

Coping with the Other: Muslim Overseas Students in Britain

Sarah Thomas

Thomas Hawes

University of Edinburgh

Augsburg University, Germany

Abstract

Europe has recently witnessed a dramatic rise in immigration from the Muslim world, including a significant influx of refugees, especially from countries beset by armed conflict. At the same time, international student mobility has been increasing rapidly. This article focuses on the cultural challenges to Muslim students coming to British universities as temporary guests. What are their needs and their strengths? What are the specific difficulties they face, if any? How can university staff best help them while they are here? We examine the challenges to students caught between their home culture and that of the host country. The responses obtained in interviews suggest that overseas Muslim students are enriching for Britain in material terms but more particularly because they are full of goodwill and constitute an unofficial diplomatic mission between UK and their own countries.

Key Words: Muslim overseas students, challenges, strengths

During the past few years international student mobility has been increasing rapidly (see e.g. Altbach et al., 2009; Bhandari and Blumenthal, 2011). From an estimated 2.1 million internationally mobile students in 2002, the total had risen to 3.4 million by 2009 and could reach 6 million by 2020 (Nicolescu and Galalae, 2013, p. 2). Therefore, we must ask how British universities should react to what is at once a crisis and an opportunity. While it is the dream of many refugees to live in Britain or other European countries, and while they often come with extremely positive attitudes, students such as those from oil-rich Arab states may be sent here by their governments, rather than choosing to come themselves. They may be

fearful of a potentially hostile host culture, or perhaps hold negative stereotypes of the locals themselves. If we are to help them, we need to know what their motivation is for studying here, what, if anything they admire in British culture, what they find problematic, and what we could perhaps change to improve their experience. One initial difficulty is that, although there are case studies of student populations from particular countries, there appears to be relatively little research on those from the Muslim world as a whole. Our interest in conducting this research was therefore, primarily, to examine the challenges to students caught between their home culture and that of the host country in which their chosen university is situated, and how they cope with them.

To address these and other questions we gathered data via questionnaires and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Our procedure was to: 1. survey the literature on Muslim students at British universities for an overview of the main issues, 2. to create research tools to elicit the best possible feedback, 3. to analyse the results and produce conclusions and, finally, 4. to make recommendations to British universities for helping this Muslim student population. The following paper will take the reader through these various steps.

Literature review

Consulting academic publications, it fast becomes clear that there is a dearth of serious research, at least in western journals, in our chosen area of overseas students and Islamic culture. Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013, p.551) confirm: ‘While there is a plethora of quantitative studies ... on intercultural adjustment patterns, there exists a slim set of interpretive-qualitative studies that dig deeper into the international students’ meaning-making perspectives.’ To address this issue the same authors provide analytical categories based on the notions of flexible identity, competing discourses and a negotiation of meaning. Eschewing simplistic stereotypes, they propose as tools the following guiding dichotomies, all of which were borne in mind when interviewing our participants: identity security-identity vulnerability; identity inclusion-differentiation; identity predictability-unpredictability; identity connection-autonomy; and identity consistency-change.

A further difficulty with the literature is that few writers situate their participants in context, other than superficially. Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) are a commendable exception as they refer to the financial context in which, for instance, changes in Saudi government policy are linked to a potential increase in the numbers of international students coming to Britain. The same study helpfully addresses methodological questions,

asserting that qualitative methodologies such as grounded theory are the best suited to a project like ours if it is to avoid stereotypical assumptions and have a better chance of producing detailed results that could prompt university staff ‘to provide more effective outreach, orientation programs, mental health services and cultural sensitivity’ (p. 409).

An interesting early reference point for us with regard to cultural issues was provided in Jackson Fahmy and Bilton’s (1992) paper on TEFL students from Oman. This study—predating 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, the ‘Arab Spring’ and recent Islamist attacks in France, Britain and elsewhere—found that Omanis generally had a positive attitude towards the use and study of English in Oman and did not appear to be afraid of becoming ‘westernised’. For example, students stated that they enjoyed learning foreign languages and that competence in English had supported development in Oman. On the other hand, the potential for intercultural conflict was already clear from certain responses relating to national interests. Four respondents hoped that studying English would allow nationals to replace the foreign English teachers in Oman. Some responses also foresaw the possibility of religious conflict. For example, two stated that knowledge of English might enable them to defend Islam against the criticisms of British people, while two others hoped it would help them to convert British people to Islam. Of course, there is nothing wrong with wishing to support one’s country or one’s religion. Yet these stated aims underline the potential for mental and emotional stress among overseas students to the extent that they might view themselves as entering a cultural battle ground.

Further thought-provoking responses from the same study included ‘The Arabic language is much better than English’; ‘I feel uncomfortable when hearing Omanis speaking English to each other’, and ‘At times I am afraid that by using English I will become like a foreigner’. Certain responses referred to cultural conflict, for instance: ‘several students explained that it was important to know as much as possible about foreigners who were not Muslims in order to be able to defend Islam’ (Jackson Fahmy and Bilton, 1992, p. 282). Finally, the same writers claim that, whereas English might sometimes be viewed as imperialistic, particularly in countries that were formerly colonised by European powers, and that students might resign themselves only reluctantly to having to study it and resent the cultural dominance of English (p. 285), the case of Oman was different because it had never been colonised by an English-speaking country. Thus, once again, the relevance of context is clear, this time specifically of historical context.

Next we come to a more disturbing claim as to what might potentially motivate Muslim students in British universities, namely a quest to acquire the language and strengths of the

‘enemy’ and so defeat him. Brahim’s (2008) ‘oppositional motivation’ involves ‘...a psychological state of defiance and challenge, in which the student learns the language of a people whose culture he despises and considers as the antithesis of his own...[situating himself in] a motivational confrontation in which language becomes an arm that can lead to defeating the Other’ (p. 71). In Brahim’s view, this ideological position, which sees the culture associated with the target language as a subtractive, ‘allows these students to overcome the cultural obstacle and engage in the language learning process despite their negative attitudes towards the foreign culture’ (p. 72). Hence, despite the Islamic prescription to study, from Prophet Mohammed himself, and the British universities’ preferred expectation that overseas students’ experience should be enriching, the motivation Brahim describes appears to leave little room for international harmony. Could it be that a significant number of Muslim students entertain this view, we asked ourselves?

While it seemed unlikely that large numbers of Muslim students would choose to study in Britain, particularly to major in English, if they hold strong anti-western views, university staff need to be aware of this possibility. In any case, it seems likely that the majority of overseas Muslim students would find at least some aspects of British culture difficult to handle. McDermott-Levy (2011) provides useful insight, suggesting that in most cases intercultural problems will not be due to a pre-existing ideological position but, rather, triggered by negative experiences in the host country early on, which could lead to disillusionment and—in reaction to this—a heightened identification with their own culture. Examples of unfortunate early experiences include individuals or groups whom the students see as representatives of the host culture expressing racism and religious bigotry. Further difficulties include a lack of facilities for the practice of their own religion, shock at western ‘immorality’ (what locals see as freedom to drink alcohol or go about scantily clad might to Muslims initially appear threatening) and anti-Muslim sentiment in the local media.

Since overseas Muslim students are likely to come from collectivist-type cultures, they will presumably often harbour strong loyalty to their home culture and may, as a result, experience pressure from compatriots to demonstrate this loyalty by upholding the practices of their group, especially the visible religious practices. It is therefore a fascinating finding of McDermott-Levy’s research that Muslims (in this specific case, Arabs) who hide their religious practices from the locals, perhaps feeling they need to deny differences in order to be accepted, actually have less contact with locals than do those who practise their religion more openly. This finding undermines the traditional demand for maximal adaptation on the part of overseas students to ensure success. It suggests that it is more comfortable to present

a confident self-image than a 'shame-faced' one and that the former provides a better basis for interaction with the host culture and its people than would a denial of one's own culture. The logical implication of this would appear to be that universities and other institutions ought to provide more (not less) facilities for Muslim students to practise their religion.

The question of how strongly overseas students need to identify with their home group in order to feel comfortable in the host country is one on which our research hopes to shed light. From the British media's somewhat abortive attempts of recent years to discuss and define 'Britishness' it is clear that British culture or national identity is primarily implicit rather than explicit. Additionally, there is a difficulty in that one individual's self-defined cultural identity may differ markedly from the way others perceive it. Sussman (2000) claims that people are typically not conscious of their own cultural identity, at least on a day-to-day basis, but adds: 'There are exceptions to the general lack of cultural identity awareness. For some groups, cultural identity is salient or explicit... This might be particularly noticeable when aspects of the dominant and minority cultures conflict' (p. 363).

Sadly, we would be justified in calling the present time one of conflict, following recent attacks in Paris, Berlin, London and Barcelona, amongst others, apparently fuelled by religious hatred. Baker's (2010) study of the portrayal of Islam in the British media highlights the discursive environment in which Muslim students in UK must live. Said (1997, p. xv-xvi) points out that when the media refer to 'Islam' they mean 'a relatively small proportion of what actually takes place in the Islamic world, which numbers a billion people and includes dozens of different countries, societies, traditions, languages, and, of course, an infinite number of differing experiences.' Richardson (2004, p. 5) speaks of the media's approach to Islam as 'an essentialising caricature', citing the four most prevalent topoi in the media's depiction of Islam as a military threat, terrorists/extremists, a threat to democracy and a sexist/social threat. Clearly our students may have more to contend with in the UK than reaches the attention of most locals.

A further avenue for research addresses the friendships maintained by overseas students while abroad. Geeraert et al. (2014) argue that the 3-5 closest contacts constitute a major influence on an individual's mind-set, that close contact with co-nationals would hinder cultural adjustment and enhance stress and that in this case 'the overseas stay would likely be evaluated less positively' (pp. 93-4). They concede that initial close contact to co-nationals may help with settling in abroad, but conclude: 'Over time ... extensive contact with co-nationals may be at the detriment of cultural learning and adjustment' (p. 88).

Alreshoud and Koeske (1997), who studied Arab students in America, conclude that, while a student's positive attitude generally leads to increased contact with the host population, increased contact does not necessarily lead to a more positive attitude. This means that there is something blocking the natural development of good relations.

Thus there is clearly potential for identity conflict amongst Muslim overseas students, as no doubt there is too amongst British or any other students at universities abroad. Brown and Brown (2009, Abstract) assert: '...our cultures of origin are centrally important to our private and personal sense of self' and refer to 'a strong emotional response to threats to collective identity'. Their conclusion is that 'multicultural training needs to be offered to counsellors at universities... [and] sensitisation to the cultural and socio-political background of trainees' (p. 410). Marginson (2014, p.7), in one of the more enlightened recent studies, argues for a paradigm shift 'from understanding international education as a process of "adjustment" of foreign students to local requirements—the paradigm that currently dominates research on international students—to understanding international education as *self-formation*.' He condemns the fact that 'home country identity is often seen as an obstacle to be broken down' (p. 8), suggesting that such an essentialist mind-set smacks of racism.

Marginson (2014, p. 9) goes on to cite Kashima and Loh (2006): 'Students mix and match identities in complex and variable ways in an often deliberate fashion', insisting that identity is ambiguous, with reference to Bourdieu's (1993) self-positioning human subjects, and also to Sen's (2000) claim that 'we all have multiple identities... associated with distinctive and sometimes competing concerns' (p. 10). Identity is, from this perspective, a flexible concept. It is a separable aspect of the individual, which s/he may well change later. Simply put, people evolve, even though the labels we stick to them may not (10). Marginson affirms that, instead of a helpless being, subjected to overpowering influences, an international student possesses 'plural selves', practises 'self-formation' and should be seen as a 'strong agent piloting the course of her/his life' (pp. 12-14). In sum, British universities should turn their backs upon ethnocentrism, recognise the strengths of overseas students, including those who are Muslims, and treat them as being worthy of equal respect. It was in this mode of thinking that we proceeded to interview Muslim student participants to see *what they could teach us* about their experiences in Britain and how they might help us to help them in future.

Methodology

This study was carried out in a well-known Scottish university. A qualitative approach was adopted since this permits a focus on the individuals concerned and their own stories, experiences and interactions. Instead of focusing on the more traditional adaptation 'required' of overseas students (see e.g. Searle and Ward, 1990, on psychological adjustment, or Furnham and Bochner 1982, 1986 and Ward and Kennedy 1992, on socio-cultural adaptation), we adopted an approach in line with more recent social identification and cognition narratives (Spurling 2006; Brown and Brown, 2009). The results thus tend to highlight an autonomous development, driven by the individuals themselves, rather than an acquisition of skills and behaviour seen by the hosts as 'appropriate' for integrating into the new culture.

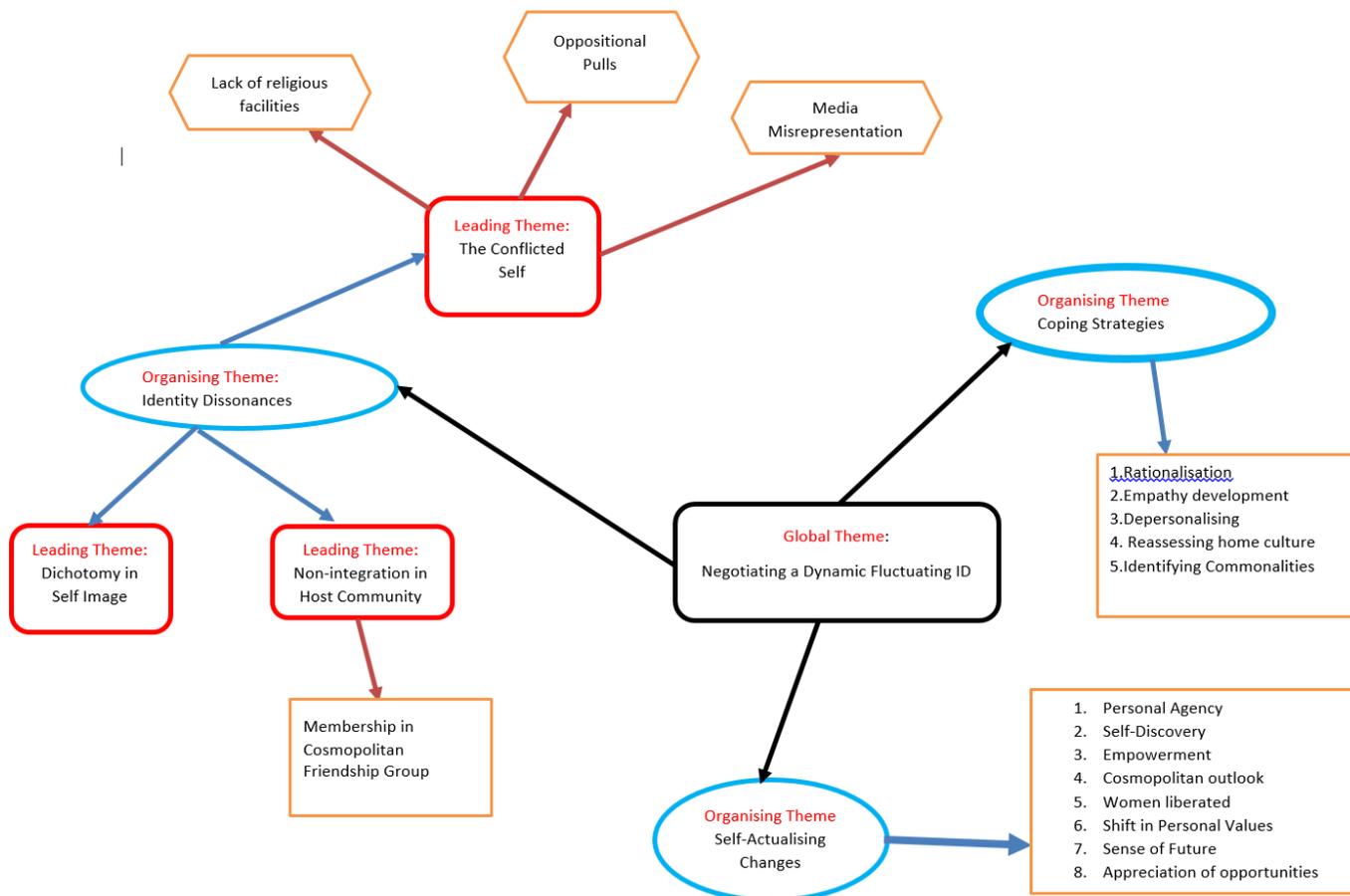
We began by identifying ten overseas postgraduate Muslim students enrolled in academic programmes as participants. Research ethics procedures were followed and informed consent obtained after assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. The data collection method comprised semi-structured interviews lasting approximately an hour each. The interview schedule probed issues of cultural adjustment experiences and their impact on participants' culture and self-identity, as well as religious, national and other forms of identification.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by research support staff and verified for accuracy by the researchers. The transcripts were then coded and analysed inductively, the researchers adopting a thematic content analysis. Specifically, our analysis employed the qualitative tool of thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001) and its associated category labels, permitting a deeper appreciation of the realities underlying the participants' experience in relation to their concepts of the self and their group cultural identity.

Results and discussion

The students' own perceptions of what they experienced are distillable into a number of common themes, which will now be discussed. The major categories are presented below diagrammatically as a network with a Global Theme, plus Organising, Leading and Basic Themes, following Attride-Stirling (2001). The diagram shows the inter-relationships among these themes and hints at their implications. The detailing of each theme's content

is briefly presented below together with illustrative participants' responses to support our interpretations.



Global theme: negotiating a fluctuating and evolving identity

As people interact with the world around them, their sense of personal self is constantly influenced by societal and environmental factors. In line with the phenomenological approach to the self described in Luzio-Locket (1998), this self-concept is embedded in the individual's perceptions of situational factors in time and space. It is in no sense a static phenomenon and it is always apt to change. However, an individual immersed in a particular cultural context from her/his formative years develops an 'established' self-identity with a degree of stability. The sudden transition for academic study purposes into a new and very different social, educational and cultural environment can then put enormous strains on this previously stable self. The participants' narratives therefore reveal an identity in constant flux.

The central claim of this study is nevertheless that the transition experience is a dynamic evolving process of recreating and redefining an integrated identity. Though some of these experiences produce dissonances, i.e. circumstances provoking inner disequilibrium or loss of harmony, what is significant is that there is an underlying strength of character, or a core of existential confidence, which enables coping mechanisms to come into play. The result is self-actualising and empowering development and it is a changed, multi-faceted individual who eventually returns to the home country.

Organising theme A: identity dissonances

The Muslim participants constitute a clearly visible sub-group within the minority group of international students. There is evidence of strain and conflict relating to their identity and their attempts to interact with the behavioural patterns of a liberal western dominant society. Being generally older and more mature than the average school-leaver home student, they brought with them a fairly strongly defined and binding sense of self and group identity, governed by the frames of reference of their Islamic heritage, in which the support and presence of family and community are paramount. The sudden immersion in a cultural environment with strongly individualistic modes of thinking and behaviour inevitably leads to phases of great identity dissonance. Our study reveals a range of these problems, the first of which we refer to as *The Conflicted Self*.

Identity dissonance 1: the conflicted self

Media misrepresentation and harassment from locals

The socio-political climate of recent years has attracted a great deal of unwelcome focus on Muslims and international students abroad are one target of such attention. Brown, Brown and Richards (2015) highlight the belief of Muslim students that the British media present negatively biased views of Islam and Muslim countries. Our study similarly reflects this perception. Student A, a young Muslim woman, describes her reaction to reports in the media about an act of Islamist terror. Although she does not suggest that there is any distortion of the truth, it is clear that a report on such an incident may suffice to create emotional distress for a Muslim. She states:

one of my classmates he was talking about the Paris attack and they were talking about the immigrants and the Syrian immigrants and how they were behind this attack. And they are not Saudi, but they are Muslims, and I cried (Student A).

Muslim students in Britain are also deeply disturbed by media representations of Islam which they perceive to be distortions. Student B comments on this:

The media doesn't help. I listen to the news every day, analyse what they say. It's all negative things about Muslims. Imagine you listen to news every day and every day you hear negative things about Muslims. With time, you just build this image that they are bad people and you are not even aware of that. And it's all because of media (Student B).

This may lead the Muslim students to feel that the public are prejudiced against them, sometimes accompanied by a sense of being constantly under scrutiny. Student C describes her fears that media stories about the actions of misguided individuals lead the public to vilify the religion and all its adherents en masse:

because what is happening around the world now, so bad, it is not Islam at all, not relevant to Islam; but people they don't know, they just watch the media and they get this bad image about Islam and I feel so bad about it of course (Student C).

She goes on to mention instances of verbal abuse, in which she becomes the token 'Muslim', held responsible for anything negative associated—rightly or wrongly—with Muslims:

My friends who use the buses, they got offended many times from the bus drivers; some people in the bus: 'go to your countries', they call names—ISIS—these things' (Student C).

Oppositional pulls

All respondents were positive about certain aspects of Scotland, most often of all mentioning the locals' friendliness. For instance, Student D particularly appreciated the fact that shopkeepers would greet her heartily, which does not typically happen in her native Malaysia. On the other hand, several respondents commented on the problem of wishing to

socialise with roommates or fellow students in the evenings but finding it difficult due to the omnipresence of alcohol, something forbidden to Muslims. Sadly, student D also mentioned that because she went to clubs with non-Muslim friends in the evenings her compatriots would consider her disloyal to their home culture.

Various participants wanting to eat out with others inevitably came up against the Muslim pork interdiction. Though they stated that non-Muslim students generally were very understanding about this, some even specially shopping for halal meat, the respondents were typically caught between wishing to join in and religious rules making it difficult to do so.

Lack of religious facilities

The most common complaint of all related to the lack of designated prayer rooms, though many participants praised the University for their concern for Muslim students and for providing at least some facilities, one even stating that he was impressed at this goodwill and didn't believe it could be taken for granted in the case of non-Muslim students studying in Muslim countries. Solutions the overseas students found to this lack of facilities included praying in all kinds of corners and even a disabled toilet, until told to desist. Their willingness to pray in almost any available space was not always crowned with success, however. One participant who prayed in a postgraduate study room was told by a fellow student that this made her uncomfortable and asked her not to do it any more. As for religious food rules, while Student E had expected a problem here, in fact Muslims found they could readily buy halal food in the ubiquitous Pakistani, Bangladeshi and similar stores.

Identity dissonance 2: non-integration into the host community

Integration is a whole complex topic for itself, with participants initially hoping to achieve it yet encountering difficulties. One Muslim student insisted—in line with the traditionally expected adaptation—that he was not here to talk to Muslims but to learn about Scotland/UK:

I feel that my task here is not to communicate with these kind [of people] because I live in my country for 25 or 26 years...Now it is my time to communicate with other people, to learn from them and give them some of my identity to deliver some message for them to know something about Muslims and Arab people. (Student G).

However, when asked whom he would approach if in need of help, the same student's response suggested that his hopes/intentions regarding integration were limited:

I prefer to go to one of my Arabic or Muslim friends. Not necessarily Muslim. So maybe my roommate who came with me from Palestine. He's the closest person to me right now. So we are sharing everything. If we have any problem, anything we need to help. Always he's the first person that has to know that (Student G).

Interestingly, the above response sounds as if national ties are overriding in matters requiring understanding. Moreover, although respondents praised locals' acceptance of the presence of other religions, this did not mean the Scots or British were open to them in ways people might be in south and south-east Asia. In Bangladesh, Student H told us, Muslims, Hindus and Christians visit each others' homes to celebrate their respective religious festivals, whereas the UK is religiocentric in that people are usually only interested in their own religion, if any, regularly foregoing the opportunity to learn about others' religions:

[In Bangladesh] religion is for an individual, but the festival is for all (Student H).

Almost all participants felt they had too little contact to locals. An example:

I think that the British people have a glorious past and I would like to meet these guys and to know how they are thinking... A very few number of people I feel that they just don't want to contact with me because I'm Muslim and Arabic background (Student G).

Prominent problem areas were, of course, food and alcohol but contact remained desirable:

To some extent I can't do everything that people do here...I don't want to go into a pub... Maybe I want to... I am trying to prevent myself from doing things like that... I want to try haggis but I can't... it's not halal. (Student F).

Here I am the minority, I am the [one] who is different, who has some different personality, who talks different, who thinks different, who has a different culture... I can understand that people here, if they haven't met any foreigners, strangers...they

may have some negative feelings. But if it is not a big serious issue like harming people like me, I would not have any problem, I can cope with them, I think I can solve these things (Student F).

Identity dissonance 3: dichotomy in self-image

Participants' remarks lead us to conclude that individuals see themselves sometimes primarily as Muslims and sometimes primarily as nationals of their respective countries. Perhaps this is one key to identity issues. In other words, we may put people into boxes, but they won't necessarily stay in them and may turn out to be more multifaceted than we expect! Two examples:

No matter which religion are you from, it's really important which country are you from and which culture. So culture doesn't really associate with religion, in a way. Because the students from Malaysia are also from Muslim background. But the Muslim people from Bangladesh and the Muslim people from Malaysia are totally different (Student H).

[Scottish and Turkish culture are] very different, but also so many similarities... Which side of glass are you looking at? Sometimes I do that, focus on empty side, the differences. Why do they do that?... Most of the times I am trying to look at the full side of the glass. I can see many similarities (Student F).

Organising theme B: coping strategies

From the above reports it is clear that coping strategies are needed to deal with the frustrating gulf between initial hopes of seamless integration and reality. The common starting position was:

For me, coming here and a new culture is quite interesting because it allowed me to learn about new things which I didn't have access to back home (Student I).

Therefore, one of the earliest coping strategies engaged was to lower one's expectations, to try to be content with only a degree of integration and to gravitate towards a dual existence:

Here I am the minority, I am the, who is different... But all in all, I can say that it's enriching. It's a fruitful experience for me. I find it quite useful. Because you get to learn about yourself and also the people in when I go back to my country... You can keep your identity and you can adapt yourself here... They are both possible at the same time (Student F).

Another common tactic is to lean on fellow nationals (rather than co-religionists) for support:

I'm a Muslim-Arabic-Palestinian (Student G)

Student G told us he was a Muslim first, then an Arab, before being a Palestinian, i.e. his affiliations went from biggest to smallest group. Nevertheless, his daily habits being Palestinian, his best friend was a compatriot Palestinian Christian rather than a Muslim from another country.

Adaptation, including avoidance of (to host nationals) potentially offensive behaviour, is the most obvious coping strategy and the one traditionally demanded of overseas students. However, avoiding doing something that is not only perfectly legitimate in one's own culture but also a part of one's personal identity is likely to lead to psychological problems:

I can agree that there is some indirect pressure to adapt. Being in a minority you don't feel you are complete... Sometimes you just don't do something because you just don't want to get into trouble to express yourself because some people don't want accommodate themselves to understand you (Student F).

Muslim students in Britain may also feel as if everything they do and say is taken as representative of the whole Islamic world, that they are in a sense ambassadors. Consequently they may feel they are on a mission to personally present a 'truer', more positive picture of Islam:

But when I'm dealing with anyone I'm trying to...just ask about their country and their identity, and then I'm starting to tell him about our identity and culture in Palestine and in the Arab world and the Muslim world. So I'm trying to just deliver this message to my friends and to my colleagues through chatting (Student C).

Organising theme C: self-actualising changes

Positive changes abound in the reports of the international students. Typically, they became more open and able to deal with difference. For instance Student I, from an exclusively Muslim background, became involved in interfaith activities:

[I am] socialising more with people from non-Muslim than Arab background. And the flexibility of PhD allowed me to try new things... [The university] organised these events, it was an interfaith event. So I've been to that and I found it interesting to learn from different traditions. And I got more involved with it because I learned stuff out of it. I've been to this event and I've been to the second and they held also the third. It's something called 'Breaking Barriers' (Student I).

All respondents, but most notably the women, claimed to have gained self-confidence, performing tasks that were new to them in an environment of difference that might have previously seemed daunting. For example, Muslim women from strictly segregated backgrounds found they were able to talk to men, while students of both sexes grew in independence and functionality. One example:

It make me stronger and more flexible...In the beginning I was afraid from a lot of things. Afraid from speaking English with people, afraid from dealing with non-Muslim people, and dealing with any other issues. Now I am not afraid of these things and this is kind of powerful. And also I am more flexible because I am accepting people more than before (Student G).

Conclusions

From the above responses, overseas Muslim students are enriching for Britain. They pay high tuition fees, sometimes over a lengthy period of time, as in the case of Student J, who was doing a PhD and in her seventh year of studies in UK, as well as spending money liberally (e.g. renting a flat next to the Scottish Parliament). But most of all these students are enriching because they are full of goodwill and constitute an unofficial diplomatic mission between UK and their own countries.

With regard to the cultural and psychological findings, firstly, all respondents appear to be very different from each other, confounding stereotypes and prejudices that may reduce Muslims to a homogenous mass. Muslims are not a monolithic block. Like people from a Judeo-Christian tradition, they have innumerable shades of opinion within their religious scholarship. Student J, for example, mentions how certain Islamic scholars insist one should

eat exclusively meat slaughtered in the ritual way, while others say one may eat any meat other than pork and that it needn't be strictly halal.

The data suggest, secondly, that contradictions are 'normal', not only between individuals' psychology and their intercultural sensibility, but also between their national-based identity and their allegiance to the international Islamic community. In this respect it was particularly interesting that, when asked, participants held their religion to be more important than their nationality (i.e. they were first Muslims, then Turks etc.), but that their national identity actually seemed to affect their day-to-day life more obviously than their religion, as we saw with two Palestinian friends—one Muslim, the other Christian—who shared a very similar lifestyle and thinking.

The international Muslim students were overwhelmingly positive with regard to Britain, its people and culture. There was no evidence of serious ideological conflict (though of course, one should add that if any students did harbour Brahim's oppositional motivation they would be unlikely to volunteer to be interviewed by us!). Nothing suggested that participants disliked the UK on arrival. But, having said that, several admitted to suffering under the negative attitudes towards Muslims in the British media and among some locals, especially linked to world events such as recent attacks perpetrated by the self-proclaimed Islamic State, confirming Said (1997) and Baker's (2010) and Richardson's (2004) worries.

If we can assume, therefore, that international Muslim students come to UK with positive attitudes, how can we help to protect them from local bigotry? Do they require a warning information lecture upon arrival, as proposed by McDermott-Levy (2011)? While this idea merits consideration, what is clear is that these students are not helpless victims in need of guidance. They are brave and resourceful individuals who can be trusted to find their own ways, faring better if they are confident in their own religious and cultural identity than if steered towards adjustment in the direction of 'Britishness'. Our findings agree with Marginson (2014) that the priority should not be for overseas students to adjust to local norms, but that we help them construct a flexible complex identity of their own choice. Similarly, we endorse Brown and Brown's (2009) call for British teachers to be trained in intercultural relations.

Bibliography

- Alreshoud, A., and Koeske, G.F. (1997) 'Arab Students' Attitudes Toward and Amount of Social Contact with Americans: A causal process analysis of cross-sectional data', *The Journal of Social Psychology* 137, 2: 235-245.
- Altbach, P.G., Reisberg, L. and Rumbley, L.E. (2009) 'Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an academic revolution', *UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education Executive Summary*: i-xviii.
- Attride-Stirling, J. (2001) 'Thematic Networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research', *Qualitative Research* 1, 3: 385-405.
- Baker, P. (2010) 'Representations of Islam in British Broadsheet and Tabloid Newspapers 1999-2005', *Journal of Language and Politics* 9, 2: 310-338.
- Bhandari, R., and Blumenthal, P. (2011) *International Students and Global Mobility in Higher Education: National trends and new directions*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bourdieu, P. (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Brahim, A.N. (2008) 'Oppositional Motivation: Insights into a new psychological predisposition in facing the other in Arab societies', *Philologia* (Serbia) VI: 69-76.
- Brown, L., and Brown, J. (2009) 'Out Of Chaos, Into A New Identity: The transformative power of the international sojourn', *Existential Analysis* 20, 2: 341-361.
- Brown, L., Brown, J. and Richards, B. (2015) 'Media Representations of Islam and International Muslim Student Well-Being', *International Journal of Educational Research* 69: 50-58.
- Furnham, A., and Bochner, S. (1986) *Culture Shock*, London: Methuen.
- Geeraert, N., Demoulin, S., Demeis, K.A. (2014). 'Choose Your (International) Contacts Wisely: A multi-level analysis on the impact of intergroup contact while living abroad', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 38: 86-96.
- Hotta, J. and Ting-Toomey, S. (2013) 'Intercultural Adjustment and Friendship Dialectics in International Students: A qualitative study', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 37:550– 566.
- Jackson Fahmy, J., and Bilton, L. (1992) 'The Sociocultural Dimension of TEFL Education: The Omani file', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 13, 3: 269-289.

- Lefdahl-Davis, E.M., and Perrone-McGovern, K.M. (2015) 'The Cultural Adjustment of Saudi Women International Students: A qualitative examination', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 46, 3: 406–434.
- Luzio-Locket, A. (1998) 'The squeezing effect: The cross-cultural experience of international students', *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 26, 2: 209-223.
- Marginson, S. (2014) 'Student Self-Formation in International Education', *Journal of Studies in International Education* 18, 1: 6–22.
- McDermott-Levy, R. (2011) 'Going Alone: The lived experience of female Arab-Muslim nursing students living and studying in the United States', Unpublished manuscript.
- Nicolescu, L., and Galalae, C. (2013) 'A Systematic Literature Review on Students' International Mobility and Cultural Adjustment', *Management and Marketing Challenges for the Knowledge Society* 8, 2: 261-282.
- Richardson, J.E. (2004). *(Mis)Representing Islam: The racism and rhetoric of British broadsheet newspapers*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Said, E.W. (1997) *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*. New York: Vintage.
- Searle, W. and Ward, C. (1990) The Prediction of Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustment during Crosscultural Transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14: 449-464.
- Sen, A. (2000). *Other People* (Fourth Annual British Academy Lecture) 7 November.
- Spurling, N. (2006) Exploring Adjustment: The social situation of Chinese students in UK higher education, *Learning and Teaching in the Social Sciences* 3, 2: 95-117.
- Sussman, N. M. (2000). 'The Dynamic Nature of Cultural Identity Throughout Cultural Transitions: Why home is not so sweet', *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 4, 4: 355-373.
- Ward, C., and Kennedy, A. (1992) 'Locus of Control, Mood Disturbance, and Social Difficulty during Cross-cultural Transitions', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 16: 175-194.

Notes on Contributors

Sarah Thomas is a tutor in the Language Education programme at the University of Edinburgh.

Email: sarah.thomas@ed.ac.uk

Thomas Hawes teaches at Universität Augsburg and is a contributor to issue vol. 2 no. 1 of this Journal.

Email: tomhawes2004@yahoo.co.uk