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Exploring the Experience of Muslim Students and Scholars in Western Academic Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This special issue of the Journal of International Students explores the multifaceted experiences of Muslim students and scholars in Western academic institutions. It investigates challenges such as acculturative stress, social integration, language barriers, and the psychological well-being of Muslim international students. The volume provides insights into the unique experiences of Muslim students navigating cultural, religious, and academic identities in Western educational contexts. This compilation, contributing to the broader conversation on diversity, inclusion, and equity in higher education, features 28 authors from 9 countries, offering crucial perspectives on the academic and social lives of Muslim students and scholars in the West.

Keywords: Muslim students, Western academic institutions, international student mobility, higher education, international education, acculturation.

International Students

The phenomenon of international students is not new; it began with the Passenger Act of 1855, which provided temporary immigrant status for visitors seeking knowledge to apply in their home countries. The Institute of International Education (IIE) was founded in 1919 to promote peace through understanding between nations (IIE, 2006). In 1948, the IIE established the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA), later renamed the Association of International Educators in 1990 (NAFSA, 2006). This organization aims to support American college officials in assisting international students. International students often face challenges when adjusting, stemming from cultural differences and experiences in a diverse society (Sodowsky & Plake, 1992). Research indicates that they encounter unique stressors that complicate

their adaptation compared to domestic students (Yeh & Inose, 2003). The experiences of Muslim students and scholars at Western academic institutions are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including acculturative stress, economic challenges, psychosocial dynamics, academic hurdles, and geopolitical influences. Understanding these factors is crucial for creating inclusive and supportive educational environments. This essay explores the barriers faced by Muslim students and scholars, such as difficulties with social adjustment, acculturative stress, language barriers, financial constraints, and mental health issues. Additionally, it examines strategies for fostering equitable and inclusive educational spaces.

Social and Cultural Adaptation

For many Muslim students, adapting to Western academic environments involves navigating cultural and religious identity within institutional and societal frameworks. As Sirin and Fine (2008) point out, Muslim students often experience the dual challenge of maintaining their cultural and religious identity while integrating into predominantly secular academic spaces. This challenge is exacerbated by the persistence of Islamophobia and cultural misrepresentation in Western societies, which contribute to feelings of alienation and exclusion (Barakat, 2018).

Negative public perceptions and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims can impede social integration, making it challenging for students to establish meaningful connections with their peers and faculty (Stubbs & Sallee, 2013). These social barriers can increase stress and decrease academic motivation, underscoring the necessity for institutional strategies that promote intercultural dialogue and understanding (Abu Khalaf et al., 2023).

Language, Academic Barriers, and Acculturation

Language proficiency remains a significant hurdle for many international Muslim students. Limited proficiency in English or other Western languages often challenges academic writing, classroom participation, and communication with faculty (Callaway, 2010). These barriers can diminish confidence and hinder academic success, particularly in institutions emphasizing active involvement and critical thinking (Denman, 2012). Western pedagogical styles prioritize independent learning and critical inquiry and can differ significantly from educational practices in many Muslim-majority countries. As Douglass and Dunn (2003) observe, this contrast often requires students to adopt new learning strategies and adapt to unfamiliar assessment methods. Targeted academic support programs can significantly ease this transition, including language workshops and mentorship initiatives.

Acculturation is defined as a process wherein “a process of adaption and change whereby a person or an ethnic, social, religious, language, or national group integrates with or adapts to the cultural values and patterns of the majority

group” (Henry, Tator, Mattis & Rees, 1996, p. 325, cited in Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2005). Berry (2021, 1997) identified four acculturation strategies: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. These strategies can be summarized as follows: (a) Separation involves a desire to maintain one's original cultural identity while minimizing close interactions with the new culture. (b) Integration: This approach seeks to balance preserving the original identity and engaging with the new culture, adopting some aspects. (c) Assimilation: This strategy entails largely abandoning the old identity to adopt a new lifestyle associated with the new culture. (d) Marginalization: This involves a lack of interest or ability to either retain the previous identity or to develop a new one. It is essential to understand the strategy chosen by the students and the reasons behind that choice.

Economic and Financial Constraints

Financial challenges are another significant barrier for Muslim students studying in Western countries. Tuition fees, housing, and other living expenses often create considerable financial strain, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds or countries experiencing economic instability (Khalifa & Gooden, 2010). These financial pressures are compounded by restrictions on employment opportunities for international students, limiting their ability to support themselves while studying abroad (Welch, 2012).

Institutional financial aid programs and scholarships tailored to the needs of international Muslim students can help alleviate these burdens. Providing on-campus employment opportunities and flexible payment plans are additional measures that can support students' financial stability and academic success

Mental Health and Well-being

The intersection of social, academic, and financial challenges significantly impacts the mental health and well-being of Muslim students and scholars (Al-Krenawi, et al., 2021). Abu Khalaf et al. (2023) emphasize that Muslim students often experience heightened stress and anxiety due to discrimination, cultural adjustment, and isolation. Despite the availability of counseling services, the cultural stigma around mental health usually deters students from seeking help.

Culturally sensitive mental health initiatives can address these challenges, including recruiting diverse counseling staff and integrating faith-based support services. Institutions must also reduce stigma by normalizing conversations about mental health and promoting awareness of available resources (Barakat, 2018; Al-Krenawi and Al-Krenawi, 2022).

Geopolitical Factors and Campus Climate

Geopolitical events and policies significantly influence the experiences of Muslim students and scholars in Western academic institutions. Immigration

restrictions, visa challenges, and political rhetoric surrounding Muslims often create barriers to academic mobility and contribute to a sense of exclusion (Norris & Inglehart, 2012). On-campus incidents of discrimination and Islamophobia further exacerbate these challenges, underscoring the importance of institutional policies that protect against bias and promote inclusivity (El-Sherif, 2016).

Articles in This Special Issue

This volume of the *Journal of International Students* explores the multifaceted experiences of Muslim students and scholars in Western academic institutions, with a focus on various aspects of their academic, social, and emotional lives. *"From the Arab world to the United States of America: The wellness of Arab graduate women studying in the U.S."* by Mariam Mostafa (2025) examines the well-being of Arab women pursuing graduate studies in the U.S., while *"Navigating language barriers: Hebrew proficiency and self-efficacy among Muslim Arab Bedouin students in Israeli higher education"* by Eihab Abu-Rabiah (2025) looks at the role of language proficiency in academic success. Additional studies such as *"Asymmetry in Israeli academia: Attitudes of Bedouin female students about their relationship with Jewish female students"* by Aref Abu-Gweder (2025) and *"Racism without race: The racialization of Muslim Middle Eastern and North African international students at U.S. colleges"* by Hannah Mesouani (2025) explore the social dynamics, racialization, and challenges faced by Muslim students in Israel and the U.S. Furthermore, *"The effect of a training program on the psychological, cultural, and social alienation experienced by foreign students in Jordan"* by Feras Ali Al-Habies et al. (2025) investigates the impact of support programs aimed at reducing alienation among foreign students.

The volume also addresses themes of motivation and identity formation, such as *"Motivational factors shaping Muslim students' decisions to study abroad: A case study of Northern Cyprus"* by Fetine Bayraktar and Ilkay Yorganci (2025), which explores the reasons behind Muslim students' decisions to study abroad. Articles like *"Bridges and walls: Coping and emotional experiences of Arab-Bedouin female students in Israeli academia post-October 7th"* by Haled Al-Said and Saleem Abu Jaber (2025) delve into the emotional toll of socio-political tensions on Arab students. *"The predictive ability of cultural intelligence and character orientations for psychological adaptation in expatriates"* by Alean Al-Krenawi et al. (2025) highlights how cultural intelligence aids in adapting to new environments. Additionally, *"Female Arab international students negotiate their identities"* by Sinaria Hassan (2025) examines the identity struggles of Arab women studying abroad. *"The impact of psychosocial and psychological well-being among expatriate students"* by Somaya Abdel-Hameed Al-Ja'afreh et al. (2025) evaluates how psychosocial programs improve students' mental health. Lastly, *"Fostering academic hospitality: Addressing the needs of Muslim postgraduate students in Canadian higher education"* by Derrick Rasheed Mohamed and Imbenzi George (2025) explores the needs of Muslim postgraduate

students in Canada, while *"Exploring intercultural competence: A case study of an Indonesian Muslim doctoral student in Australia"* by Hastowohadi Hastowohadi, Sayid Marifatulloh, and Maria M. Widiantari (2025) provides insight into the intercultural experiences of international students. These articles collectively shed light on the diverse experiences of Muslim students and offer valuable perspectives on fostering more inclusive and supportive academic environments.

Cultural Competence with International Students

To work effectively with international students, it is essential to establish a set of values, principles, behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that facilitate successful cross-cultural interactions. Counselors must be able to do the following:

1. Value diversity
2. Conduct self-assessments.
3. Manage the dynamics of differences.
4. Acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge.
5. Adapt to the diverse cultural contexts of the students they serve.

It is important to incorporate these principles into all aspects of policymaking, administration, practice, and service delivery while systematically involving the student community and religious context. Cultural competence is a developmental process that evolves over time, and individuals as well as organizations exist at different levels of awareness, knowledge, and skills along the cultural competence continuum.

Strategies for Creating Inclusive Academic Environments

To support Muslim students and scholars, institutions must implement proactive strategies that promote inclusivity and equity.

- Culturally responsive policies should accommodate diverse religious practices by offering halal dining options, creating designated prayer spaces, and allowing flexible exam schedules during Ramadan. It's also important to recognize gender differences in these settings, including considerations for mixed-gender environments, the role of the Imam, and the availability of Islamic counseling in academic contexts (Al-Krenawi, 2016; Al-Krenawi et al., 2019).
- Diversity and Inclusion Training: Providing training programs for faculty, staff, and students to enhance awareness of Islamophobia and foster intercultural understanding.
- Establish mentorship programs that connect Muslim students with peers, faculty, or alumni to enhance their sense of belonging.

- Access to culturally sensitive mental health services is essential, along with efforts to reduce the stigma associated with seeking psychological help.
- Engaging with local Muslim organizations, mosques, faith leaders, and Imams to establish supportive networks for students and scholars.
- It is time for mental health practitioners to extend their approach beyond cultural sensitivity, incorporating the diverse knowledge systems informed by the religious and spiritual traditions of these cultures., “Perhaps more important than simply being sensitive to a service user’s relative orientation to their Muslim religion, is the notion of adjusting therapeutic interventions to concur with and align with their level of religiosity” (p. 24) (Cited in Bendeck Sotillos, 2022).

Conclusion

From an intervention perspective, professionals working with international students should be culturally competent and sensitive. This involves becoming familiar with the cultural expectations and experiences of the students. By doing so, professionals can develop and implement culturally sensitive programs that identify at-risk students and create a positive academic and social environment. This environment should encourage cross-cultural skills and promote equity and inclusion (regarding relationships and diversity). For instance, offering knowledge and skills related to effective acculturative strategies is essential. Additionally, professionals can design programs that address acculturation issues through a more proactive and educational approach, incorporating the social context that reflects the lived experiences of international students.

Before designing programs for international students, it’s essential to assess their support systems, including the roles of family and friends in their acculturation. Programs should address economic stressors by providing information on money and time management. Faculty support in this process can also enhance student integration (Al-Krenawi et al., 2021). Muslim students face unique challenges across social, academic, financial, and political dimensions, necessitating inclusive environments that celebrate diversity and promote Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI).

Institutions can empower these students by implementing culturally responsive policies, fostering intercultural dialogue, and supporting mental health and financial stability. They should also recognize the reverse culture shock experienced upon reentry, recommending training to prepare students for this transition. Sharing updates from home and engaging in reflective practices can aid adjustment. For those struggling, individual counseling may be helpful (AlKhalaf, Al-Krenawi, & Elbedour, 2024).

The current geopolitical tensions have profoundly impacted international education, especially in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. These tensions, fueled by political interests, trade wars, and conflicts in various regions, have led to increased scrutiny of international students, stricter

visa policies, and a rise in xenophobia and racism on campuses. In particular, the ongoing tensions between major world powers have resulted in an uncertain future for many students from countries like China, Russia, and Iran, who are often subjected to increased surveillance and discrimination. Furthermore, the escalating costs of tuition and living expenses have created financial burdens for international students, many of whom are already grappling with the emotional toll of navigating unfamiliar academic and social environments. The fear of potential conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, has also heightened anxiety among students, with many unsure about their safety and prospects in foreign countries.

This special issue of the *Journal of International Students* is highly relevant in this context, as it addresses the diverse and complex challenges Muslim students and scholars face in Western academic institutions. With geopolitical tensions affecting student mobility, this volume highlights the need for more inclusive, supportive, and culturally sensitive educational environments. The articles in this issue provide critical insights into the experiences of Muslim international students, shedding light on the psychological, cultural, and social challenges they face, while emphasizing the importance of fostering academic hospitality and providing adequate support systems to ensure their well-being. The research presented here contributes to the broader conversation on the role of higher education institutions in promoting diversity, inclusion, and global cooperation amid the rising challenges posed by geopolitical tensions.

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Editor bio

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Dr. Al-Krenawi earned his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto in Canada, a master's degree from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and a bachelor's degree from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Israel. He has held senior administrative positions at Ben-Gurion University, Al-Ahliyya Amman University in Jordan, Achva Academic College, and Memorial University of Newfoundland in Canada. His academic contributions have been recognized internationally through visiting professorships as a Killam visiting scholar at the University of Calgary, Bournemouth University in the UK, and the Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Dr. Al-Krenawi has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, and academic books and has presented his work at numerous national and international conferences. His contributions have significantly influenced the global discourse on culturally sensitive social work and mental health practices. In 2022, he was recognized as one of the top 10 Social Work Journal Scholarship contributors. Furthermore, in 2023 and 2024, Stanford University named him one of the world's top 2% of scientists in his research field. Dr. Al-Krenawi continues contributing to academic excellence and developing inclusive and impactful approaches to education and social sciences through his leadership, scholarship, and commitment to cross-cultural understanding. He can be reached at alean@bgu.ac.il and alean.al-krenawi@algomau.ca.
