INCLUSIVE PRACTICE IN RELATION TO STUDENTS OF DIVERSE RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MUSLIM STUDENTS:

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC STAFF

The strategies proposed in this resource are largely based on findings from my research into Muslim students’ course experiences at Australian and US universities, and incorporate suggestions made by Muslim staff. It is hoped that some of the strategies may usefully inform more inclusive teaching approaches towards students from other religious and cultural backgrounds.

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Some factors influencing Muslim students’ course experience

- the need to perform daily (especially Friday noon) prayer
- having access to prayer-related facilities such as a designated prayer space and a place to wash
- being religiously prohibited from consuming alcohol and/or prok products; for example at students' social functions
- the availability (or not) of halal/kosher food on campus
- needing flexible responses to their religious needs on the part of staff; for example, being allowed time off to pray, or to attend religious feasts
- being valued and respected rather than ‘spotlighted’; for example, being regarded as an expert on everything to do with Islam
- being stereotyped; for example, Muslim males regarded as potential terrorists, or Muslim females regarded as oppressed
- wanting to be included in student interactions, but feeling uncomfortable in close proximity with members of the opposite sex (including staff)
- facing negative attitudes and discrimination on a daily basis, particularly off-campus
- having access to courses on Arabic and Islamic Studies, taught by qualified people
- being allowed or encouraged to include Islamic perspectives in discussions and/or written work
- being strongly committed to their studies and to gaining qualifications, as a means of ultimately contributing to their communities
- being sustained by their faith in difficult times

(Based on findings from surveys of Muslim students in Australian and United States universities)
Suggested strategies for teachers, to prevent discrimination and encourage inclusive attitudes towards students from diverse cultural backgrounds (with particular reference to students of Muslim background)

- Introduce yourself in the first class and disclose some personal details, including aspects of your cultural background, that you are willing to share. Then …

- Get students to introduce themselves to another student not already known to them, find out something about that student’s background that they are willing to share, and then get them to introduce that person to the class.

- If possible, learn students’ names (and how to pronounce them) and try to make sure students do the same.

- Negotiate ‘ground rules’ with students as early in the course as possible, regarding appropriate classroom behaviors such as courtesy, and respect for different opinions. Link these attributes to the University’s core values and/or generic attributes.

- Give students a copy of the ‘ground rules’ and/or refer to them again if needed. Be ready to re-negotiate later.

- Be aware of your own potential for bias, and help your students to become aware of theirs. Support students in reflecting on these issues.

- Model inclusive behavior towards minority students, neither ‘spotlighting’ them in ways that may be unwelcome, nor overlooking them when they wish to make a contribution.

- Find out the appropriate ways to refer to certain groups; for example, people who adhere to Islam are ‘Muslim’, not ‘Muhammadan’ or ‘Islamic’; and some Indigenous peoples prefer to be referred to as ‘nation’, ‘people’ or ‘community’ rather than ‘tribe’ (‘Tribe’ is not usually appropriate in Australia.)

- Set up a cross-cultural learning environment where students are initially allowed to self-select into groups where they are comfortable, often with peers of similar backgrounds. Inform students that later they will be placed in groups selected by the teacher. Ensure that those groups all contain students of diverse backgrounds.

- Be flexible in encouraging students to do assignments on topics of personal interest to them, including aspects of their religion or culture, and make sure all contributions are equally valued.
- Encourage students to tell you about their cultural and religious sensitivities in relation to classroom or lab activities; for example, Muslim students are often uncomfortable in close one-to-one interactions with a student of the opposite sex; or with exposure to nudity (eg in a drawing class).

- In consultations with students of the opposite sex, always leave the door open, and allow students to be accompanied by another student if they prefer.

- Avoid jokes which target any specific group, religion or culture, and actively discourage such references on the part of students.

- When planning out-of-class social events for students, bear in mind the religious prohibitions affecting some students:
  - if alcohol is served, make sure alternative beverages are located at a distance;
  - if meat is served, avoid having only pork or beef;
  - include vegetarian options.

- Bring in guest speakers from a range of backgrounds to address topics on which you may not have expertise, but remember to relate such content to course assessment.

- Be flexible when students request time off from class, or extensions on assignment deadlines, in order to fulfil spiritual and/or community obligations such as prayer; breaking the fast in Ramadan; attending religious feasts; attending funerals.

- Take students on field trips to places like mosques and synagogues, or to restaurants serving food from diverse cultures. Set research tasks associated with such excursions.

- Use role play where students research and then act out roles dissimilar to their own cultural backgrounds. Get them to reflect on this experience.

- Select course material from a range of cultures, societies and religions; for example, in a course on accounting, consider including reference to the Islamic prohibition on charging and receiving interest.

- Ensure that any cross-cultural learning experiences and opportunities are fully integrated into course learning outcomes, curriculum and assessment (not just an ‘add-on’), and relate them to policies on generic attributes such as the qualities of global citizens.

(Based on findings from surveys of Muslim students in Australian and United States universities)
Further reading on issues relating to Muslims and students of other religious backgrounds at western universities


