophobia without grasping this fundamental truth.

This report builds on the work of the Black Students’ Campaign and the NUS Women’s Campaign over the last few years. Crucially, it highlights the chilling effect of the UK Government’s counter-terrorism initiative Prevent on Muslim students, where it is a duty to identify and report students who are ‘vulnerable to radicalisation’ and it reaffirms our calls to abolish the duty.

This report also informs the pioneering work being done by the NUS Women’s Campaign on gendered Islamophobia, the effects of counter-terrorism policy on Muslim women and the triple penalty experienced by Muslim women.

We look forward to working with local activists, student Islamic societies, the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS) and relevant sector bodies to implement the recommendations of this report and create a more inclusive environment for Muslim students.

We leave you with some words from the Qur’an, with which we started this research, “Verily, with every hardship comes ease.” (94:5)

It is worth mentioning that this research was not easy for either of us. Firstly, it was the product of the deep-seated racism that we have personally experienced and witnessed during our time in the student movement. It was also an attempt to shed light on some uncomfortable truths including the failings of NUS in recent years. Most of all, it was an opportunity to capture the voices of the most marginalised in our movement and restore some agency to Muslims.

With love and solidarity,

Hareem Ghani, NUS UK Women’s Officer
Ilyas Nagdee, NUS UK Black Students’ Officer.

Acknowledgements

NUS would like to extend our sincere thanks to the Muslim students and sabbatical officers who took part in the online survey. In particular we would like to thank those who shared distressing and difficult experiences with us and who provided important insights as to how Islamophobia within the student movement might be challenged.

In particular we would like to acknowledge the following people who contributed to this report;

- Members of the project steering group: Saffa Mir (Vice President Students Affairs, FOSIS), Akiqul Hoque (Deputy Vice President Student Affairs, FOSIS), Aiysha Qureshi (Welfare and International Officer, Students' Union, UCL), Ayo Olatunji (BME Officer, Students' Union UCL) and Tara Mariwany (Welfare & Diversity Officer, Goldsmiths Students' Union) for all their support in producing and developing this research;
- Fenella Bramwell and Lynsey Owens from the NUS Insight Team who supported the development of the survey and the data analysis;
- Jannat Hossain for promoting and disseminating the survey across our membership;
- Richard Stewart who undertook the analysis and drafting of the report;
- Azfar Shafi and Mandeep Rupra who provided expertise in race equity and valuable feedback in the drafting process;
- Jeremy Pilkington for designing the report;
- and Natasha Dhumma for managing the research project and finalising the report.

Executive summary

The Muslim Students' Survey was launched in 2017 as part of Islamophobia Awareness Month. The NUS Women's Campaign and NUS Black Students Campaign commissioned this research to better understand the Muslim further and higher education student population in the UK and their experience of their educational institutions, unions, representatives and of NUS. It was developed in consultation with Muslim student representatives from both higher and further education and the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS). The survey comprised questions with defined, multiple choice answers – primarily yielding quantitative information – but respondents also had opportunities to add comments, providing some qualitative data.

We received 578 responses to our research survey among UK-based Muslim students. Almost all respondents (93 per cent) were in full-time education and 82 per cent were UK citizens. We also received a small number of responses from sabbatical officers, accounting for 5 per cent of all responses. A more detailed demographic breakdown of survey responses is in the appendices.

- The research did not seek to compare Muslim students with all other students. Instead, it sought to understand Muslim students' experiences and their barriers to

general involvement in their learning environment and community. More specifically, it aimed to identify Muslim students' barriers to engaging in student democracy and debate on sensitive issues that relate to their Muslim identity. Hate-motivated incidents and experiences of Islamophobia¹ were key issues arising from the survey. We consistently found that Prevent, which forms part of the government's counter-terrorism strategy and requires education institutions to identify and report students who they deem to be 'vulnerable to radicalisation' significantly affects all of these engagement opportunities for Muslim students. One-third of respondents felt negatively affected by Prevent. This ranges from having been referred to authorities under the scheme, having organised events that were cancelled or significantly changed because of it (30 per cent of those affected) or having disengaged from political debate specifically due to concerns around being reported under Prevent. As a result, 43 per cent of those who reported being affected by Prevent felt unable to express their views or be themselves.

- Respondents affected by Prevent conveyed a significantly different experience to other Muslim students in a variety of areas, including being less involved in student democracy, being more likely to feel there is no safe space for them to discuss issues affecting them, and being less comfortable engaging in political

¹ The definition of Islamophobia used in the survey is from *Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for us All*, Runnymede Trust (2017): 'Islamophobia is any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or

impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.'

debate or running for voluntary and sabbatical roles in their students' union. These findings are a cause for deep concern.

The survey also explored Muslim students' experiences of leadership within their students' unions and NUS' democratic structures:

- Respondents viewed representative roles with a politicised aspect differently from those they perceived as solely relating to improving academic provision. Some 63 per cent of respondents would feel comfortable standing to be a course representative, compared to only 38 per cent for sabbatical roles, citing being questioned on their faith and not feeling representative of other students as reasons not to stand.
- The vast majority of respondents (eight out of 10) had not attended NUS events of any kind. Those who had attended NUS events reported having more positive experiences at training/learning and campaign events than democratic events.
- Among respondents who have attended NUS democratic events (12 per cent), one in three felt unwelcome there. Of those who had attended democratic events, more than one-third (38 per cent) spontaneously stated that the events were not supportive of Muslims or that attendees had experienced anti-Muslim comments during the events.

On their interactions with their students' unions and campus more broadly, we found:

- Only 38 per cent of respondents agreed that their students' union understands their needs as a Muslim student, and 36 per cent of the total agreed that they feel represented by their union.

- Half of all respondents have voted in students' union elections, four out of 10 have had some involvement in union activities such as sports clubs and societies, and more than half belong to their education institution's Islamic Society (ISoc).
- 39 per cent of respondents felt able to participate in their union's sports activities only rarely or never at all. Drinking cultures, a general lack of inclusiveness and mixed sex sports were stated as barriers to getting involved in sport.
- Positively, 90 per cent of respondents said they had a prayer space or mosque on or near campus. Less positively, only 68 per cent had halal food (food permitted by Islam) on or near campus and only 28 per cent were clear they had a Muslim chaplain or cleric at their educational institution, with only 24 per cent sure that their institution had a Muslim imam.
- Among the respondents who felt they had a safe space on campus to discuss issues affecting them, 54 per cent considered this to be their ISoc. Yet from the small number of responses we received from ISoc presidents these valued and safe spaces are indicated to be under threat. 80 per cent of ISoc president respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the Prevent duty has had a negative impact on their society, with some commenting a decline in membership due to concerns of surveillance by authorities.

Responses relating to hate crime, hate incidents and abuse were also cause for concern:

- One in three respondents said they were fairly or very worried about experiencing verbal abuse, physical attacks, vandalism, property

damage or theft at their place of study, relating to their religion or belief. Women respondents who wear a religious Islamic garment (eg a hijab, niqab or jilbab) were significantly more likely to be very worried.

- One in three respondents had experienced some type of abuse or crime at their place of study, with 20 per cent experiencing verbal abuse in person.
- 79 per cent of those who had experienced abuse believed that this was motivated by the perpetrator's or perpetrators' prejudice relating to their Muslim identity, with seven out of 10 of these citing prejudiced statements or gestures before, during or after the incident. Hate words or symbols, incidents coinciding with a recent terrorist event or with activism that challenges Islamophobia were other reasons why respondents who had experienced abuse believed this was as a result of their faith.
- Respondents who experienced an Islamophobic incident would be most likely to report it to a member of academic staff at their place of study (36 per cent), followed by police (29 per cent) or their ISoc (29 per cent). One in four respondents would not report an Islamophobic incident.
- Not necessarily connected to their place of study, over half of our respondents had experienced some form of abuse or harassment online. The main types of online abuse were religious attacks and those against their personal views.

- 91 per cent of respondents agreed that Muslims and Islam are not portrayed positively in the media and 89 per cent did not believe that attacks on Muslims were reported equally in the press, when compared with attacks on other groups.
- 40 per cent of respondents agreed that negative portrayals of Muslims in the media would dissuade them from seeking a high-profile position in their students' union, and 62 per cent felt that reporting of recent 'terrorist' attacks in the media affected how people treated them. These were more likely among respondents who wear religious garments. This contrasted to respondents' feelings around online abuse which they felt would not impact whether or not they would stand for a high profile position.

This report outlines a number of recommendations for students' unions, further and higher education institutions and NUS to address the issues raised through this research. These range from improving support services and reporting mechanisms to increasing Muslim leadership and civic engagement, creating healthy spaces for political and academic debate and positive media representation. As well as seeking to inform how students' unions and NUS engage with Muslim students these findings will, where they relate to Muslim officers and the organisation, inform NUS' Race Equity Plan².

In exploring wider Muslim representation in the media:

² NUS (2017) *Race Equity Plan to Tackle Institutional Racism*

<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/nus-race-equity-plan>

Introduction

This research is the first comprehensive piece of work devoted entirely to capturing the experiences of Muslim students and sabbatical officers in colleges and universities throughout the UK.

Given the current political context, this research is timely. Anti-Muslim hate crime is at an all-time high, the Prevent legislation threatens the civil freedoms of every student, and the media seems determined to vilify Black and/or Muslim activists. Prayer rooms are being defaced, pro-Palestinian activists are facing soaring levels of scrutiny and Muslim women are having their veils pulled off in public.

With the recent inauguration of a US president swept to office on a campaign of racism and Islamophobia, a resurgence of far-right parties seizing power across Europe and ever-intensifying race- and faith-based vitriol in the media, tackling Islamophobia is urgently required for the sake of our whole society.

Alongside this, extensive measures are being introduced by further and higher education institutions to monitor the activities of Muslim students – from installing cameras in prayer rooms to tracking emails. In attempting to implement their Prevent policy to meet their legal responsibilities to prevent terrorism, universities are effectively placing Muslims under strict surveillance. Measures such as these both draw upon and feed Islamophobia, while also undermining education institutions' ability to function as spaces of cooperation and learning.

This is before turning to the socio-economic situation for many Muslim students. The Muslim community is described as the most economically disadvantaged group in the UK, with almost 50 per cent living in the 10

most deprived local authorities, and with Muslim women experiencing the greatest pay gap in the country. In 2017, a government report found that young Muslims living in the UK face enormous social mobility challenges, being more likely to drop out of their studies, less likely to acquire a first or a 2:1 at degree level and more likely to be unemployed than any other faith group. Only one in five members of the economically active Muslim population is in full-time employment, compared to one in three overall. Meanwhile, Muslims comprise 15 per cent of prisoners in the UK yet less than 5 per cent of the population.

Islamophobia is played out on every stage in UK society. Hate crime against Muslims is certainly a clear and present threat, but it only tells half of the story and speaks little of the institutionalised nature of Islamophobia.

NUS conducted an independent review into institutional racism within the organisation in 2016 and a number of its findings are also reflected in this piece of research. As such, this report will inform activities in NUS' Race Equity Plan, which aims to tackle institutional racism and create lasting organisational change. The fight against Islamophobia remains core to anti-racism, but has for too long involved little more than tokenistic tweets and distant whispers within the student movement.

NUS' own Light Sleeper report (1999), touted as its "first ever anti-racist handbook", reiterated damaging conspiracies about the "threat of Islamic extremist organisations" and abusive "Muslim extremists" on campus, rather than the very real threats facing Muslim students. Meanwhile, incremental improvements in Muslim student representation in students' unions and NUS have been accompanied by venomous pushback and attacks in the media and from peers, which impede Muslim students'

current and potential political involvement. This means that the opportunities for personal growth and civic engagement offered by our movement is increasingly limited for our Muslim peers.

It is clear that NUS and the student movement have much more to do in rooting out Islamophobia at the institutional level on campuses and in students' unions. It is also crucial to respond to the lived experiences of Muslim students, which are deeply gendered, racialised, and class-stratified.

The Muslim Students' Survey, launched in 2017 as part of Islamophobia Awareness Month, aimed to capture these experiences. It addresses a whole spectrum of issues faced by Muslim students in further and higher education – from their everyday interactions in lecture theatres to involvement in their students' unions and student societies, their feelings of safety on campus and their perceptions of media representations of their fellow Muslims. Building on the experiences of former Muslim NUS officers and volunteers, it also sought to understand how NUS can better support Muslim students' participation in the student movement, enable successful Muslim leadership and challenge Islamophobia in all its forms.

Research findings

Prevent and the stifling effect of counter-terrorism

The Prevent duty has been a legal requirement for further and higher education institutions and staff since the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015. It is designed to combat exposure to 'extremism', which the programme states can lead to individuals being 'radicalised' into committing crime intended to make political change.

The Prevent duty requires education institutions to identify and report students who they deem to be vulnerable to 'radicalisation' or 'extremism'. This may involve referring students via Channel, one of many local multi-agency boards with broad powers, which can recommend that a student must attend a variety of programmes.

NUS believes that this approach is fundamentally flawed and discriminatory. The Black Students' Campaign has stated that it believes Prevent needs to be abolished. For more information, please see the further guidance and campaign documentation available via NUS³.

Awareness and understanding

One-third of our survey respondents felt negatively affected by the Prevent strategy. This included participating less in political activity or debate; having events they have organised being restricted or cancelled; or being reported through Prevent. Whether a

Muslim student has been affected by Prevent is a significant indicator of whether they are involved in a wide variety of student activities and their opinions on a variety of matters. As such we noted throughout the survey where these answers significantly differed from the rest of the respondents, had they been affected by Prevent.

Male respondents were more likely to be very or extremely aware of Prevent. Students affected by Prevent highlighted that their experience of Prevent has led to them taking part in less political activity.

Muslim students feel strongly about what Prevent entails. An overwhelming majority of respondents disagreed that lecturers and education institutions should monitor and report students' attitudes and behaviours, prayer room activities and email/online activity. Three in five respondents disagreed that lecturers should report on their views and opinions. Having personal experience of the impact of Prevent heightens these responses.

Two out of five respondents (43 per cent) who reported having been affected by Prevent told us that this experience made it harder to express their opinions or views. Nearly a third of students (30 per cent) who have been affected by Prevent reported experiencing barriers to organising speakers and events on campus.

"In lessons I found myself not speaking my true opinion because of fear of being misreported as a result, just for saying my opinion, and I worry that others will just comment." (Woman, aged 22-23, Masters student)

³ For further discussion on the terminology of Prevent please see NUS Black Students' Campaign *Preventing PREVENT Handbook*, 2017

<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/preventing-prevent-handbook>

"[When I was] getting a certain speaker for an event, Prevent were involved and had to be present for the talk, in addition to police as well, shockingly." (Man, aged 22–23, higher education student)

Muslim students most likely not to have been affected by Prevent include women who do not wear religious garments (eg hijab or niqab), those not involved with their students' union and international students. The correlation between the visibility of Muslim women and how they are affected by Prevent is notable, lending weight to arguments that Prevent magnifies a variety of existing biases and prejudice among staff who exercise the duty.

The impact of Prevent on participation in civic life

Our research findings suggest that Muslim students follow a similar pattern to other students in terms of their general levels of participation (both passive and active) in student union activities, including a small percentage who have no involvement whatsoever. Respondents who reported a complete lack of involvement in these activities are more likely to have reported being unaffected by Prevent. Conversely, students who reported an acute awareness of their students' union's work are more likely to have reported being affected by Prevent. Muslim students affected by Prevent are more likely to disagree that their students' union understands their needs or reflects their views.

These findings are reflected in Muslim students' engagement in, and attitudes towards, NUS. Respondents who are not involved with their students' union and/or not affected by Prevent were more likely to report being unaware of NUS' work. Students Not Suspects, NUS' Prevent campaign, is delivered through our member

students' unions, and on the ground activists often within union structures. Respondents' awareness of Prevent tends to accompany a lack of comfort attending NUS events (with 30 per cent of those affected by Prevent not feeling comfortable by contrast to 17 per cent of those not affected). This group also disagreed that NUS understands the needs of Muslim students (comprising 35 per cent in comparison with 20 per cent of those unaffected). Students affected by Prevent are also more likely to have attended NUS events. Negative feedback on NUS events does not mention the organisation's stance on Prevent, however, instead focusing on access and the politicised nature of Muslim identity at policy and democratic events.

Feelings of safety and political disengagement

Respondents who reported having been affected by Prevent are significantly more likely than others to believe there is no safe space or forum on campus to discuss issues that affect them. These students are also significantly more likely to note they would not be comfortable involving themselves in student debates around racism, Islamophobia, Muslim student provision, terrorism, Palestine or Prevent.

It is notable that Prevent causes discomfort for students engaging in politicised aspects of student life. For example, students affected by Prevent reported being less likely to feel comfortable running for voluntary or sabbatical roles within the student movement, as opposed to academic roles such as course representatives. Qualitative feedback from respondents who reported being less willing to run for any roles explicitly highlight their Muslim identity as a factor, but it is awareness of Prevent that correlates with a lack of comfort running for political roles.

"I feel confident that there would be no discrimination or any

judgement when it comes to being a course rep. I'm somewhat confident my class would be supportive. (Woman, aged 22–23, Masters student)

Awareness of the Prevent strategy and concern about Islamophobic abuse in all forms, including online, are linked. It is notable that students who lack any awareness of Prevent are more likely to have never have experienced abuse or crime at their place of study. Students with an understanding of Prevent react to incidents of Islamophobic abuse or hate crime differently, being more likely to report it to their student sabbatical officer or Islamic Society (ISoc), although there is no significant change in the likelihood that they will report it elsewhere. These respondents are also more likely to know that there is not a third party hate crime reporting centre available to them where they can submit a report in an environment they feel comfortable in without having to engage directly with the police. However, awareness of Prevent correlates with students having less trust in the ability of their educational institution, students' union and NUS to respond appropriately to allegations of Islamophobia.

As noted elsewhere, there is a high level of consensus among respondents that media portrayals of Muslims and Islam are not positive, and that attacks against Muslims are not reported in the media to the same extent as those on other groups. However, the impact of these portrayals on students is influenced by their experience of Prevent. Students who have been affected by Prevent are more likely to cite media representation of Muslims as a reason not to seek a high-profile position within their students' union. These respondents are also more likely to believe that media coverage of terrorism influences how other people treat them.

Conclusions relating to Prevent

Prevent is a key issue for respondents' ability to engage meaningfully with the structures of their institutions, unions and NUS, in particular around democratic engagement. It is particularly notable that being affected by Prevent has a negative impact on respondents' engagement with political debates. This negative impact persists whether or not respondents articulated that fear around Prevent was the cause. This correlation demonstrates the chilling effect of Prevent, and that being affected by Prevent accompanies an erosion in trust of institutions who have responsibility to combat Islamophobia.

Engaging with NUS and students' unions

Getting involved in debates and changing opinions is a core aspect of student engagement with the wider learning community and a key element of student leadership. Muslim survey respondents told us about their experiences of debating different topics and their views on standing for different student leadership roles.

Willingness to discuss difficult topics

Muslim students reported being generally relatively happy to be involved in discussions on racism, Islamophobia and provisions for Muslim students. They were more likely to report being uncomfortable or unsure about debating terrorism, Palestine and the Prevent duty, although half of the respondents would still feel comfortable engaging in debates on these issues.

Reasons cited where respondents did not feel comfortable to get involved in these debates included general feelings of discomfort, how others view them, and concerns about being misunderstood or not

knowing enough about the topics. One in 10 students who would not get involved specifically cited fear of being reported to Prevent.

"Some of these topics I don't have enough information on, but also I don't feel comfortable debating Islamophobia as people don't take the subject seriously and think we're playing victims. I don't mind discussing political ideologies." (Woman, aged 22-23, graduated in the last year)

"Being under the radar. Potentially reported to Prevent. Being misunderstood." (Man, aged 20-21, higher education student)

Academic versus politicised democratic engagement

The survey distinguished Muslim students' responses to potentially standing for office to be a course-level academic representative (63 per cent would feel comfortable with this) or standing for a volunteer officer or paid sabbatical officer role (54 per cent and 38 per cent would feel comfortable with this, respectively).

Reasons for standing for voluntary or sabbatical officer roles included feeling their faith was not a barrier, previous Muslim students' successes, and a recognition of their own skills and experience. In contrast, reasons cited by respondents for not feeling comfortable standing for a voluntary or sabbatical officer role included concerns around their own skills and confidence, and the potential impact of the role on them personally. Some 42 per cent of respondents cited being questioned around their faith as a reason to not stand for sabbatical roles.

In qualitative feedback, some students said they felt they would struggle to represent other students. This is a key concern as all

leadership roles, except those that require candidates to self-identify in a specific way, should be open regardless of the individual identity.

"I am introverted and I avoid 'public roles'. Also, I usually feel that I am unable to represent fellow students." (Woman, aged 22-23, higher education student)

"There is not any Muslim female representation in my students' union, I'd feel very out of place." (Woman, aged 18-19, higher education student)

Feedback highlighted that it was the politicised nature of part-time officer and sabbatical officer roles that dissuaded students from standing, as opposed to academic representative roles. Respondents could differentiate academic roles from their identities, and more Muslim students would consider running for these roles. There is space for further exploration, potentially through local or national research, about what is considered success in terms of the profile of potential candidates for politicised officer roles in students' unions. There is another potential opportunity to examine how course-level academic roles are linked to progression within students' unions.

Positions of leadership in the national context

Nearly half (43 per cent) of our respondents agreed that they would feel comfortable running for positions of leadership in their students' union. Slightly fewer (38 per cent) agreed that their students' union understands their needs as a Muslim student, with 36 per cent agreeing that they feel represented by their union. However, 39 per cent of respondents could neither agree nor disagree that their union reflects the views of Muslim students, which may highlight need for clarity around

student union representation and democratic accountability. The reasons respondents gave for a lack of trust or engagement with their students' unions were varied, with no single dominant issue but a broad focus on accessibility and inclusion – these areas are likely to provide opportunities to improve engagement and trust within the Muslim student body.

Awareness of NUS' work is low among survey respondents, with a third not at all aware, and only one in 10 very or extremely aware of the organisation's work. Eight out of 10 respondents had not attended any NUS meetings or events, and the majority of those who had attended events did not comment or feed back on this experience in our survey. Where there was feedback, 40 per cent of respondents who had attended NUS events reported having positive experiences at training or learning events, the most positively rated types of events. A few specific campaign or project events, such as the Muslim Women in Leadership conference organised by the Women's Campaign, also received mostly positive comments.

Notably, 38 per cent of respondents' comments relating to experiences of attending NUS democratic or policy events, reflected perceptions that these events were not supportive of Muslims or that attendees had experienced anti-Muslim comments. One in three respondents said they were made to feel unwelcome in such NUS spaces. In this context, it is important to recognise that Muslim students are not a homogenous group.

"I feel alienated and feel as though I must vote in a particular manner." (Woman, aged 20–21, higher education student)

"I attended National Conference and felt very targeted because of my faith. Because I am a visible Muslim woman, it was assumed I

would vote a certain way. I had remarks made to me in person and on social media specifically because I was a visible Muslim partaking and voicing my concerns." (Woman, aged 18–19, higher education student)

Managing online interactions and media coverage of both NUS events, and for attendees, candidates for officer roles and officers, should be a priority for improving the accessibility of our democratic spaces.

"No protection provided for Muslim students from being attacked by the press whilst partaking in NUS policy events such as National Executive Committee." (Woman, aged 22–23, PhD student)

Conclusion around engagement with NUS and students' unions

There are key issues regarding NUS and wider union democratic engagement for Muslim students, which are exacerbated by national initiatives such as Prevent. NUS and student union initiatives should address these barriers, starting with engagement with NUS as a template for further work in students' unions and further and higher education institutions.

The student experience

Students' engagement in academic and pastoral life is a key factor in their academic success. We asked respondents about their views on, and how they interacted with, their students' union, educational institution and NUS itself. This included asking respondents about Muslim student focused service provision and facilities at their place of study.

Participation

The respondents to our survey have had a wide range of engagement and involvement in students' union activities on campus. Half of them have voted in student union elections and more than half belong to their ISoc. Four out of 10 have had some involvement in activities such as sports clubs and societies. Fewer respondents indicated having been more actively involved in their students' unions, such as the one in 10 who have sat on committees, are academic representatives or have set up a society. Only one in 10 respondents have not been involved with their students' union at all. Reasons given for this lack of involvement include lack of time and lack of interest in the activities offered.

Nearly one in five respondents were very or extremely aware of their students' union's work, and 71% of all respondents were aware or somewhat aware of this. One in 10 are not at all aware of what their union does.

Involvement in activities

Respondents' experience of involvement in volunteering, student media, societies other than ISoc, politics and sports are mixed. 89 per cent reported always or usually feeling able to participate in volunteering and community action but 39 per cent said they rarely or never felt able to participate in sports. Among respondents giving feedback on barriers to participation across all of these activities, the drinking culture was a factor for more than one-quarter. Other factors cited by respondents include a general lack of inclusiveness and problems participating in mixed sex sports.

Experiences and service provision at educational institutions

We asked survey participants about their experiences of their places of study, including the provision for Muslim students.

Positively, 90 per cent of respondents had a prayer space or mosque on or near their campus. Less positively, only 68 per cent of respondents had access to halal food at or near their place of study, and only 28 per cent were clear they had a Muslim chaplain or cleric, with only 24 per cent sure they had a Muslim imam at their educational institution.

Respondents gave mixed responses to questions about whether they feel there is a safe space or forum on campus where they can discuss issues that affect them. A quarter responded that there is such a space at their place of study, but a third said that there is not, with even more respondents unsure. Over half of those who felt there was a safe space highlighted the ISoc as that space, indicating the importance of those societies. It is concerning that it is primarily Muslim-only spaces that are considered safe spaces for these students, which may highlight a need for more cultural competency in other forums and services.

Learning and views on their educational institution

Survey respondents' attitudes towards their educational institution varied. A majority agreed that they felt their institution would not remove or change their prayer space without consultation, and that they could engage in discussion on issues relating to Islam and Muslim people in class. In contrast, 43 per cent of respondents would not feel comfortable discussing terrorism in class, and 44 per cent not feel comfortable about the way issues relating to Muslim people or terrorism are covered in class. Respondents highlighted organisation and management as issues at their place of study. Only one in 10 students believed that their institution avoided scheduling classes and exams during Ramadan, or that their institution avoided scheduling classes and exams during prayer times.

A third of students who gave feedback on how to improve facilities or services for Muslim students highlighted improved prayer space, and there was similar feedback on improved access to halal food. Wudhu shower facilities were also requested by one in 10 respondents who gave feedback. Some 13 per cent of respondents' feedback concerned pastoral support they would like to see provided for Muslim students.

Conclusion around the student experience

The accessibility and inclusion of both formal and informal learning, and of extra-curricular experiences, is a key concern for all respondents, and as a consequence NUS. Previous research conducted by NUS has included recommendations on how to make sports clubs and societies more inclusive⁴. There are further recommendations below, relating to ISocs and their key role in supporting Muslim students.

Hate crime, Islamophobia and representations of Muslims

We asked respondents about their attitudes towards, and experiences of, hate crime and harassment, including online. We were interested in a variety of experiences, including verbal abuse, physical attacks, vandalism, property damage and theft. When these actions are motivated by religion or belief, they are hate crimes.

Experiences of hate crime and harassment

One in three respondents were fairly or very worried about experiencing verbal abuse, physical attacks, vandalism, property damage or theft relating to their religion or belief at their place of study. This response was gendered; women who wear a traditional Islamic garment (eg a hijab, niqab or jilbab) were significantly more likely to be very worried about being abused or attacked. One in three respondents said they had experienced some type of abuse or crime at their place of study, with one in five experiencing verbal abuse in person.

The vast majority (79 per cent) of respondents who have experienced abuse or crime believed that this was motivated by prejudice relating to their Muslim identity, with seven out of 10 of these respondents citing prejudiced statements or gestures made by perpetrator/s before, during or after the incident as their reason for doing so. Hate words or symbols, and the event coinciding with a recent 'terrorist' event, were also noted by respondents as reasons for believing the perpetrator's actions were motivated by religious prejudice. Of those who believed an incident related to prejudice, 28 per cent stated it occurred while they were engaged in activism that challenged Islamophobia.

The experiences of LGBT+ Muslim students were particularly concerning. While the number of responses from this group was fairly low, out of the 29 received 15 had experienced an incident at their place of study and 11 were fairly or very worried about being targeted. This suggests that students with intersecting identities may be attacked both as result of defining as, in this case, Muslim and also LGBT+. This is

⁴ [1] Milani, A. and Shotton, H. (2018) *Sports, Sports, Sports! Increasing Participation and Breaking Down Barriers*. NUS.

supported by existing studies.⁵

Survey respondents' views on reporting Islamophobic incidents was mixed. More than one-third (36 per cent) said they would report an Islamophobic incident to a member of academic staff and 29 per cent would report to the police. Similarly, 29 per cent of respondents said they would report such incidents to their ISoc, and 21 per cent would report to a hate crime reporting centre. Less commonly selected reporting options included sabbatical officers, students' union and institutional staff.

Notably, a quarter of all respondents said that they would not report an Islamophobic incident. And three-quarters did not know if there was a hate crime reporting centre available to them. Other options selected by respondents included reporting to FOSIS, their ISoc and NUS. Previous research into student experiences has indicated low levels of trust regarding reporting mechanisms.⁶

Institutional responses to Islamophobia

Muslim students' levels of trust in the ability of their students' union, educational institution or NUS in relation to handling allegations of Islamophobia were mixed, although 45 per cent would trust their students' union and 42 per cent would trust their institution. However, nearly a quarter of respondents did not believe their institution would respond appropriately.

Respondents were the most unsure about NUS' ability to respond appropriately to Islamophobia – two-thirds were unclear on this or did not believe NUS would respond

appropriately. Although only indicative due to a small sample size (29 respondents), 44 per cent of sabbatical officers disagreed that NUS would respond appropriately to allegations of Islamophobia if they arose, which contrasted with 20 per cent of the student respondents to the question.

"NUS Muslim representatives have faced disproportionate abuse over recent years and the NUS has not dealt with it adequately."

(Woman, aged 22–23, higher education student)

We additionally asked respondents who are positions of responsibility, such as president of an ISoc or a sabbatical officer, how they would deal with institutional Islamophobia⁷. Half of these respondents said they would report it to another member of student union staff, and four out of 10 would report it to institution staff. It is notable that even among this group of student leaders, one-fifth would not report institutional Islamophobia to others.

Experiences online

Half of our survey respondents had experienced some form of abuse or harassment online, primarily religious attacks and attacks against their personal views. The two online spaces where a majority of respondents had experienced abuse and harassment were Facebook (61 per cent) and Twitter (53 per cent).

While respondents predominantly responded that they would not allow online abuse to prevent them from standing in student elections (two-thirds) or prevent them from using social networks (seven out

⁵ Meyer, D. (2010) 'Evaluating the severity of hate-motivated violence: intersectional differences among LGBT hate crime victims', *Sociology*, 44:980: p982.

⁶ NUS (2012) *No Place for Hate*. NUS Religion and Belief research report.

⁷ While we did not define institutional Islamophobia, the question suggested that institutional Islamophobia included incidents "such as your work being sidelined or devalued, or not being treated the same as non Muslim officers".

of 10), there was an even split on whether or not they tried to keep a low profile online to avoid abuse or harassment.

Respondent's levels of trust in organisations' ability to handle online abuse followed a similar pattern to dealing with in-person Islamophobia, with four in 10 believing that their students' union or educational institution would respond appropriately to an incident of online abuse, but nearly half unclear whether NUS would do so. Sabbatical officer responses are clearer, as 46 per cent did not agree that NUS would respond appropriately to allegations of social media abuse, by contrast to 19 per cent of the student respondents to the question. Similarly, regarding their institution, 52 per cent of sabbatical officers did not agree that allegations of social media abuse would be dealt with appropriately, compared with 27 per cent.

The media and public representation of Muslim people

Respondents held very strong views on the media, with 91 per cent agreeing that Muslims and Islam are not portrayed positively in the media, and 89 per cent stating they did not believe that attacks on Muslims were reported equally in the press when compared with attacks on other groups. Contrary to their feelings of resilience after experiencing online abuse, 40 per cent of respondents said that negative portrayals of Muslims in the media would dissuade them from seeking a high-profile position in their students' union, and 62 per cent felt that reporting of recent 'terrorist' attacks in the media affected how people treated them. The latter finding was more likely among respondents who wear religious garments.

"I think that people see the Islamic way of life as something unfamiliar. There is a genuine lack of knowledge and understanding

of Islam and this can breed hatred." (Woman, aged 20–21, higher education student)

Conclusion around hate crime and representations of Muslims

Experiences of hate-motivated incidents or crimes is widespread, and under-reported. The amount of reporting needs to increase so that the scale of the problem can be understood and addressed. Pathways to reporting incidents vary, and NUS and student union interventions to tackle hate crime should reflect this. Similarly, NUS and students' unions should take into consideration the impact of media portrayals on Muslim students' willingness to take on leadership roles.

Support for Islamic society leaders

ISocs on campus are an important part of academic and pastoral life for many Muslim students. As noted, 54 per cent of all respondents would go to their ISoc to discuss issues affecting them at their place of study, making it the single most trusted forum among these Muslim students. As such ISoc presidents are likely to facilitate open discussions on a wide range of critical issues for Muslim students, including service provision by their students' union and educational institution, their specific pastoral needs and their experience of hate incidents.

Islamic society presidents' experiences

We surveyed ISoc presidents about their experiences and received a small number of respondents spread across a wide number of institutions. While findings based on a sample of 26 respondents cannot be extrapolated more widely, it does give some interesting insights worth further

investigation. These respondents had positive, but considered, feedback about their own society's events and activities providing safe spaces for Muslim students.

"It HAS usually been considered a safe space for most Muslims (due to Prevent it might not any more)." (Woman, aged 26–27, PHD student)

Two out of three societies whose presidents were surveyed endorse candidates in student elections. They reported this as a positive approach, which helped Muslim student issues and values to be reflected in their students' union. ISoc presidents' engagement with debates around student union policy change was more mixed.

Islamic society presidents' views on unions and other organisations

The majority of ISoc president respondents agreed that the Prevent duty has had a negative impact on their society, with 80 per cent agreeing or agreeing strongly. Bearing in mind the high level of respondents who identified their ISoc as a key forum in which to discuss pastoral and safety issues, this is of serious concern, in particular noting our findings relating to Prevent, as outlined below.

"[We have] a decline in members as many fear that they will come under surveillance if they join the ISoc." (Woman, aged 26–27, PHD student)

"[The impact of Prevent is ISoc] events cancelled, over-cautious restrictions." (Woman, aged 18–19, higher education student)

ISoc presidents who participated in our survey have had a generally positive experience with their students' union in terms of events and activities. The majority of ISoc president respondents (63 per cent)

agreed that their students' union is transparent about issues that it and its members face, in contrast to 44 per cent who felt the same about their educational institution. This was reflected in significantly stronger agreement that students' unions would advocate for improved prayer facilities on campus if required, as opposed to institutions. ISoc presidents predominantly identified Muslim chaplains or clerics on campus as the figures most likely to act in the best interests of their society and its members. These respondents considered both FOSIS and students' unions to be supportive of ISocs, with NUS considered to be the least supportive organisation.

Conclusion around support for Islamic society leaders

Many respondents to the survey clearly highlighted the importance of their ISocs, especially when other pastoral factors created stress or a lack of trust with institutions and services. While the number of ISoc presidents' respondents was not large, they are a key group that NUS, member unions and partners should consider supporting in a targeted and specific way. There is significant scope in this area for further consultation and research.

Recommendations

Prevent

- When campaigning around the Prevent strategy, NUS should publicise the evidence that direct experience of having been affected by Prevent significantly impedes students' engagement with student democracy.
- Information and support around this lobbying should honestly reflect findings in this research that the Prevent duty impedes Muslim students' trust in effective institutional responses to hate crime and incidents. NUS and student union campaigning on hate crime and hate incidents should therefore prioritise the safeguarding of Muslim students affected by these issues.
- NUS should undertake further analysis of this data in combination with an audit of institutional and students' unions' responses to the Prevent duty in order to understand whether there is a link between institutional responses and the detrimental impact of being affected by Prevent.
- Any further research on Prevent should examine the link between Muslim students' identities being visible and the impact of the Prevent duty, and how the Prevent strategy serves to dampen students' engagement in political and civic functions.

Engagement with NUS and students' unions

- NUS, in partnership with students' unions and Muslim partner organisations, must further

- understand what prevents Muslim students from engaging with politicised leadership roles, including NUS officer roles, in students' unions – both in running for election and once in post. This should include assessing the development needs among student union staff to better support Muslim students.
- Student union and NUS staff require new guidance and support to encourage and enable Muslim students to engage in student democratic structures. This should include an understanding of Muslim students as a heterogeneous group with a variety of individual needs. Evaluation of our democratic structures and culture should specifically address challenges that Muslim students face in engaging with them.
- NUS should proactively review its support relating to press and media interaction for event attendees, candidates and elected officers while working within NUS democratic structures and spaces. This review should consider what NUS' formal press responses can do to further and publicly tackle media hostility to Muslim students and officers. This work should all contribute to NUS' race equity work.
- Students' unions should commission student-led research into improving how democratic debate can be facilitated from the perspective of Muslim students, with a view to informing student union practice on effectively dealing with Islamophobia as it arises.
- NUS should address the challenges that Muslim students and officers face as a result of media coverage focusing on Islam and Muslims. This should clearly link to activities outlined in NUS' Race Equity Plan.

The student experience

- Students' unions should develop, or lobby for the development and promotion of more inclusive activities for students. This should initially focus on sport, including more women-only sporting opportunities and events not dominated by alcohol.
- Students' unions need good practice and campaigning tools relating to creating and managing inclusive academic organisations and facilities, so that unions can lobby their institutions.

Hate crime, Islamophobic incidents and representations of Muslims

- Students' unions need best practice guidelines on encouraging the reporting of hate crimes, including Islamophobic incidents. These should also support student officers who want to critique their institutions' approach to dealing with hate crime incidents.
- Students' unions should provide training and information for people who are likely to receive disclosures of hate crime, including ISoc committee members, and should have the tools to lobby for academic staff to have similar training and resources.
- Further research is required into how to support student officers to deal with the media and online contexts where they may experience Islamophobia.
- NUS should consult with Muslim sabbatical officers on how to improve its reporting mechanisms to more effectively deal with Islamophobia which links to

activities outlined in the Race Equity Plan.

- NUS should undertake further analysis of this data to better understand the distinct experiences of Muslim women in the student movement and create guidance to challenge gendered Islamophobia.
- Guidance created around initiatives to tackle hate crime and support Muslim students affected by hate crime must be clear that initiatives should not be embedded in or part of the roll out of the Prevent duty on campus. These initiatives should also consider those students who may not wish to engage with the police and justice system, given existing inequalities within them.
- NUS should create and execute an action plan with Muslim community-led partner organisations on combatting both Islamophobia and negative portrayals of Muslims within the media. This should consider what support or training key NUS staff, specifically including all those who regularly facilitate press and media contact, need in order to combat Islamophobic rhetoric. This complements activities outlined in NUS' Race Equity Plan.

Support for Islamic society leaders

- Students' unions should consider how to support ISocs, eg by improving their response times, engaging more proactively with them or providing more tailored support.
- FOSIS should continue to develop its provision for all ISocs, taking particular care to consider the diversity of their needs.
- NUS should strengthen and formalise its relationship with FOSIS

as a key stakeholder in understanding the challenges faced by Islamic Societies and improving the support for these groups. This should include collaboratively developing Islamophobia Awareness Month annually.

- While it is outside of NUS' remit to support ISocs directly as our role is to support students' unions to do so themselves, NUS should undertake further work to enable students' unions to support their faith societies, with a focus on preventing and tackling hate crime and how these societies may support students in relation to the Prevent duty.
- NUS should clearly communicate its role and remit regarding its member unions and their societies.

Appendix

Methodology

This report presents the findings of a 2017 survey conducted among Muslim students in UK further education and higher education institutions. The survey was developed in full consultation with FOSIS and other student representatives from the Muslim community.

A final sample of 578 was achieved. NUS Black Students' Campaign and Women's Campaign offered a prize draw of a share of £150, £50 or £25 to encourage responses. The survey was advertised via the NUS extra student database. It took respondents approximately 15 minutes to complete. Survey questions are available on request, please contact NUS Insight at insight@nus.org.uk.

Within this report, a number of demographic questions have been broken down and compared with each other. Where there were any statistical significant differences between answers, they are reported where applicable to a sufficiently large base size ($n > 30$) and are valid at confidence level of 99 per cent.

Demographics

The vast majority of respondents were in full-time study (93 per cent) and in higher education. Only 10 per cent of responses were from students in further education. Overall, 29 respondents (5 per cent of the total) held a sabbatical officer role, which is considered to be just under half of those in such positions. A large majority (78 per cent) of respondents were aged 18–23. In total, 67 per cent of respondents identified as women, with 2 per cent defining as non-binary or preferring not to

disclose their gender, and the remainder as men. Women who wear religious garments, largely a hijab, accounted for 66 per cent of all women who participated in the survey. Respondents were primarily UK citizens (82 per cent). International students from outside the EU comprised a further 14 per cent. Asian or Asian British Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities were the most highly represented ethnic group, together accounting for almost half of the overall responses (34 per cent and 14 per cent, respectively).

Other ethnic groups participating included Asian or Asian British – Indian (9 per cent), Black/Black British – African (8 per cent), Asian or Asian British – other (7 per cent), Mixed – White and Asian (3 per cent), White – other (3 per cent), Mixed – other (2 per cent), White – British (2 per cent), Black British – other (1 per cent). A further 12 per cent of respondents stated they belonged to any other ethnic group and 4 per cent preferred not to share information on their ethnicity.

The vast majority of respondents described themselves as heterosexual (90 per cent), 3 per cent self-identified as bisexual/bi, 1 per cent as queer and 1 per cent as gay/lesbian. The remaining 5 per cent preferred not to state their sexual orientation.

There was a good geographic spread of responses with 37 per cent studying in London, 12 per cent in the South East and 10 per cent in the North West. Yorkshire and the Humber, the West Midlands, the South West and the East Midlands all comprised 7 per cent of respondents each. Responses from students studying in UK nations other than England accounted for 7 per cent of the total sample; 4 per cent from Wales, 3 per cent from Scotland and 0 responses from Northern Ireland.



National Union of Students
Macadam House
275 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8QB
t. 0845 5210 262
w. www.nus.org.uk
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