BERJ British Educational Research Journal

BERA

Check for updates

British Educational Research Journal
Vol. 47, No. 5, October 2021, pp. 1388–1415

DOI: 10.1002/berj.3733

'University is a non-Muslim experience, you know? The experience is as good as it can be': Satisfied settling in Muslim students' experiences and implications for Muslim student voice

Maisha Islam[a]* and Lucy Mercer-Mapstone[b]
[a]*University of Winchester, UK;* [b]*The University of Sydney, Australia*

We report findings from a cross-institutional investigation testing the applicability of a new concept, 'satisfied settling', which describes the ways in which students are unconsciously 'settling for less' in terms of their university experiences. The context of exploration for this article was that of Muslim students' experiences as a critical area which has received little previous focus. Our results describe a staged cognitive process undertaken by students to subconsciously excuse institutional failures to support their religious needs by settling for lower levels of satisfaction. The 'counter stories' told by 19 Muslim students (via semi-structured interviews) detail how their voices are heard or silenced around the deep importance of religious provisions in their university experiences. Satisfied settling was ultimately found to translate across institutional contexts, and the applicability of the concept is discussed in extending to other marginalised student groups.

Keywords: diversity and inclusion; Muslim student experience; religion in higher education; student voice

Introduction and literature review

The rhetoric of diversity and widening participation in UK Higher Education (HE) has been mobilised as a way to boost economic prosperity and fulfil social justice aims (Department for Education & Skills, 2003). Despite increasing diversity in student populations (Office for Students, 2019), discriminatory systems remain. Diversity is not synonymous with social inclusion, and such rhetoric can gloss over the inequalities which are embedded into HE culture and structures (Archer, 2007).

Many have written of inequalities that are (re)produced within HE for particular students. This includes (but is not limited to) Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students (Higher Education Funding Council, 2011; Davies & Garrett, 2013; Pilkington, 2013; Bhopal, 2018), students with caring responsibilities (Medved & Heisler, 2002; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Brooks, 2012), students from

Corresponding author. Centre for Student Engagement, University of Winchester, Sparkford Road, Winchester SO22 4NR, UK. Email: Maisha.Islam@winchester.ac.uk

'working-class' backgrounds (Archer *et al.*, 2003; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Reay *et al.*, 2010), LGBTQIA+ students (National Union of Students, 2015) and students with disabilities (Jacklin *et al.*, 2007; Madriaga, 2007; Kendall, 2016). This literature indicates that 'non-traditional' students share the same motives for enrolling in HE (e.g. to earn a degree and meaningful employment) but enter a system which puts them at odds of fulfilling these. One manifestation of these issues is the BAME degree-awarding gap, where BAME students are 13% less likely to receive a 2:1 or first degree outcome compared to their White peers (Universities United Kingdom and National Union of Students, 2019).

This article draws attention to the experiences of Muslim students in UK HE, given the dearth of literature in this space (Codiroli Mcmaster, 2020). One reason driving this under-examination of Muslim student experiences is universities acting mainly under the (false) banner of secularism (Stevenson, 2013; Aune & Stevenson, 2017), claiming an ethos of secular values (Modood & Calhoun, 2015; Advance HE, 2018)—adopting the principle of separation of the university from religious institutions. However, this ignores the fact that many university students (and staff) maintain religious beliefs (Weller *et al.*, 2011; Codiroli Mcmaster, 2020), thus making campuses sites of religious practice, tension and discussion (e.g. Solent University, 2019).

Religion under this secular banner, as a marker of diversity, is often side-lined to make way for discussions around race, gender and/or class (Barber, 2010). As a result, data around religion has not always been uniformly collected, only becoming mandatory for UK Higher Education institutions (HEIs) to collect in their return data in 2017–2018 (Codiroli Mcmaster, 2020). Nevertheless, we see evidence that religion has gained traction from academics and policymakers alike due to its correlation with policy, research and the increased importance now being placed on the student experience (Jackson, 2011; Aune, 2015). A notable example includes implementation of the Prevent duty in 2015, which placed responsibility on UK universities to deter individuals from terrorism and challenge extremist thought (Qurashi, 2017). Such policy has drawn concern from several organisations, including the National Union of Students (NUS), who claim that the duty creates a climate of suspicion and supresses political and religious views and academic freedom (National Union of Students Connect, 2016). Academic attention towards religion also includes funded projects in relation to tackling religious harassment and hate crime at universities which have advocated for institution-specific research and evaluation to tailor interventions accordingly (Aune *et al.*, 2020).

As argued by Aune and Stevenson (2017), policy and policy implementation is only one solution to the general disengagement that has been shown to the place of religion and the experiences of religious students. As an additional source of information informing such debates, emerging research regarding religious students has reported: difficulties regarding participation and access at university (e.g. dietary requirements and religious prohibitions); tensions arising through negotiating religious observances; and on-campus discrimination and harassment (Hopkins, 2011; Weller *et al.*, 2011; Stevenson, 2018). This may be why Codiroli Mcmaster (2020) reported that less than two-thirds of Muslim students graduated with a 2:1 or first degree outcome. The rhetoric around inclusion must then be extended to religious students if we are

to understand 'how practices of the university work to exclude religious students from full participation on campus' (Stevenson, 2013, p. 40). This is even more necessary in a UK HE regulatory climate, where universities must show concrete action as to how they are ensuring an equality of outcome, particularly for under-represented student groups, via publication and monitoring against Access and Participation plans (Office for Students, 2018).

In the following study, we conducted interviews to explore the experiences of Muslim students from three HEIs through the lens of 'satisfied settling': 'A mechanism in which (Muslim) students have justified (unconsciously) not having access to a richer and more fulfilled university experience in relation to religious needs' (Islam *et al*., 2019, p. 94). After reviewing the literature on Muslim students' experiences and voices in HE, our findings deconstruct the process of satisfied settling into cognitive stages. Through this lens, interviewees' experiences are examined regarding religious provisions, barriers which silence their voices and their willingness to take action to address those barriers. Therefore, the two focal concepts of our work, 'student voice' and 'satisfied settling', are linked in that the extent to which students are willing to make their voices heard and take action around religious provisions is dependent on the extent to which they have settled and vice versa. We discuss our data with a view to providing actionable recommendations for institutions to uptake should they wish to move towards including Muslim students as a valued part of the HE community.

Muslim students in higher education

Muslim students currently account for around 17% of the UK student population (Codiroli Mcmaster, 2020), a figure which will likely continue growing (Malik & Wykes, 2018), It is an appropriate assumption that most British Muslim students will experience intersectional identities, coming from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Strand, 2007) which can exacerbate experiences of inequality, including: being less likely to receive an offer from Russell Group universities (Boliver, 2016); reporting lower levels of satisfaction (Surridge, 2008); and employment disparities immediately following graduation (Zwysen & Longhi, 2016).

Further, research, policy and practice concerning Muslim students has been criticised, with Ahmed (2015) claiming that such work speaks about rather than with students. Khan (2013) is similarly critical that these accounts are interpreted in ways whereby Muslims' voices and experiences are erased. Most notably, and that which has seen the biggest impact on Muslim students (and staff), is the aforementioned Prevent duty, which has been argued to be interpreted mainly under Islamophobic discourses (Qurashi, 2017; Jerome *et al*., 2019). Certain literature also suggests a tendency to inadvertently play into common tropes associated with Islam, despite intentions to do the opposite. For example, while Song's (2012) research into Islamic student associations at university concludes that moral panics about them usually forget their otherwise mundane function, certain interview questions within her research seemed to perpetuate a baseline assumption that being 'British' and 'Muslim' is mutually exclusive—an assumption which would not perhaps be queried with other religious-based associations.

With a hyper-visibility of Muslims since September 11th and the subsequent 'war on terror' narrative disproportionality targeting Muslims (Jeldtoft, 2013; Stevenson, 2018), the urgency for research to go beyond this and explore the everyday experiences of Muslim students is paramount. Additionally, with universities now being required to consider the needs of students from a variety of religious backgrounds (Gilliat-Ray, 2000), discourses that situate students as key stakeholders in HE must place Muslim students' voices centre stage on such issues. In doing so, we recognise that respecting students' faith and the value which is placed upon it within university settings can positively influence religious students' educational journeys and actively encourage their academic success (Dumangane, 2017).

Deconstructing homogeneity in student voice and experience

Terms such as '*the* student voice' and '*the* student experience' have been given a larger platform over recent years, but Sabri (2011) cautions against such rhetoric masking the diversity within student populations and homogenising voice and experience to a single student 'body'. Universities have invested heavily in student feedback at local and national levels to garner the student voice, but which voice(s) do these mechanisms privilege and which do they silence? These questions are extended across international boundaries. For example, focusing within an Australian schooling context, Keddie and Niesche (2012) draw attention to the discrepancies in how student difference may best be supported. Their paper suggests that educational settings perpetuate inequitable understandings of student difference and often fail to respect the 'complexity of the discourses that shape minority students' identities' (p. 333).

Student engagement, however, as an academic discipline in its own right, addresses such questions, often arguing the importance of acknowledging a holistic diversity of student experiences, considering concepts such as: belonging, integration and community; transformation; collective engagement; and barriers to engagement (Bryson, 2014). Such conceptions critique structures within HE—including those structures which seek to engage students. This includes, for example, considering to what extent student representatives and institutional engagement structures and schemes are reflective of or accessible to a diversity of students (Bols, 2017; Matthews, 2017; Healey & Healey, 2019; Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2021). Much of this previous research problematises these structures, indicating that, especially at institutional level, engagement mechanisms often accommodate the elite—those students who have the time, capital and financial stability to engage with mostly unpaid extracurricular opportunities to make their voices heard (Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2021).

We seek to develop a more nuanced understanding of two key themes in the student engagement literature in relation to the previously under-examined cohort of Muslim students. We aim to understand how Muslim students perceive opportunities to have a student voice around issues important to them within their institutions and how they experience being a student in their university communities. These can often be compromised where hostility is generally felt on UK campuses (Stevenson, 2017). Our own reading across research into Muslim students' experiences across the UK and abroad (including Asmar *et al.*, 2004; Asmar, 2005; Modood, 2006; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006; Oikonomidoy, 2007; Seggie & Sanford, 2010; Hopkins, 2011;

Possamai *et al.*, 2016; National Union of Students, 2018) highlights a number of themes characterising 'the Muslim student experience', including: a high level of importance placed on Islam; little report of outright discrimination/harassment, but high feelings of alienation, exclusion and covert discrimination; inaccessible university cultures which lack diversity and are inflexible towards Islamic lifestyles; dissonance between academic and social experiences; and accommodations and sacrifices being made when negotiating between faith and education.

This literature presents evidence of silenced voices and atmospheres not fully welcoming Muslim identities. For example, Hopkins' (2011) research highlights the narratives of 29 Muslim students attending a British HEI where there 'were claims that Muslims did not have a voice' nor was there anyone representing their interests due to the everyday misrepresentation of Muslims. This created a climate of scrutiny on campus and over-surveillance of their 'racialised and religious bodies' (p. 163). Further findings by Kyriacou *et al.* (2017) reported the impact of Prevent for Muslim students, adding to their sense of isolation and self-monitoring of what they say. For those 'visibly Muslim' students (e.g. wearing a hijab), their experiences of Islamophobia and differential treatment were exacerbated. Seggie and Sandford's (2010) paper noted how veiled Muslim students on American campuses felt they had to constantly prove their intelligence, caught odd looks from their peers and were made to feel as though they were representatives of their faith. Informal mechanisms have also excluded Muslim students' participation and integration on campus. The dominance of alcohol often presents an institutional barrier for Muslim students to engage with society events and celebrations (Shaffait, 2019), also positioning Muslim students as abnormal in the eyes of non-Muslim students when religious values seem to directly oppose a 'typical student lifestyle' (Ahmad, 2007).

We thus see a myriad of formal and informal practices which disempower Muslim students expressing their views and feeling a sense of belonging at university. Therefore, recognising the intersectionality of students' experiences, limitations, preferences and ambitions is wholly important if we are to understand how this impacts upon student voice and experience. Within and outside HE, critical perspectives on student voice and considerations of this relating to traditionally marginalised students have emerged recently (Cunninghame *et al.*, 2020; Young & Jerome, 2020). However, including and extending such multi-dimensional aspects has the potential to result in more favourable educational outcomes should we support students to develop and maintain their religious identities (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010) as a welcome part of their HE experiences.

Exploring and expanding 'satisfied settling' as a conceptual lens

Our study builds on previously published work from a single UK HEI (Islam *et al.*, 2019), the findings of which contradicted literature inferring Muslim students have predominantly negative experiences and do not feel a sense of belonging to their universities. Results showed that two-thirds of students interviewed ($n = 16$) clearly expressed feelings of belonging, largely constituting positive academic experiences and factors relating to their 'Muslim identity'. Much of this belonging was, however, couched within large caveats and many students seemed to imply a high degree of

settling for 'less than' whilst at university, unconsciously justifying why certain religious provisions were not readily in place for them.

Thus arose the concept of 'satisfied settling', defined as 'A mechanism in which (Muslim) students have justified (unconsciously) not having access to a richer and more fulfilled university experience in relation to religious needs' (Islam *et al.*, 2019, p. 94). Further research is warranted to capture a more diverse range of Muslim student experiences and assess the applicability of the hypothesised concept beyond its original context. We thus adopt satisfied settling as a lens for understanding Muslim students' voices and experiences in HE, seeking to understand how such a concept is useful (or not) in exploring the lived experiences of this marginalised group.

Methods

Nineteen semi-structured interviews were carried out with Muslim students from three post-1992 (non-research-intensive) UK universities to understand their stories and experiences. Qualitative methods were deemed appropriate for early exploration of the new concept of satisfied settling as they readily capture multiple interpretations and realities, and are a prevalent way to uncover meaning from minority groups (Connolly & Troyna, 1998; Given, 2008). A Muslim researcher (the first author of this article) conducted these interviews as evidence shows that ethnic matching can benefit data collection through the development of rapport with interviewees based on shared identity (Gunaratnam, 2003).

Institutions and participants

The universities selected for inclusion were based on their diverse contexts and pre-established relationships with colleagues by the first author. University A is a medium-sized HEI in southeast England with a Muslim student population of ~2%. Seven participants were interviewed from University A: six women and one man, four from second and three from third year. University B is a small HEI located in the suburban Midlands with a high proportion of commuting and BAME students (91% and 50%, respectively); Muslim students account for just under a quarter of the overall student population (23%). Seven participants were interviewed from University B: five women and two men, two from foundation year, four from third year and one undertaking a PhD. University C is a larger London institution with 45–50% BAME students, ~20% of which are Muslim. Five participants were interviewed from University C: three women and two men, one foundation, two second year and one each from third and fourth years, respectively.

Each HEI presented a different geographic and demographic context, which provided a wider and more representative pool of Muslim student voices. Table 1 details student demographic information. Using gatekeepers from Universities B and C to advertise the research project to their student bodies (where the first author is employed at University C), students who self-identified as Muslim voluntarily participated and were assured that their participation would remain anonymous via the use of pseudonyms.

Table 1. Student demographics

	Pseudonym	Gender	Year of study
University A	Hanna	Female	Second year
	Hadiya	Female	Second year
	Zainab	Female	Third year
	Rima	Female	Third year
	Zahra	Female	Second year
	Rihanna	Female	Second year
	Isaac	Male	Third year
University B	Afreen	Female	Third year
	Tahani	Female	PhD
	Jahida	Female	Foundation year
	Annaya	Female	Third year
	Sareena	Female	Third year
	Syed	Male	Foundation year
	Jamil	Male	Third year
University C	Safa	Female	Third year
	Nabiha	Female	Second year
	Sana	Female	Fourth year
	Majid	Male	Foundation year
	Saif	Male	Second year

Interviews

Interviews were split into four main sections as outlined below. Most questions were traditional semi-structured interview questions which asked students to respond freely based on their experiences. Some questions asked students to respond on quantitative scales, however, in order to better quantify factors like importance using a Likert-scale response.

- Section 1: Demographic information—closed-item questions regarding year of study, home or international student status and mode of term-time living.
- Section 2: Likert-scale questions on religious provisions—students rated the importance of university-based religious provisions (5 = Very Important to 1 = Not Important), satisfaction levels should these not be provided (5 = Very Satisfied to 1 = Very Dissatisfied) and likelihood of action to gain these provisions (4 = Very Likely to 1 = Very Unlikely). Six provisions were selected for discussion, based on previous research which had identified them as being important accommodations for Muslim students whilst at university (Islam *et al.*, 2019).
- Section 3: Overall student experience—open questions inviting students to consider empowerment to act and describe academic and social experiences.
- Section 4: Exploring satisfied settling—open questions exploring concept.

The full set of questions can be found in Appendix S1 in the online Supporting Information. The concept of satisfied settling was introduced in Section 4 once general experiences were gathered to avoid confirmation bias. In order to reduce the likelihood of confirmation and participant bias, the participant information sheet distributed prior to interview only referred to a study seeking *to better understand*

religious students' university experiences (specifically, Muslim students), rather than exploration of the concept. As per Appendix S1, questions in Section 4 utilise a more open-ended style of questioning and prompt follow-up; a common style of questioning when investigating a phenomenon from an insider perspective. For example: 'What do you think about this concept?' and 'From your own experiences, do you believe that you (as a Muslim student) are a "satisfied settler"?' (Chenail, 2011). This choice allowed students to holistically evaluate their own university experiences before imparting judgement/utility of the concept. All interviews lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and were audio-recorded for transcription. Students are referred to via pseudonyms. The research was conducted in line with each university's respective ethics policy, receiving full ethical clearance from the three HEIs.

Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using Excel to calculate summary statistics. Qualitative transcripts underwent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by the first author with cross-checking of themes by the second author. This included: familiarisation with the data; coding; generation of initial themes; reviewing of themes; defining and labelling of themes; and writing up. An inductive (data-driven) approach was initially used to interpret the data associated with each question, whereby themes were determined by the content and semantics of students' experiences. For example, it appeared that in their responses about the concept of satisfied settling, students were outlining various different aspects of what constituted settling in a chronological way, indicating a cognitive process they undertook which led to settling. Teasing out these aspects and order led to the stages of settling as described in theme one. A deductive approach was then applied, where the lens of satisfied settling was able to provide further insight into students' responses. For example, the barriers which silenced students' voices (theme three) were made sense of as, in some instances, resulting from students having settled. Importantly, Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight how analysis is shaped by researcher values and philosophical standpoints. In researching an area of identity to which the first author also belongs (as a Muslim woman), the complexities of insider–outsider research are considered later in the article as both a strength and a caution (Hamdan, 2009).

Findings

Quantitative and qualitative results are reported in integrated sections according to themes. There were four themes, some with subthemes, which arose from the data, presented in Table 2, where quasi-quantitative count data have been generated by calculating the number of times participants mentioned each theme across the dataset.

Theme one: the staged process of satisfied settling

A primary aim of these interviews was to further explore and test the concept of satisfied settling. When introduced to the concept, all students agreed that it resonated

Table 2. Quasi-quantitative count data for the number of participants who mentioned each theme and the number of text references per theme across the dataset

Theme	Number of text references
The staged process of satisfied settling	137
Importance of religion/religious provisions at university	155
Barriers silencing Muslim students' voice(s)	72
Willingness to take action	59

with their experiences. A moment of enlightenment came towards the end of interviews as students started to frame their experiences within this new term, giving a name to a previously unconscious process:

> I really agree with that [concept], you do somehow end up thinking 'mmmh I'm less of a priority anyways' because there's not many of us so I should be happy with what is given. But thinking of it right now, I think that's quite wrong. . .. (Sareena, University B)

> These attitudes and this mentality. . . we're all socialised into it, it doesn't matter if you're a part of the minority or majority. . . we all feed into it and we don't notice it because it's so deeply ingrained, which is why I think it's unconscious. . .. (Afreen, University B)

These representative quotes indicate that, within our sample, satisfied settling appears to be a concept which translates beyond the original single-institutional sample from which it was derived. This finding is substantiated by additional evidence across the other themes presented below. The data revealed a staged cognitive process which Muslim students undertook to reach a point of satisfied settling—as shown in Figure 1. The below subthemes speak to each stage.

Majoritarian norms and values. The first step in the process of satisfied settling was for the majority Muslim students to frame their educational experiences explicitly within the (non-Muslim) majoritarian norms and values which dictate how they conduct their British Muslim lifestyles. These norms were focused on the sociocultural

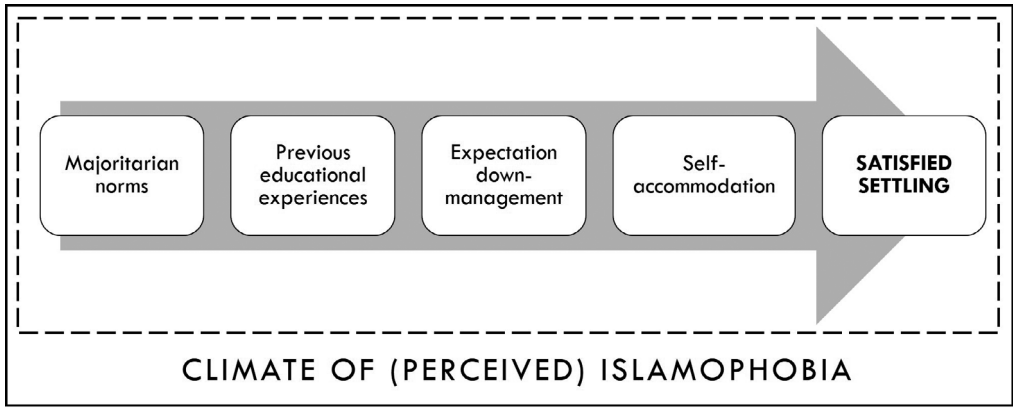

Figure 1. Cognitive stages of satisfied settling.

context, where these students are religious minorities in a predominantly Christian context with a culture of Islamophobia. As Majid (University C) put it: '*This isn't an Islamic country*, *so*, *in my head*, *what do I expect?*' Islamophobic stereotypes were also seen to affect students' decisions to use their voice and the support they believed they would receive regarding Islamic provisions, which is later drawn out in theme four:

> . . . there will be non-Muslim students that don't want to eat halal food and then that goes back onto the chefs having to make halal and non-halal meat. I think I tend to think so deeply into the consequence that is going to happen to everybody if they [University B] were to provide halal food and whatnot. (Tahani, University B)

Religion was not the only norm which students felt dictated their exclusion, with interviewees also pointing to racism and sexism intersecting with their religion to shape their experiences. These norms dictated their experiences within and beyond university. Students also framed experiences within neoliberal capitalist cultures driving consumerist models of HE:

> I had a couple of non-Muslim students who would often ask me about my opinions, not just about religion but like race, gender, just identity basically. I was always more than happy to answer questions, but it got to the point where it felt like harassment and I often felt like they were being discriminatory and mocking me. They were being racist, and they were being Islamophobic and quite sexist too and that was difficult to deal with. . .. (Afreen, University B)

> . . . for the university to consider such things it's probably not gonna be economically well for them like money-wise and everything else they need to consider. (Zahra, University A)

Earlier educational experiences

Many Muslim students then looked to previous educational experiences, having acclimated to an educational career which has not fully catered to them. Their assumptions about HE regarding religious provisions were shaped by these experiences:

> . . . I've never been given that opportunity [Ramadan exam considerations] in school or college, I didn't know that was a thing. . .. (Tahani, University B)

> . . . it's quite normal. Again, not having the option of halal food. . . in school we never had that, so at university it's not a shock to me. (Hanna, University A)

> If I didn't get a prayer room in sixth form, I would have thought they don't do prayer room at unis. So, I reckon just because of like past education, even though it's higher education, you still think you won't automatically get these things. (Syed, University B)

Being acclimated to environments unresponsive to Muslim students' needs impacted their level of entitlement to religious provisions upon entering HE. Their early experiences, such as praying in empty school classrooms or fasting during GCSE and A-Level examinations, suggested a level of accommodation which would not automatically be provided to them (or even expected) when they join university. Thus, there becomes the normalisation of institutional structures which disproportionately impact the experiences of Muslim students.

Expectation down-management. The majority of Muslim students interviewed therefore down-managed expectations of how their universities would cater for them. Low expectations and the possibility for more dire situations meant that students were overly grateful for 'small wins':

> I never thought 'that's not enough', I always thought 'no that's great, thanks for the consideration'... just being considered is great. (Rima, University A)

> In Holland, I was not getting any jobs or opportunities in studies because of my head scarf so coming here and seeing things like a prayer room, halal food, that's a big thing for me... these basic things really make me happy because I was not used to having them. (Jahida, University B)

The above quote from Jahida also highlights the intersectional identities we further bring attention to, for example, geographical location. When queried as to the reason for leaving Holland to come to England, Jahida mentioned that one of the main reasons for this was due to hostility faced for overtly practicing Islam, even being pressured to stop veiling but refusing to do so as she would have felt '*naked without it*'. Jahida's experience of an English HEI being far more receptive to her needs as a Muslim was thus overly appreciated, because she understood the very real consequences that emerge as a result of Islamophobia:

> In Holland, in the whole school, I was the only one who was wearing hijab so everyone was watching me all the time; what I did, how I spoke, and they tried a lot of times to attack me, to pull it off. Here, you see a lot of Muslim girls wearing hijabs and a lot of Muslim girls not wearing hijabs, so they can make the choice. Whereas there [in Holland], some girls don't have the choice other than to take it off... that's why I feel like having a prayer room and halal food, this is something really big for me. (Jahida, University B)

Low expectations may be due to the level of proportional diversity on campus. For example, Zainab (University A) describes a sense of intimidation and feeling like an outsider on campus '*because there was no one else like me*', leading to a lack of belonging. This is further explained in theme four.

Self-accommodation. Where some students may be likely to request or campaign for provisions which they need, many Muslim students self-accommodated, reflecting a lifetime of such practices:

> ... I am so used to accommodating myself, obviously just adjusting to non-halal food around you because I grew up not having that option. I would prefer it of course.... (Rihanna, University A)

> ... because I don't have time to write a letter,... I would think it would be quicker if I just found somewhere else [to pray], or sometimes I just sneak into an empty classroom, quickly pray and then carry on with my day. (Safa, University C)

> ... I knew that this was the situation [Ramadan falling in the exam period]... so I prepared beforehand... and I feel like a lot of people across the country face the same thing. (Nabiha, University C)

The extent of one student's self-accommodation even led her to commute to university from a neighbouring city that was much more accommodating to her lifestyle as a Muslim, despite preferring not to have done so but justifying this decision using a cost–benefit style of thinking:

> . . . I was more happy to commute from Southampton (sic). . . I can get halal food and I can go to the mosque; I don't even know if they have a mosque here [city of University A]? (Zahra, University A)

Regarding broader university experiences, differential social experiences between Muslim students and their non-Muslim peers were seen to be the only point of contention. Whilst it is positive to find a consensus that the majority of Muslim students were largely satisfied with their academic experiences, for example, support given by academic staff, Jamil's (University B) quote below exemplifies how he has become accustomed to informal exclusionary university practices:

> The experience is as good as it can be for a Muslim student. . . University is a non-Muslim experience you know?. . . University is made for them. They get all of these vouchers to go bar crawling and drinking and I don't do that, so I think university is made for them. (Jamil, University B)

> I feel like I'm a part of the university. [University B] shows students that they care about them, like with my tutor, I don't have to worry about looking stupid, I can say anything to her. (Syed, University B)

Satisfied settling. The final stage in this process was to settle as 'satisfied' with current conditions, regardless of whether or not students' religious needs were met. All students, in reflecting on their experiences, described themselves as having settled in this way at some point during their HE experiences:

> . . . me not asking for halal food is me being satisfied with what I have because we're not used to being included in that way. So, we're not dissatisfied, we're just accepting of how it is, and we don't bother changing it. (Hanna, University A)

> I'd consider myself a satisfied settler because I am now justifying why they don't cater for my needs and why it's okay, and I am grateful for what they've given so far. (Tahani, University B)

> We are satisfied with the university experience as a whole but as a Muslim, we need to settle for some things because we are such a small minority. (Zahra, University A)

This seemed to be driven by an instinct to avoid upsetting the status quo or inconveniencing others, as Saif (University C) described: '*I want people to give us our rights, but I don't want our rights to overburden another person*'. As students came to understand the application of this new concept to their past experiences, it was linked to negative emotions:

> I think that's a bit disappointing that we're just accepting something. . . we should be able to speak up and be like 'no, we want this' because at the end of the day we do make up part of the university. Even though we are a small percentage, we're still a percentage. (Hadiya, University A)

> . . . maybe I am a satisfied settler because I accept things for the way they are; I don't have the energy to deal with it. Oh, that makes me sad. (Afreen, University C)

> I've never thought about it like that. . . I don't think it's a good thing. (Rima, University A)

The interview process itself, and their shift in understanding, seemed to catalyse some personal change for students in how they framed their experiences:

> . . . as a result of this interview, I think I'm learning not to be [a satisfied settler], I'm thinking I shouldn't have to think like this. (Zainab, University A)

> . . . I don't feel like we should blame ourselves completely. If the space is there and we don't take action then that's different, but if we don't feel like the doors are open enough for us [to ask] or that we will be supported, then we can't really blame ourselves for that. (Annaya, University C)

Theme two: importance of religion and religious provisions at university

It was clear that religion played a significant part in the day-to-day experiences of Muslim students. Most of their needs centred around access to religious provisions, affecting students' ability to feel comfortable or satisfied. Whilst there are many factors and provisions influencing Muslim students' experiences (Asmar, 2006), we focused on six provisions, including prayer rooms, Islamic societies, halal food on campus, Ramadan exam considerations, non-alcoholic social events and Muslim chaplains, each of which constituted a subtheme. The relative importance of these provisions is shown in Table 3, along with subtheme descriptions and indicative quotes illustrating how students discussed them.

Theme three: barriers silencing Muslim students' voice(s)

Themes three and four speak to the 'student voice' and actions, which is a second focus of our work in addition to satisfied settling. The two are linked in that the extent to which students are willing to make their voices heard and take action is dependent on the extent to which they have settled, and vice versa.

Many students described several factors limiting how they asserted their voice(s). Most of these stemmed from students recognising that they held minority student status—linking to the first stage of satisfied settling as in theme one—leading to and based on inhospitable environments, a sense of disempowerment, feelings of illegitimacy as valued members of the university community, fear of reprisals and discrimination. A lack of representation in staff and student cohorts was a significant barrier:

> When you're in a classroom and there are not many people that look like you or have the same beliefs as you, it can create a gap, like 'is it ok if I say this?' It's never about intentionally making us feel uncomfortable, it's just that there's no one else really looking like us. (Annaya, University B)

> I haven't seen tutors or professors that look like me, there's a gap there. That's what makes it hard and intimidating, is this my place to put forward my idea? Am I being too much? (Annaya, University B)

Table 3. Qualitative and quantitative results on provisions for Muslim students on campus, including mean values of importance of each provision (on a Likert scale of 5 = Very Important to 1 = Not Important) and descriptions with exemplar quotes of themes relating to each provision

	Importance	Theme description	Contextual quote
Prayer room	4.89	Critical to maintain religious practice and belonging on campus.	'. . . [a prayer room] *is very important because in our religion we should try not to miss prayer. . . you can still do your religious duty but you can also be a student the same time*' (Isaac)
Islamic society	4.58	Place to share a common identity and unity where other societies may not be religiously suitable/comfortable; facilitate cultural knowledge exchange and personal growth.	'*I've evolved in social skills because we have these societies* [Islamic society]. . . *I think that can make a shy newcomer become more confident because we have a really lovely community of Muslims who we can talk to*' (Rihanna)
Halal food on campus	4.53	Convenience, practicality and choice/variety important for helping students stay on campus throughout the day.	'*I've shortened the amount of time that I stay at uni so I can go home and eat because the food isn't available here*' (Zainab)
Ramadan exam considerations	4.37	Considerations when exams fall within Ramadan to ensure equitable educational outcomes, of which most students were unaware. Only one university provided such provisions.	'*We are fasting all day and it's very hard. Your body is already weak because you are starving yourself and then you are going to be stressing yourself mentally, and that could affect your exam results*' (Jamil)
Non-alcoholic social events	4.47	Perceived as less important to academic activities but also somewhat impenetrable for those who don't drink and for the high percentage who were commuters.	'*I found it very difficult* [at the start of first year] *because I don't go out drinking and I just felt like the uni didn't really have a lot for someone like me who doesn't like to go out clubbing or drinking. . .*' (Hadiya)
Muslim chaplain	3.95	Potential source of religious guidance, though stated that such support could be accessed elsewhere.	'*I have some male friends at university who do visit the chaplain and it does help them to stay connected with their religion*' (Hanna)

A few students used a proportionality argument to justify why a range of provisions are not generally provided to Muslim students—effectively down-managing their expectations as per stage three of the settling process:

> . . . it's also to do with the population as well. If you see there is a lot more non-Muslim students, it's easier to cater for them than to cater for Muslims so yeah I'm happy to settle as it is, but I'm not completely settling for less either. . .. (Isaac, University A)

Some therefore felt a lack of entitlement to HE spaces, where having such provisions (or enhancing them) could greatly benefit their student experience. As a result,

some Muslim students framed their presence as tolerated but not wholly valued or respected:

> ... if you go in there [the prayer room] it's a bit of a state, in cases like hoovering, even prayer mats. There have been times where I've had to take them home and get my mum to wash them... stuff like the wudhu (ablution) facility should be clean... taps should be fixed, this just gets unrecognised.... (Saif, University C)

This lack of recognition highlights institutional failings, which in turn create a lack of understanding and appreciation of Muslim students and their faith. This potentially reinforces the notion that 'Muslim problems' are not understood or are met with indifference:

> ... you hear a lot of people say 'so, why don't you not fast when you've got exams?' and it's like 'no, that's not an option'. (Rima, University A)

A few students believed that Muslim students held some responsibility to use their voice and act when appropriate:

> ... I think the responsibility is on Muslim students, we should vocalise if we want something to be changed, we should try and take action.... (Isaac, University A)

Others believed their institution should be playing a larger role in ensuring access to provisions. If a Muslim student was not taking action, this did not always indicate settling but instead reflected institutional failings in creating an inhospitable environment. It was clear that Muslim students could not escape a climate of Islamophobia in which any act (small or large) came with a potential risk of being labelled as 'extreme' or 'radical', and this was particularly felt among the few male Muslim students interviewed, indicating again the importance of intersectionality:

> ... if my teachers were to see me [at a demonstration], they might treat me differently. They might unconsciously read my work and think something because they have that in their mind rather than just reading my work as a student.... (Majid, University C)

Safa (University C) stated: '... *what if we do push for it* [a bigger prayer space] *and then they just take away the whole prayer room altogether?*' This fear emanated from the University of East Anglia's decision to remove Muslim prayer spaces (Hoxha, 2017). She goes on to state: '... *if those unis are reacting that way*, *then what is stopping* [University C]*?*'

Theme four: willingness to take action

Students were asked about their likelihood to take action (see scale in Table 4) should each of the six provisions not be provided. This section sought to explore a nuanced aspect of satisfied settling, where students do not self-accommodate but instead ask the university to accommodate their needs.

Table 4 shows that, when looking at both individual and aggregate means, students were far more likely to undertake a low-level action by supporting an action led by others (e.g. signing a letter or petition) than to lead action themselves (e.g. organising a demonstration).

Table 4. Likelihood of taking action regarding specific provision

Level of action (*low to high*)	Prayer room	Halal food	Ramadan exam considerations	Islamic society	Non-alcoholic events	Muslim chaplain	Total mean
Supporting university-wide campaign	3.95	3.74	3.68	3.53	3	3	3.48
Signing letter/petition	3.89	3.95	3.74	3.74	3.37	3	3.62
Attending demonstration	3.47	3.11	3.32	3.05	2.68	2.79	3.07
Writing letter/petition	3.37	2.63	2.95	3.05	2.21	2.05	2.71
Organising demonstration	2.53	2.32	2.42	2.47	2.11	1.89	2.29
Starting university-wide campaign	2.74	2.42	2.47	3.26	2.11	1.95	2.49

The visualisation in Figure 2 shows that there are certain provisions students felt more strongly about. For example, prayer rooms were rated consistently high in terms of willingness to act in every level of action, aligning (as do all categories) with ratings of importance (Table 3). Students, however, felt exceptionally strongly about having an Islamic society—rating this as where they would be most likely to undertake the highest level of action should one not be provided. This emphasises the critical importance of community.

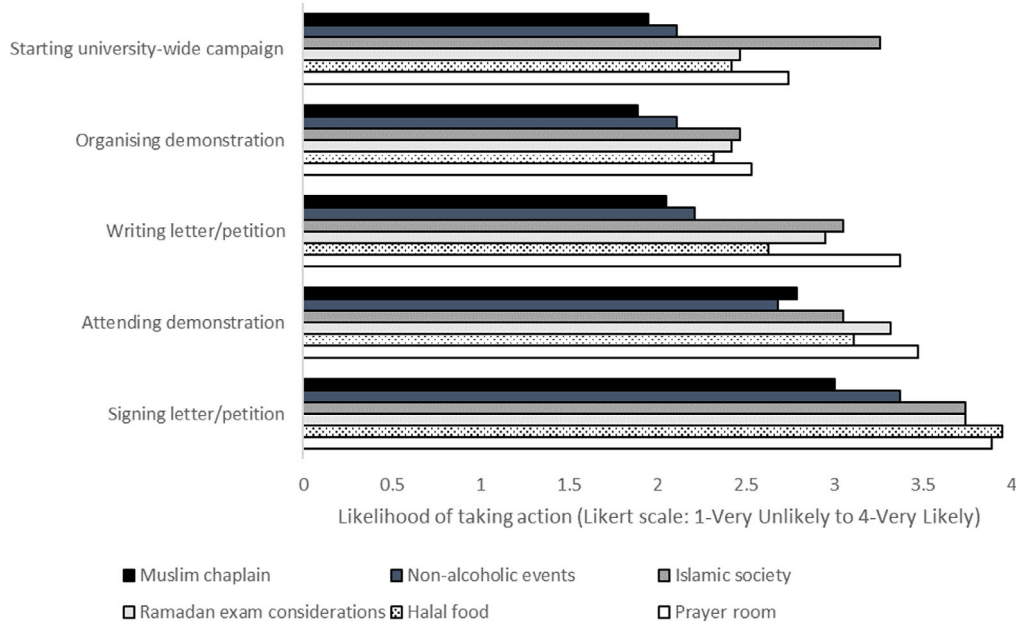

Figure 2. Self-rated likelihood to act for certain actions on a scale of 1 = Very Unlikely to 4 = Very Likely. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Many students believed smaller-scale action was more effective based on the premise that, if they appear more professional, requests are more likely to be received favourably:

> . . . organising a letter, it's a bit more formal. . . sometimes I say that the power of voice is more powerful than anything else. . . I would say attending a demonstration, etc. that's a bit too much. . . writing a letter shows that I care. . .. (Saif, University C)

There was also evidence of a strong sense of solidarity amongst Muslim students. For example, feeling obligated to support fellow Muslim students even if they were not particularly passionate about having a certain provision:

> . . . I would definitely support them because that's something that other Muslim students need. I wouldn't necessarily take the step forward myself. . . we support each other's needs, that sort of thing. (Nabiha, University C)

Empowerment to act therefore came from this group solidarity:

> One thing is seeing the halal sign board outside the SU [Student Union] shop. That's made a big difference because it just shows that there's someone else with the same views as us. . . it's giving us the courage to speak up for something. (Hanna, University A)

> I wouldn't have felt empowered in first or second year, but in third year when I found like-minded individuals such as yourself and other Muslims. . . I think that's given me a bit of hope, that there is a window of opportunity and that people will listen. . .. (Zainab, University A)

These findings indicate the importance of community—perhaps with a sense of shared leadership to avoid being the instigator of change—in facilitating Muslim students' empowerment to advocate for their own needs.

Discussion

It should be noted before discussing these findings that, in line with the first study (Islam *et al.*, 2019), students did describe positive academic university experiences and feelings of belonging to their campus which largely intersected with how their 'Muslim identity' was regarded and respected. These positive experiences, however, were framed within the need to settle for less in terms of students' experiences and it is these themes that we explore in the following discussion to interrogate the broader applications and nature of satisfied settling.

Satisfied settling in (Muslim) students' experiences: intersectional applications beyond our context

The original definition of satisfied settling bracketed the word (Muslim) to allow scope for further exploration and potential application to other under-represented groups in HE (Islam *et al.*, 2019). We explore here how the themes in our data resonate with findings from studies which focus on such groups to begin to paint a more holistic picture of how the concept of satisfied settling can likely be applied to the experience of many marginalised student groups.

Considering majoritarian norms and values, Black students have often noted the isolating experience of attending universities which do not seem to cater to their needs (Abou El Magd, 2016). Black students, in holding minority status in predominantly White HEIs, have noted that their views may be unwelcome or unappreciated (National Union of Students, 2011). Tinklin and Hall (1999, p. 189) similarly describe the 'assumptions of normality' that dictate disabled students' experiences, whereby they operate in environments overlooking and thus excluding based on their differences. One student in that study, in reminding others of her learning differences, thought she may be 'asking too much' and did not want to impose (p. 189). We see clear alignments here with the concerns of many of the Muslim students interviewed in our study when discussing barriers silencing Muslim students' voices.

We found that, in the process of satisfied settling, the early educational experiences of many Muslim students affected their assumptions going into HE. Bowl (2001) explored this in the case of mature students holding intersectional identities (coming from BAME and working-class backgrounds). She noted that these students' secondary-school experiences made them feel inadequate and different, and that cultural and linguistic superiority embedded into the education system affected their learner identities. Although this affected aspirations (rather than expectations) for HE, it exemplifies how pre-HE experiences are powerful in shaping students' HE journeys.

Other under-represented students have also been seen to manage expectations as to how their needs can/should be accommodated. Formby (2017) describes how LGBTQIA+ students in HE excused the limitations of SU officer roles that covered all equality issues, stating that it would be 'too much expecting them to work on LGBT, women's issues, BME, mental health, and all that' (p. 214). Where most Muslim students in our study accommodated themselves by not eating halal food on campus, commuter students have also noted limitations on accessing food and storing personal belongings (Thomas & Jones, 2017). This was seen to negatively impact their ability to engage in extra-curricular activities. These examples indicate places where certain stages of satisfied settling are described elsewhere in the literature, based on the experiences of marginalised students in HE, highlighting that this concept may prove to be applicable to under-represented student groups beyond Muslim students. Research along such avenues would be fruitful.

Similarly, Bhopal *et al.* (2020) describe a 'specialisation of consciousness' within BAME students which resonates highly with the concept of satisfied settling. Their paper discusses how BAME students recognise institutional legacies of discrimination, yet accept these as fixed realities. The awareness and acceptance of such practices speaks to the normalisation of racism which BAME students have been accustomed to; much like the normalisation of (covert) Islamophobia which Muslim students are routinely used to. Unfortunately, this trains students 'to graduate without challenging overtly inequitable institutions and social inequalities more generally' (Bhopal *et al.*, 2020, no page number). Whilst this further supports the inter-application of satisfied settling across marginalised student groups, the realisation of the concept itself may be able to disrupt such a consciousness.

Theoretical intersections with satisfied settling

We discussed in the previous section the intersections of our results with the lived experiences of other marginalised groups in HE as described in previous research. We explore in this section the concept of satisfied settling through various theoretical lenses as they intersect with our results to add depth and nuance to our concept. Students' self-accommodation, for example, could be framed as a form of conformist resistance (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), as students offer their own fixes to a problem within the confines of an existing social system, rather than challenging the structural causes of the problem. We can also draw parallels between stages of satisfied settling and aspects of Freire's (1993) pedagogy of the oppressed. We found that most Muslim students altered their actions and beliefs in accordance with an environment which did not accommodate them. Struggles to self-manage resonate with Freire's notion that oppressed peoples share a characteristic trait of self-deprecation. This trait is symbolic of hegemonies which make Muslim students and other under-represented groups believe unconsciously that they are not worthy of an equality of experience and adjust their behaviours (such as self-managing) accordingly.

Our participant (Annaya) notes, however, that if universities do not provide spaces for Muslim students to assert their voices, blame cannot lie with those students in failing to speak up. What could be argued as minority status stress—the concept that belonging to a marginalised group brings more unique stresses (Smedley *et al.*, 1993)—points to failures in university structures to effectively meet students' needs, affecting feelings of belonging and integration. This is important if considering Astin's (1999) theory of student involvement, which postulates that an environment needs to be structured around the student to encourage active participation in ways that will lead to growth. This theoretical lens births a challenging question: are Muslim and other under-represented students in an environment which appropriately supports them to flourish?

Similar theorisations have also been found outside HE. In their paper looking at religiously minoritised students in Northern Irish schools, Niens *et al.* (2013) found that there were various acculturation orientations amongst students whereby they would carefully negotiate their religious (and non-religious) identities within educational settings. The numerous parallels we have drawn here with previous research and theory indicate that the concept of satisfied settling draws together a number of critical threads across the literature on minority students' experiences in HE. The concept may thus be a useful frame of reference for future research in this area, and explicit exploration on how the concept applies beyond Muslim students is warranted.

The power of naming

Additional theories to those discussed above offer new insight into our findings, specifically around the power that comes with explicitly *naming* the phenomenon of satisfied settling. Our conceptualisation of satisfied settling reflects signature themes within critical race theory (CRT) which seek to shed light on, name and interrogate cultural and structural aspects of racial domination. Though emerging from legal studies, CRT has seen application to the field of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), for example,

in foregrounding the experiences of marginalised communities (mainly those of colour) and using an intersectional approach to better understand experiences of discrimination (Solorzano *et al.*, 2000). Our results—the lived experiences of Muslim students—challenge dominant ideologies which assume 'normality' in student populations, resulting in institutional failures to consider the diversity of needs present (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Our interviews thus acted as a form of *counter-storytelling*, representing 'the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told' (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32), and shed light on the relative privileges offered to 'traditional' students which enable them to more easily thrive academically and socially.

CRT has been a fruitful lens in working towards achieving social justice and transforming society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In the research process of our study, which included naming the concept of satisfied settling, students discovered a concept articulating their experiences as religious minorities, offering space for learning and transformation. Jemisin (2017, p. 183) writes this of her heroine, as she is finally able to put a name to the omnipotent power that has dictated her life: 'Naming what she sees has eased her fear. Names have power.' We hope, and our interviewees seemed to agree, that in providing further insight into the concept of satisfied settling we have named a process which insidiously and problematically drives these (and perhaps many other) students' university experiences. We envision that satisfied settling can act as a form of *backtalk* whereby the naming of this concept enables a *coming to a voice* for Muslim students (hooks, 1989). Indeed, CRT scholars re-privilege such under-represented voices and regard their experiences as legitimate and necessary in disrupting dominant narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Baszile, 2008). As hooks (1994) argues, in theorising this concept we can begin to make sense of experiences and start a healing process.

'The act of naming phenomena shapes perception' and thereby calls attention to the social world and its apparent unchanging state which, in this context, are university spaces which fail to fully consider Muslim students' needs (Davidson & Yancy, 2009, p. 4). Thus, in reaching self-realisation and naming oppression, there was a determination to take action (Freire, 1993). These interviews symbolised moments of healing by engaging in dialogue and honesty; students were thankful at the end of their interviews, one shaking the first author's hand, grateful for the opportunity to collectively share, respect and mutually understand. We hope that, where others take up this newly named concept, similar processes of affirmation and healing may be possible.

Recommendations for institutions

Healing cannot and should not be the sole responsibility of the oppressed. Institutions have a responsibility to create a climate which welcomes *all* students regardless of religion. We emphasise the below in supporting Muslim students' voices and experiences, which encourage sense of belonging.

Normalisation and visibility

It was clear that, where students were aware of their marginal status, organised groups such as Islamic societies were able to enshrine their religious identities, providing a

safe and empowered space for Muslim students to use their voice (National Union of Students, 2018). Instances of such positive representation need to be replicated throughout an institution and not simply concentrated within a single sphere/society in order to normalise Muslim visibility. The use of micro-affirmations (i.e. small acts of inclusion) were seen to be potent in affirming a level of belonging for Muslim students which welcomed and made visible their presence (Powell *et al.*, 2013). Such inclusion measures are seen elsewhere, for example, gender-neutral bathrooms which offer visibility of trans issues (University of Bristol, 2018). Normalising similar accommodations for religious minorities would go a long way to preventing the need for satisfied settling.

Collectivistic approaches to 'student voice'. The typical mechanisms for student voice in many Western institutions rely on individual student representatives self-nominating to engage in representation systems which inform governance and decision-making. Such processes are inherently suited to promote individualistic tendencies, implicitly excluding more collectivistic cultures. One of our key findings was that participants indicated they were much more likely to *support* initiatives which advocated for their needs than they were to *lead* such initiatives based on, among other influences, the fear of being perceived as extremist or radicalised within the climate of Islamophobia on campus. This insight is critical in understanding how mechanisms which facilitate Muslim students' voices need to be structured in such that they can act as a community rather than being reliant on one individual.

Institutional responsibility. Whilst embedding representation and providing appropriate channels of feedback can have positive impacts in better allowing Muslim students to feel empowered to enact change, this is not their responsibility—especially where, as above, many Muslim students did not feel comfortable leading actions around advocating for their needs. Universities must be proactive in listening to and responding to *all* students. For example, implementation of a commuter student lounge was possible through an institutional student–staff partnership scheme, which ensured the university took more responsibility for supporting commuting students (Alison, 2017). Such initiatives, where institutions actively invite Muslim students to contribute to/partner in initiatives which facilitate their own belonging, would be a welcome strategy to preventing satisfied settling.

Limitations

The aim of this research was to further explore, test and expand the concept of satisfied settling within a student group rather than to test generalisability. The research included an over-representation of students who identify as women and was conducted at three post-1992 (not research-intensive) HEIs. Readers should therefore be cautious in extrapolating these findings across contexts with the caveat that, as discussed, themes in our findings align strongly with previous research.

The first author, who designed, conducted and primarily analysed the data, has a unique 'insider–outsider' position as a Muslim woman which some may perceive to be a limitation in terms of researcher bias. Hamdan (2009) notes that occupying these

double positions can not only cause discomfort to the researcher, but also affect the sense of detachment and level of criticality which can be applied to the research. Elsewhere, some researchers have highlighted the importance of taking extra care when being aware of the issues that might arise from shared religio-cultural research (Abbas, 2007). We believe, however, that this 'insider' perspective was a strength. The benefits of peer-matched interviews have been known to reduce power imbalances and are well advocated within feminist research (Oakley, 1981).

To mitigate potential issues, the second author reviewed themes and codes which provided 'stranger value', where clarity could be given to information presumed as understood by the first author (Rhodes, 1994). While the second author is not Muslim, she could (as a queer woman) empathise with the nuances of belonging to a marginalised group and thus reflect critically on issues regarding equality, diversity and equitable (student) experiences.

Conclusion

This article draws attention to the inequalities present for Muslim students within HE regarding institutional support for their religious needs and identity, giving insight into the lived experiences and voices of students who have been historically neglected. We shed light on the difficulties that have been reported by Muslim students and how this implicates concepts and practice related to student voice and experience. Namely, our research calls upon universities to consider the barriers faced by Muslim students, considering the subtle forms of exclusion and operations of 'normality' which negate their ability to effectively participate in/enjoy university. In exposing barriers silencing Muslim students, universities can consider how to break them down.

We are confident in the potential applicability of satisfied settling beyond Muslim students, and would encourage further research with other minority student groups to determine whether similar cognitive processes are being used by these students to excuse institutional failures to welcome them equally into the academic community. We hope that instead of problematising under-represented student groups, HEIs can use this work to acknowledge the heterogeneity of 'student voice' and provide appropriate accommodations. Above all, responding to Muslim students' needs must counter in visible ways the perceptions that university is a 'non-Muslim experience', instead committing to ensuring an equitable system which enables all students to flourish.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the support provided by Tom Lowe, Leoarna Mathias, John Peters, Wilko Luebsen and Digby Warren in undertaking this research. We thank our Muslim student participants who gave up their time and experiences, which made this article possible.

Ethical guidelines

This research was carried out in accordance with ethical guidelines set out by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), as well as ethics policy and

procedures produced by the University of Winchester. Ethical approval was gained from the ethics committee of the University of Winchester, London Metropolitan University and Newman University. We have ensured the protection of our participants by removing any identifiable information associated with the data and through the use of pseudonyms.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

References

Abbas, T. (2007) British South Asians and pathways into selective schooling: Social class, culture and ethnicity, *British Educational Research Journal*, 33(1), 75–90.

Abou El Magd, N. (2016) *Why is my curriculum white? Decolonising the academy*. Available online at: www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/why-is-my-curriculum-white-decolonising-the-academy (accessed 9 February 2016).

Advance HE (2018) *Religion and belief: Supporting inclusion of staff and students in higher education and colleges*. Available online at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/religion-and-belief-supporting-inclusion-staff-and-students-higher-education-and (accessed 20 September 2018).

Ahmad, F. (2007) Muslim women's experiences of higher education in Britain, *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 24(3), 46–69.

Ahmed, S. (2015) The voices of young British Muslims: Identity, belonging and citizenship, in: M. Smith, N. Stanton & T. Wylie (Eds) *Youth work and faith: Debates, delights and dilemmas* (Lyme Regis, Russell House Publishing), 37–51.

Alison, C. (2017) Sowing seeds, growing roots: How engagement led me to flourish in university, *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 3(1), 159–161.

Archer, L. (2007) Diversity, equality and higher education: A critical reflection on the ab/uses of equity discourse within widening participation, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12(5–6), 635–653.

Archer, L., Hutchings, M., Ross, A., Leathwood, C., Gilchrist, R. & Phillips, D. (2003) *Higher education and social class: Issues of exclusion and inclusion* (London, Routledge Falmer).

Asmar, C. (2005) Internationalising students: Reassessing diasporic and local student difference, *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(3), 291–309.

Asmar, C. (2006) *Inclusive practice in relation to students of diverse religious backgrounds, with special reference to Muslim students*. Available online at: https://docplayer.net/11315344-Inclusive-practice-in-relation-to-students-of-diverse-religious-backgrounds-with-special-reference-to-muslim-students.html (accessed 8 December, 2019).

Asmar, C., Proude, E. & Inge, L. (2004) 'Unwelcome sisters?' An analysis of findings from a study of how Muslim women (and Muslim men) experience university, *Australian Journal of Education*, 48(1), 47–63.

Astin, A. W. (1999) Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education, *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(5), 518–529.

Aune, K. (2015) Faith and the university experience in the UK, *Occasional Papers*, 1, 43–61.

Aune, K. & Stevenson, J. (2017) *Religion and higher education in Europe and North America* (New York, Routledge).

Aune, K., Weller, P., Cheruvalil-Contractor, S., Osmond, J. & Peacock, L. (2020) *Tackling religion or belief-related harassment and hate incidents: A guide for higher education providers*. Available online at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/4dfc9b51-dfd7-4f02-a1f0-54ea2095cd4c/coventry-university-research-and-evaluation-report.pdf (accessed 23 December, 2020).

Barber, K. (2010) Intersectional analyses of religion, paper presented at the *American Sociological Association Annual Meeting*. Hilton Atlanta and Atlanta Marriott Marquis, Atlanta, GA, 14 August 2010.

Baszile, D. T. (2008) Beyond all reason indeed: The pedagogical promise of critical race testimony, *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 11(3), 251–265.

Bhopal, K. (2018) *White privilege: The myth of a post-racial society* (Bristol, Policy Press).

Bhopal, K., Myers, M. & Pitkin, C. (2020) Routes through higher education: BME students and the development of a 'specialisation of consciousness', *British Educational Research Journal*, 46, 1321–1337.

Boliver, V. (2016) Exploring ethnic inequalities in admission to Russell Group universities, *Sociology*, 50(2), 247–266.

Bols, A. T. G. (2017) Enhancing student representation, *The Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change*, 3(1), 81–89.

Bowl, M. (2001) Experiencing the barriers: Non-traditional students entering higher education, *Research Papers in Education*, 16(2), 141–160.

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

BERA (2018) *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (4th edn) (London, British Educational Research Association). Available online at: www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018 (accessed 20 June 2018).

Brooks, R. (2012) Student-parents and higher education: A cross-national comparison, *Journal of Education Policy*, 27(3), 423–439.

Bryson, C. (2014) Clarifying the concept of student engagement, in: C. Bryson (Ed.) *Understanding and developing student engagement* (New York, Routledge), 1–22.

Chenail, R. J. (2011) Interviewing the investigator: Strategies for addressing instrumentation and researcher bias concerns in qualitative research, *The Qualitative Report*, 16(1), 255–262.

Codiroli Mcmaster, N. (2020) *Research insight: Religion and belief in UK higher education*. Available online at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/research-insight-religion-and-belief-uk-higher-education (accessed 17 March 2020).

Cole, D. & Ahmadi, S. (2010) Reconsidering campus diversity: An examination of Muslim students' experiences, *The Journal of Higher Education*, 81(2), 121–139.

Connolly, P. & Troyna, B. (1998) *Researching racism in education: Politics, theory, and practice* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

Cunninghame, I., Vernon, L. & Pitman, T. (2020) To be seen and heard: Enhancing student engagement to support university aspirations and expectations for students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, *British Educational Research Journal*, 46, 1487–1506.

Davidson, M. D. G. & Yancy, G. (2009) *Critical perspectives on bell hooks* (New York, Routledge).

Davies, C. & Garrett, M. (2013) The BME student experience at a small northern university: An examination of the experiences of minority ethnic students undertaking undergraduate study within a small northern university, *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching*, 3(5). https://doi.org/10.21100/compass.v3i5.72

Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2017) *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd edn) (New York, New York University Press).

Department for Education and Skills (2003) *The future of higher education*. Available online at: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200203/cmselect/cmeduski/425/425.pdf (accessed 18 January, 2020).

Dumangane, C. (2017) The significance of faith for Black men's educational aspirations, *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(5), 875–903.

Formby, E. (2017) How should we 'care' for LGBT+ students within higher education?, *Pastoral Care in Education*, 35(3), 203–220.

Freire, P. (1993) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York, Continuum).

Gilliat-Ray, S. (2000) *Religion in higher education: The politics of the multi-faith campus* (New York, Routledge).

Given, L. (2008) *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (Los Angeles, CA, Sage).

Gunaratnam, Y. (2003) *Researching race and ethnicity: Methods, knowledge and power* (New York, Sage).

Hamdan, A. K. (2009) Reflexivity of discomfort in insider–outsider educational research, *McGill Journal of Education*, 44(3), 377–404.

Healey, M. & Healey, R. L. (2019) *Students as partners guide: Student engagement through partnership*. Available online at: www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/essential-frameworks-enhancing-student-success-student-engagement-through-partnership (accessed 12 December 2019).

Higher Education Funding Council (2011) *National student survey: Findings and trends 2006 to 2010*. Available online at: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs (accessed 19 January, 2020).

hooks, b. (1989) *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black* (Boston, MA, South End Press).

hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom* (New York, Routledge).

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

Hoxha, T. (2017) *The University of East Anglia tells Muslim students to pray in multi-faith room even though it's too small*. Available online at: www.thenationalstudent.com/Student/2017-06-13/the_university_of_east_anglia_tells_muslim_students_to_pray_in_multi_faith_room_even_though_it_s_too_small.html (accessed 2 February, 2020).

Islam, M., Lowe, T. & Jones, G. (2019) A 'satisfied settling'? Investigating a sense of belonging for Muslim students in a UK small–medium higher education institution, *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 2(2), 79–104.

Jacklin, A., Robinson, C., O'Meara, L. & Harris, A. (2007) *Improving the experiences of disabled students in higher education*. Available online at: http://cascadeoer2.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/33757279/jacklin.pdf (accessed 20 January, 2020).

Jackson, R. (2011) Religion, education, dialogue and conflict: Editorial introduction, *British Journal of Religious Education*, 33(2), 105–109.

Jeldtoft, N. (2013) The hyper-visibility of Islam, in: N. M. Dessing, N. Jeldtoft, J. S. Nielson & L. Woodhead (Eds) *Everyday lived Islam in Europe* (Burlington, VT, Ashgate), 23–38.

Jemisin, N. (2017) *The stone sky* (London, Orbit).

Jerome, L., Elwick, A. & Kazim, R. (2019) The impact of the Prevent duty on schools: A review of the evidence, *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(4), 821–837.

Keddie, A. & Niesche, R. (2012) Productive engagements with student difference: Supporting equity through cultural recognition, *British Educational Research Journal*, 38(2), 333–348.

Kendall, L. (2016) Higher education and disability: Exploring student experiences, *Cogent Education*, 3(1), 1–12.

Khan, M. G. (2013) *Young Muslims, pedagogy and Islam: Contexts and concepts* (Bristol, Policy Press).

Kyriacou, C., Reed, B. S., Said, F. & Davies, I. (2017) British Muslim university students' perceptions of Prevent and its impact on their sense of identity, *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 12(2), 97–110.

Ladson-Billings, G. & Tate, W. F. (1995) Toward a critical race theory of education, *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47–68.

Madriaga, M. (2007) Enduring disablism: Students with dyslexia and their pathways into UK higher education and beyond, *Disability and Society*, 22(4), 399–412.

Malik, A. & Wykes, E. (2018) *British Muslims in UK higher education: Socio-political, religious and policy considerations*. Available online at: https://www.azizfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Bridge-Higher-Education-report.pdf (accessed 5 January, 2020).

Marandet, E. & Wainwright, E. (2010) Invisible experiences: Understanding the choices and needs of university students with dependent children, *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(5), 787–805.

Matthews, K. E. (2017) Five propositions for genuine students as partners practice, *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(2). https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v1i2.3315

Medved, C. E. & Heisler, J. (2002) A negotiated order exploration of critical student faculty interactions: Student-parents manage multiple roles, *Communication Education*, 51(2), 105–120.

Mercer-Mapstone, L., Islam, M. & Reid, T. (2021) Are we just engaging 'the usual suspects'? Challenges in and practical strategies for supporting equity and diversity in student–staff partnership initiatives, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 26, 227–245.

Modood, T. (2006) Ethnicity, Muslims and higher education entry in Britain, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 11(2), 247–250.

Modood, T. & Calhoun, C. (2015) *Religion in Britain: Challenges for higher education*. Available online at: www.tariqmodood.com/uploads/1/2/3/9/12392325/6379_lfhe_stimulus_paper_-_modood_calhoun_32pp.pdf (accessed 28 April, 2020).

Moreau, M. P. & Leathwood, C. (2006) Balancing paid work and studies: Working (-class) students in higher education, *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(1), 23–42.

Nasir, N. S. & Al-Amin, J. (2006) Creating identity-safe spaces on college campuses for Muslim students, *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 38(2), 22–27.

National Union of Students (2011) *Race for equality: A report on the experiences of black students in further and higher education*. Available online at https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/education-beyond-the-straight-and-narrow-lgbt-students-experiences-in-higher-education (accessed 17 August, 2020).

National Union of Students (2015) *Education beyond the straight and narrow: LGBT students' experience in higher education*. Available online at: www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/education-beyond-the-straight-and-narrow-lgbt-students-experiences-in-higher-education (accessed 1 September 2015).

National Union of Students (2018) *The experience of Muslim students in 2017–18*. Available online at: www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/the-experience-of-muslim-students-in-2017-18 (accessed 18 March 2018).

National Union of Students Connect (2016) *Preventing Prevent*. Available online at: www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/preventing-prevent-we-are-students-not-suspects (accessed 23 December, 2020).

Niens, U., Mawhinney, A., Richardson, N. & Chiba, Y. (2013) Acculturation and religion in schools: The views of young people from minority belief backgrounds, *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(5), 907–924.

Oakley, A. (1981) Interviewing women: A contradiction in terms, in: H. Roberts (Ed.) *Doing feminist research* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul), 30–61.

Office for Students (2018) *Office for students: Universities must eliminate equality gaps*. Available online at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/office-for-students-universities-must-eliminate-equality-gaps/ (accessed 13 December 2018).

Office for Students (2020) *Summary of equality and diversity data*. Available online at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-and-diversity-student-data/ (accessed 19 January 2020).

Oikonomidoy, E. (2007) 'I see myself as a different person who [has] acquired a lot…': Somali female students' journeys to belonging, *Intercultural Education*, 18(1), 15–27.

Pilkington, A. (2013) The interacting dynamics of institutional racism in higher education, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 16(2), 225–245.

Possamai, A., Dunn, K., Hopkins, P., Worthington, L. & Amin, F. (2016) Muslim students' cultural and religious experiences in city, suburban and regional university campuses in NSW, Australia, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 38(6), 637–648.

Powell, C., Demetriou, C. & Fisher, A. (2013) Micro-affirmations in academic advising: Small acts, big impact, *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*, 15. https://doi.org/10.26209/mj1561286

Qurashi, F. (2017) Just get on with it: Implementing the Prevent duty in higher education and the role of academic expertise, *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 12(3), 197–212.

Reay, D., Crozier, G. & Clayton, J. (2010) 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in UK higher education, *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(1), 107–124.

Rhodes, P. J. (1994) Race-of-interviewer effects: A brief comment, *Sociology*, 28(2), 547–558.

Sabri, D. (2011) What's wrong with 'the student experience'?, *Discourse*, 32(5), 657–667.

Seggie, F. N. & Sanford, G. (2010) Perceptions of female Muslim students who veil: Campus religious climate, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 13(1), 59–82.

Shaffait, H. (2019) *Inclusivity at university: Muslim student experiences*. Available online at: www.kcl.ac.uk/geography/assets/kcl-sspp-muslim-policy-report-digital-aw.pdf (accessed 24 September 2020).

Smedley, B. D., Myers, H. F. & Harrell, S. P. (1993) Minority-status stresses and the college adjustment of ethnic minority freshmen, *The Journal of Higher Education*, 64(4), 434–452.

Solent University (2019) *Scriptures and sexuality*. Available online at: www.solent.ac.uk/discover/scriptures-and-sexuality (accessed 24 September 2020).

Solorzano, D. G. & Bernal, D. D. (2001) Examining transformational resistance through a critical race and LatCrit theory framework: Chicana and Chicano students in an urban context, *Urban Education*, 36(3), 308–342.

Solorzano, D., Ceja, M. & Yosso, T. (2000) Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students, *The Journal of Negro Education*, 69(1/2), 60–73.

Solórzano, D. G. & Yosso, T. J. (2002) Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44.

Song, M. (2012) Part of the British mainstream? British Muslim students and Islamic student associations, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 15(2), 143–160.

Stevenson, J. (2013) Discourses of inclusion and exclusion: Religious students in UK higher education, *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 14(3), 27–43.

Stevenson, J. (2017) *University can feel like a hostile place to Muslim students*. Available online at: https://theconversation.com/university-can-feel-like-a-hostile-place-to-muslim-students-74385 (accessed 25 January 2020).

Stevenson, J. (2018) *Muslim students in UK higher education: Issues of inequality and inequity*. Available online at: https://www.azizfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Bridge-Higher-Education-report-2.pdf (accessed 25 January 2020).

Strand, S. (2007) *Minority ethnic pupils in the longitudinal study of young people in England*. Available online at: https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/4157444.pdf (accessed 24 January 2020).

Surridge, P. (2008) *The National Student Survey 2005–2007: Findings and trends. A report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England*. Available online at: https://archive.hefcw.ac.uk/documents/council_and_committees/council_papers_and_minutes/2008/TQI%2008%2079%20Annex%20A.pdf (accessed 19 January 2020).

Thomas, L. & Jones, R. (2017) *Student engagement in the context of commuter students*. Available online at: www.lizthomasassociates.co.uk/projects/2018/Commuter (accessed 25 April 2020).

Tinklin, T. & Hall, J. (1999) Getting round obstacles: Disabled students' experiences in higher education in Scotland, *Studies in Higher Education*, 24(2), 183–194.

Universities United Kingdom and National Union of Students (2019) *Black, Asian and minority ethnic student attainment at UK universities: #ClosingTheGap*. Available online at: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-closing-the-gap.pdf (accessed 20 January 2020).

University of Bristol (2018) *Accessible & gender neutral toilets*. Available online at: www.bristol.ac.uk/inclusion/lgbt/accessible–gender-neutral-toilets/ (accessed 8 August 2020).

Weller, P., Hooley, T. & Moore, N. (2011) *Religion and belief in higher education: The experiences of staff and students*. Available online at: www.ecu.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/external/religion-and-belief-staff-and-students-in-he-report.pdf (accessed 25 January 2020).

Young, H. & Jerome, L. (2020) Student voice in higher education: Opening the loop, *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(3), 688–705.

Zwysen, W. & Longhi, S. (2016) *Labour market disadvantage of ethnic minority British graduates: University choice, parental background or neighbourhood?* Available online at: www.iser.essex.ac.uk/research/publications/working-papers/iser/2016-02.pdf (accessed 25 January 2020).

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Appendix S1. Semi-structured interview questions.