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Coping with Islamophobia: how Muslim staff strategize and respond to their working experiences in the academy

Yunis Alam and Izram Chaudry

University of Bradford, Bradford, UK

ABSTRACT

Drawing on data generated through research examining the perceptions and experiences of Muslims in the Academy, this paper situates Islamophobia as a critical feature within contemporary discourse, wherein freedom of expression, academic autonomy and progression toward equity are under renewed threat. We examine participants' viewpoints around risk and their everyday experiences of Islamophobia, levels of trust and efficacy in EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) and how institutional systems fail to adequately address structurally ingrained inequalities. How Muslim staff mitigate and/or respond to Islamophobia in Higher Education (HE) points to the presence of tokenistic and contradictory cultures in purportedly progressive and egalitarian spaces. We embrace an autoethnographic orientation through which our professional experiences are implicit but also explicitly presented as brief segments from recorded conversations. Our analysis is also attentive to the neoliberalism that has taken root across universities, often producing conflicting and counterproductive impacts that exacerbate inequalities.

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Islamophobia; racism; higher education; EDI; Muslims; microaggressions

Introduction

This paper focusses on the particularized experiences of Muslim staff in the Academy, their responses to Islamophobia and how they mitigate against ensuing risks that point to alleged deficits in professionalism, character and competence. Although the inequalities faced by Muslims in healthcare, the criminal justice system and, more specifically, universities are well-documented and explored in-depth elsewhere (Arday 2021; Bhopal 2020; Ozturk and Berber 2020; Runnymede Trust 2024; Vomfell and Stewart 2021), we argue that such issues persist in Higher Education (HE) spaces despite the extolled presence of systemic and institutionalized mechanisms, including Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) infrastructure. We also explore the cultures and processes that coerce Muslims into silence and self-censorship, often provoked by perceived contradictions

CONTACT Yunis Alam m.y.alam1@bradford.ac.uk
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between institutional rhetoric, policy and practice. As such, we touch on the current backlash against EDI in general, and especially within HE.

By situating institutional policies and procedures as equitable and inclusive toward students, staff and other stakeholders, universities can claim to address all manner of inequalities. Universities (as well as many other public and private sector organizations) were quick, after all, to "support" the protests that emerged following the police murder of George Floyd in 2020. Given that present racial disparities are attributable to a historical colonialism steeped in racism (Ahmed 2021; Alam 2025; Alexander and Arday 2015; Bhopal 2022), without any irony, universities in the UK as well as the US happily embraced the politics of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, decoloniality and "anti-racism".

The constitution of this paper hinges on two streams of data. First, we position ourselves as embedded and invested actors within academia, thereby enabling insider and (auto)ethnographic (Reed-Danahay 1997) insights to feature in our analysis. Although autoethnographic methods have been criticized for producing academic narcissism, we see value in researchers "owning", embracing and embedding their identities as key elements within the pursuit of research and knowledge (Alam 2016, 2020; Campbell 2017; Hammersley 2025). Furthermore, social scientific studies are free to adopt political, biographic, insider and explicitly activist approaches, yielding invaluable and novel framings and impacts of research (Bhattacharyya and Murji 2013; Britton 2020). We position ourselves and our research in this space.

Second, we draw on data from a project that examined the perceptions and experiences of Muslims (academics, professional services colleagues and students) navigating *into* and *through* their university place of work or study (Alam and Chaudry 2025). By combining snowball, opportunistic and purposive sampling, we undertook 30 semi-structured interviews with university "stakeholders" of Muslim heritage. Along with guarantees around anonymity, our empathetic connection facilitated elicited cathartic, emancipatory and reassuring interviews for our participants and ourselves. More generally, however, our ethnographic insiderness involves preexisting and nuanced understandings of the issues being explored. Whilst this facet of researcher identity can be quickly, albeit erroneously, critiqued for producing biased findings, such critiques tend to disregard the extent to which qualitative social research can be rooted in the proclivities of the researcher/s. As alluded to above, activist, partisan, insider and community-based approaches are able to offer textured analysis and insight, constituted through the voices of the researcher and the researched, which may also account for relevant social context.

In the forthcoming section, we briefly explore the concept of Islamophobia. From there, we consider the pressures created by neoliberal approaches to the management and scope of universities as well as how neoliberalism influences the efficacy of institutional mechanisms such as EDI within HE, and thus, the extent to which Islamophobia constitutes a pernicious, complex and at times, insidious source of discrimination and harm. This then feeds into a brief analysis of populism, culture wars and issues located within the domain of "woke". Following this, we move into analysis sections, offering insights from our datasets.

Islamophobia: A belief system

Islamophobia stems from how the West has historically viewed and framed Islam and Muslims (Ansari 2004; Daniel 1961, 1984; Poole 2002; Said 1978). For instance, the

Crusades involved racial othering and ordering (Krey, 2007), partly through circulating fabrications about Islamic practice, culture and sexuality (Daniel 1984). Throughout its existence, Islamophobic thought has hinged on the belief that Islam and Muslims are "fixed" and at odds with Western and European identity in which rationality, liberalism and progress are framed as central identity markers (Said 1978; *cf* Huntington 1996). Islamophobia, in other words, entails an amalgam of principles, practices, and protocols which seek to discipline Muslimness[1] by reference to Westernizing horizons (Sayyid 2018). These horizons, or indeed worldviews, can be considered ideological in their origin and purpose, and like the language and machinery of race are simultaneously posited as neutral or normative (Alam 2025; Husband and Alam 2011; Hussain and Poli 2026).

For Sayyid (2014), a key element of Islamophobia relies on assumptions, distortions and disinformation that, consequently, snowball into "common-sense" streams of knowledge which, in turn, fuel conjecture, mistrust, anxiety and fear of a creeping yet multifaceted Islamic peril. Collectively, such features elicit an "integration of threat" (Stephan and Stephan 1996), leaving Muslims vulnerable to Islamophobic attacks of various types[2] (Guest et al. 2020; Hussain 2014, 2015). In practice, Islamophobia produces detrimental impacts in education, employment and criminal justice for Muslims (Arday 2021; Bhopal 2020; Ozturk and Berber 2020; Runnymede Trust 2024; Vomfell and Stewart 2021). As a phenomenon, Islamophobia operates in a range of modes: in the shadows through racial microaggressions (Chaudry 2021), media representation (Alam 2025; Poole 2002) and via more noticeable and aggressive ways, as illustrated by the Trojan Horse Affair (Holmwood and O'Toole 2018; Miah 2017) and the UK Summer riots of 2024 (Najib 2025).

By the latter part of the twentieth century, various issues concerning British Muslims in particular gained widespread attention. For example, children being offered halal meals in schools (Murphy 1987), the Honeyford Affair (Halstead 1988) as well as the Satanic Verses Affair (Asad 1990; Webster 1990) produced debate, consternation and conjecture amongst politicians, media commentators and academics. Alongside this prevailing context, in the 1990s, Samuel P. Huntington's (1996) the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis argued that Islam, and thus Muslims, were not benign in their difference, but rather, represented a global and ideological threat, (re)positioned as being antithetical to the interests and the broadly secular, modern and progressive identity of the "West".

Today, Islam and Muslims continue to be framed as a problematized threat across Western societies, manifesting through "double-edged" policy interventions (Husband and Alam 2011; Runnymede Trust 2024) and varied channels of popular political discourse *inter alia*. In the UK and, indeed, elsewhere, through a ceaselessly expanding body of punditry (politicians, "experts", academics, journalists), there have emerged corresponding and amplified conversations around terrorism, radicalization, Islamism, immigration, segregation and "grooming". These elements, and others, have consistently fed into (mis)-constructing and diagnosing Islam and Muslims as an unusually problematic and stubborn infection (Hussain and Poli 2026). Left untreated, it may spread or produce even more symptoms.

Although the term "Islamophobia" *per se* connotes fear, it is necessary to emphasize it as a form of racism and, therefore, constitute *a belief system* in which humans – mainly Muslims – can be defined and categorized, hierarchically, according to biology, culture,

intelligence and so on. Islamophobia cannot be merely reduced to an emotion or expression of prejudice against Muslims as it also constitutes a practice of power relations which are acutely asymmetric in nature and form. In everyday life, subtle manifestations of Islamophobia can go unnoticed through the implementation and operation of exclusionary and racially loaded policies, as well as individuals exhibiting various behaviours and attitudes. Therefore, adequate racial literacy has become a necessary tool, particularly for Muslims, in order to identify and challenge the scourge of Islamophobia, regardless of when and where it takes place. As Sayyid has argued, "if being an Islamophobe (or if you prefer, committing Islamophobic acts) is a learned activity, then so is detecting it, pointing to it and condemning it" (2014: 21).

In the following sections, we examine the pressures created by neoliberal approaches within universities. Subsequently, we explore how conversations around freedom of expression/speech, censorship and the drift toward populist centre-right impact HE spaces (Aroyehun 2024; Özbilgin and Erbil 2025).

Incongruity in action: HE, neoliberalism and EDI

Academia prides itself on being a forward-thinking and an enlightened institution. Arguably, it uses self-referential loops of knowledge and knowledge validation that further underpin claims toward the sanctity of cultural inclusion, accessibility, belonging and "diversity" (Alam 2025; Arday 2022). Woven into institutional mission statements, strategic aims, and "values", we find references to promoting just and equitable societies, pursuing transformative social change and addressing inequalities. Such aspirations become translated into strategies, policies and deliverables through the support of EDI units, often presented as a well from which meaningful, transformative water can be drawn. Examples include attention toward awarding gaps, the production of equality "Charter" applications, installing reporting mechanisms and, of course, valuing history months. Whilst "things" are visibly being done, the academic research relating to Muslims in HE inspires little confidence in the efficacy of institutional infrastructures or the policies they spawn. Although there is activity, substantive or noticeable impact (other than the intervention itself) is seldom measured or, in some instances, measurable (Akel 2021; Chaudry 2020, 2021, 2022; Arday 2022; Bhopal 2022, 2024; Alam and Chaudry 2025).

What complicates matters further is that universities are becoming increasingly mindful of the financial bottom line. Having adopted neoliberal business models (Collini 2017; Husband 2016), universities must demonstrate value beyond knowledge, interest or even curiosity, resulting in a culture dominated by investment returns (knowledge transfer, business and enterprise, grant capture) whilst obsessing over metrics involving Key Performance Indicators, Staff-Student Ratios and survey results. With student fees, education is now a matter of commerce, as is the correspondingly gradual reframing of academic values, including the erosion of academic autonomy and freedom (Gasser 2024). For school leavers, university education is underpinned by a system of exchange value and reinforced throughout the life course (Chaudry 2024; Collini 2017). Academia, therefore, operates through a mode of capitalism in which consumerism, marketization and the commodification of knowledge align (Newfield 2008). This backdrop is especially pertinent given how it may provide some explanatory purchase in relation to the *raison d'etre* of EDI in HE.

Despite being grounded in intent and aspiration, the benign but well-meaning interventions presented through EDI are subjected, perhaps legitimately, to accusations of "tokenism", "performativity" and, indeed, "interest convergence"; a process that emerges when those in positions of power and privilege choose to support advances toward racial equality because they may benefit *more* from those changes (Ahmed 2021; Bell Jr. 1980; Bhopal 2024; Gillborn 2005, 2006). This creates further complexity once we load in the political and public conversations that frame HE as a space of unfettered "wokery" and "culture wars".

Culture wars, populism and media

Whilst universities were at the fore of supporting the anti-racist protests that emerged following the police murder of George Floyd in 2020, any ensuing initiatives, however, have been short-lived and have appeared to largely benefit universities themselves (Bhopal 2024). Simultaneously, there emerged an amplification of and opposition to issues considered "woke", historical or forced into the political and public arenas through rampant and radical left-wing politicking (Pilkington 2022), with vociferous attacks on the BLM coalition (Chaudhary and Richardson Jr 2022; Keyes and Keyes 2022) and especially HE. Counters to racial equality gained further traction through rising populist political discourse, particularly on the right, which tended to reject the erstwhile proven and empirical facts of coloniality's legacies (Jamil 2022; Madrid Gil 2023). The Trump administration's disinvestment in DEI, for instance, across the US government and public sectors, signalled a regressive approach toward even recognizing structural inequalities, let alone addressing them.

This is not to say that neither anti-racist work nor EDI are new. Since the 1970s, the UK has established something of an EDI industry which has produced "anti-racist" training packages, role models, keynote speakers and other means through which "race" inequality would be eradicated, at least in theory. Meanwhile, EDI units have enabled various organizations to demonstrate their "diversity credentials", with the 1980s moment of "samosas, saris and steel drums" (Troyna 1987, 1993) becoming emblematic of this arguably superficial approach toward multiculturalism (as opposed to anti-racism). Since then, attitudes to "race" equality have lurched from tokenistically valuing "good minorities" to demonising those deemed "bad, including immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees and, in a perhaps generalized yet overlapping and "potentialized" manner, Muslims.

Today, then, things appear to be further spiralling away from any aspiration toward arriving at just and equitable societies. The circus or TV show approach around American politics is expanding, a cast dominated by political leaders who appear to be comfortable in dismissing opposition and blithely ignoring due process and legislation. This is principally done through arranging ideas and opinions, no matter how outlandish, as truths simply by claiming them as such and channelling them through whatever means. Of course, not all truths are equal. We thus find ourselves in the unenviable position of being invited to decide between divergent "truths" (see, e.g., Davies and MacRae 2023; Satia 2021) that are usually placed within a left- or right-wing binary. Our recent history has located those who define themselves in opposition to "liberal elites" as significant gears within the machinery of the "culture wars" that are read and ingested by some as unequivocally true. Anti-"woke" campaigners, in particular, have denied "structural racism, and as a community.

> has ended up telling itself that academics identifying artefacts looted from colonies on display in stately homes are "extremists,", while a sustained year-on-year series of record-breaking temperatures in the UK and across the globe is just normal weather […] this pseudo-religious frame has become the latest attempt to intellectualise a moral panic about perceived leftwing cultural hegemony. (Ahmed 2012, 4)

Meanwhile, speaking about matters that are framed as contested, let alone speaking out against them, becomes riddled with risk even for those who may feel secure, comfortable and armoured with significant cultural and political capital, including politicians, aristocracy and of course "celebrities" (Cullingford 2023). At the same time, "authenticity", "lived experience" and an individual's "truth" appear to be of paramount importance, and feature as components within the resurgent turn toward a variation of identity politics (Lacatus and Meibauer 2022). We may all be invited to speak our truth, to be our authentic selves, but if we speak truths that are uncomfortable or challenging, then our truths and our authentic selves risk being excluded, admonished or "cancelled". What happens when a particular identity becomes platformed as more important than another is similarly problematic. Both identities may be "authentic" or speaking their own truth, but both can't be right or equally valid, especially if one source of truth has more power and reach. What ensues may be a question of rights within the law.

In the UK, the 2010 Equality Act aims to ensure some aspects of identity (gender, sexuality, "race", religious belief, for example) are afforded protections from discrimination. Laws become operationalized through policy. However, the law or even policy doesn't necessarily translate into anything particularly meaningful, except at the level of "duty" and "process", producing tokenistic, problematic or circular outcomes (Gardiner and Riches 2016). Added to this, laws can be – and have been – changed. Shifts in migration, education and especially counter-terrorism legislation and policy have all disproportionately and adversely impacted Muslims (Husband and Alam 2011; Zempi and Tripli 2023). Whilst such facets of contemporary life and living may seem relevant at the level of abstraction, when discussing moments when free speech and ideas are considered to be somehow problematic, they reveal tensions, anxieties and contradictions within legal, policy and philosophical contexts (e.g. the cases of Professor Kathleen Stock and Professor David Miller).

With this wide-ranging context in mind, we now turn to our analysis of findings. Although EDI structures and initiatives have been embedded across university settings for some time, Islamophobia continues to manifest in a range of forms.

Subtle islamophobia

In this subsection, we illustrate the distinct ways in which Islamophobia operates in HE by examining the "banal", "ordinary" and "everyday" experiences of our sample. Additionally, we highlight the implications of these experiences ranging from the toll on mental health to the elicitation of risk when speaking out. It is worth noting that there were some notable differences according to professional identity, across our sample. Academics, for example, faced challenges in line with academic expectations (i.e. grant capture, producing high-quality publications, and so on), whereas for those working in professional services and indeed, students, the nature and form of encounters hinged on their spheres of experience, defined by their roles and relationships with

and within the institution. Similarly, senior academics[3] tended to have a more cynical view vis-à-vis the prospects of "positive change" given the ironies and contradictions they had routinely encountered for many years. Simply put and generally speaking, those who have inhabited academia for longer tend to experience a greater number and wider variety of phenomena in comparison to early career colleagues.

We begin with assessing whether our sample felt Islamophobia was present, and if so, how they might have experienced it in HE. For Saleem, Islamophobia was subtle, implicit" but located and transmitted institutionally.

> I don't think we'll see any kind of physical violence and so on. The most common manifestation of racism or Islamophobia is implicit. If it's occurring throughout departments, and if there's a consistent theme, and if it's not just down to a couple of rotten apples, then there's some institutional complicity. (Saleem, Male, Early Career Academic)

According to Chaudry (2022), Muslims frequently encounter veiled occurrences of "othering" and marginalization which function under the camouflage of racial microaggressions. However, Nomaan highlighted a tendency toward "white saviourism" amongst some colleagues, and the propensity for others, including "allies", to voice their "ethical concerns".

> You will hear various versions of people trying to save our poor, impoverished and pathologically oppressed female Muslim students […] I've heard about how international students are only here because the university wants money. Some of that is subverted, because colleagues will say, *Well, we're behaving unethically by allowing these students here*. *So, actually I'm not racist. I'm ethically sound.* I'm anti-racist by being racist. (Nomaan, Male, Senior Academic)

Being subjected to discrimination also produces further adverse consequences, including negatively impacting mental health (Chaudry 2021; Nadal et al. 2012), a point explored, albeit indirectly, by Siddique. Although not immediately recognizable as a form of "silencing" or self-censorship, those familiar with such encounters respond with caution and filtering:

> I find it quite difficult to not respond and to not get emotive in those responses, which I think to them like fulfils their stereotype of crazy angry Muslim. I have to work not to fulfil those stereotypes for them, which is even more mental work to do on a daily basis. (Siddique, Male, Professional Services Colleague)

Whilst this sort of "mental work" may seem trivial, over time it becomes a routine emotional and psychological burden and in turn creates an impact not just on well-being, but on productivity and workflow. Subsequently, Siddique described a more precise and alarming incident, not solely because of what initially occurred, but how he was handled once he reported his concerns.

> I've witnessed a [colleague working in a religious support role] say a comment to a Muslim female student during Ramadan: *Oh, it's really hot. God doesn't need you to starve or wear that thing on your head*. When that was reported to the [line manager] […] they said, *Oh no, you know, they really mean well. They're a person of God; I'm sure that's not how they meant it*. (Siddique, Male, Professional Services Colleague)

Siddique's willingness to intervene by raising a complaint led to a subtle process of silencing. Rather than being prepared to hear and appreciate the gravity of the

concern, the manager reduced it to a "misunderstanding" on Siddique's part. This sort of process is neither unique nor exceptional and has deeper implications. Indeed, "to become a complainer is to become the location of the problem" (Ahmed 2021, 3). And once an individual becomes alert to this label being applied to them, further emotional work is required, even under the guise of "resilience". Whilst this empirical example points to a lack of transcultural competency, it additionally indicates a (not isolated) failing in policy and process. Although Siddique deployed the "active bystander" model, this was used against him. Such experiences tap into an obscured impact that people of colour in general endure routinely, with accumulating, harmful and debilitating consequences. Such microaggressions:

> often appear to be small slights that in isolation cause minimal harm to the recipients. However, being exposed to a lifetime of daily insults, disregard and disrespect has been shown to be extremely harmful unless mitigated in some fashion. The effects of microaggressions may be compared to the "perennial slow death by a thousand cuts'". (Sue 2010, 3)

Siddique's excerpt also illustrates how some religious symbols and practices are "out of place" (Puwar 2004), perhaps explaining the "well-meant" response about the headscarf, fasting and heat. There is, after all, a body of research which has illuminated the gendered nature of Islamophobia (Chaudry 2021; Hopkins 2016; Perry 2014; Zempi 2020). For instance, gendered symbols of Muslimness (including the headscarf) afford "onlookers" additional layers of identity information. The "onlooked" are characterized through a myriad of negative framings: supposedly being "unhygienic", "docile" and "oppressed" *inter alia*. Consequently, such visible signifiers of identity place Muslim women as more likely to be microaggressed, as well as verbally and physically assaulted because of their outward Muslimness, which can be linked with clothing, language or even political and philosophical views (Chaudry 2021; Zempi 2020).

More generally, reporting and communicating problematic experiences was frequently explored across our sample. Malik's insight was not untypical, illustrating how reporting can induce "double-edged" risk.

> I think if you report it, I think you'll become a bit of a target. When nothing happens, then everyone's like, *Why? Why didn't you do anything about it?* When you don't report it, you're not doing anything about it. Kind of rock and a hard place. Then people stop reporting stuff. (Malik, Male, Professional Services Colleague)

Such experiences are neither unusual nor absent from the body of academic literature relating to the inception and operationalization of equalities policies in HE (Ahmed 2021; Alam and Chaudry 2025; Arday 2018; Bhopal 2022). If not silenced by virtue of feeling unsafe to speak out, Siddique depicts an arguably passive version of silencing that is built on the perception(s) of what "typical" Muslims, even in HE spaces, are expected to be

> I always felt like they [colleagues] expected you to be dumb. They expect the Muslim person to not be that intelligent or to not be that articulate. That's the one that I always get. You always get, *Oh your English is really good*. And I'm like, *Yeah, it's my first language [...] and I've been speaking English like since I was born. Why wouldn't it be?* (Siddique, Male, Professional Services Colleague)

Because Siddique exceeds expectations by being fluent and articulate in English, he is read as exceptional. Such "compliments" also speak to how embedded and ordinary these baseline

expectations have become. Malik, however, noted that the "diversity" work he was undertaking (developing racial, religious and cultural awareness within his institution) was undervalued by his line manager, practically insisting Malik focus on "priority" tasks. In response,

> I didn't say anything. I felt like I couldn't say anything openly but inside, I was like, *Hang on a minute, I thought this EDI stuff was supposed to be important? If it's important, why do you want me to stop doing it?* (Malik, Male, Professional Services Colleague)

Many participants felt confident to raise similarly problematic issues principally because they were engaging with researchers who had lines of commonality in terms of ethnicity, faith and a broader experience of racism and racialization. In the absence of routine "safe spaces", Muslim staff may select silence, with others expressing themselves fully when they are confident that there is no risk of reprisal. And once they are able to "speak their truth", what they say may be neither positive nor performative.

In the same interview, Malik also explored how he felt over-managed and over-scrutinized in comparison to his non-Muslim peers, a feature that was also raised by a large proportion of our sample. With specific reference to Malik's experience, EDI work makes "business-sense" as it can help enhance an institution's ethical standing whilst also demonstrating and measuring its attentiveness and action toward addressing inequality. It is to EDI that we turn to next, exploring how our sample perceived this area of work.

EDI: in operation or in-operation?

Many British universities have made bold and ambitious claims about remedying the disadvantages faced by minoritized groups (Satia, 2021). However, it is EDI units and departments that attend to ameliorating inequalities, often through valuing diversity and aiming to foster greater levels of inclusion. As an area of activity, EDI hinges on the presence of inequalities and an affirmation that such inequalities are self-evidently "bad" and must be eradicated. Because EDI sits in opposition to inequality, it must be "good". However, good is not necessarily the same as effective, a point illustrated through persisting and multiple forms of prejudice, discrimination and inequalities in HE, including those resulting from Islamophobia. At the same time, others lament EDI's tokenistic, performative and ineffective reach (Ahmed 2021; Alam and Chaudry 2025; Bhopal 2022). Similarly, the bulk of our participants considered EDI as untrustworthy, often eliciting disconnects between institutional rhetoric and the reality on the ground

> We're claiming to be doing EDI, but yet when difficult conversations come up, we're scared of losing friends. We're scared of rubbing people up the wrong way. We're scared of people not wanting to hear this. (Rehana, Female, Early Career Academic)

For Rehana, however, the lack of confidence in calling out problematic and prejudicial behaviours has two facets. Those who raise issues of concern risk being targeted and marked as "trouble causers" whilst those who can instigate change appear inert. Thus,

> Racism is treated as a breach in the happy image of diversity; racism is heard as an injury to the organisation and its good will. To even use the word "racism" can mean to become the subject of ill will – to become what makes the organisation ill, what compromises the health of the organisational body or what gets in the way of institutional happiness […] Describing the problem of racism can mean being treated as if you have created the problem, as if the very talk about divisions is what is divisive. (Ahmed 2012, 153)

Added to this, some are immune to critique by virtue of their position and power. Indeed, “allies” and “white saviours” (Irfan 2023) are also similarly inoculated given their politics and diversity credentials. In a conversation between ourselves, we explored the complexity of this context:

> Yunis: Interesting and kind of weird how it’s easier for white colleagues to call things out than it is for me to do the same thing. I mean, I do it – less now than I used to – but I always feel a bit, you know, weird about it.
>
> Izram: Like compromising yourself?
>
> Yunis: And it draws attention to yourself. Say something unpopular, you get noticed for the wrong reasons.
>
> Izram: I know. It was like at that research meeting where [name removed] said lots of really solid things and I was thinking, like, *yo, if that was me who said that, I’d get done* […] when a white person says it, it seems to hold more weight […] What gets me is white people can say things that I can’t […]

Such conversations often featured in our ordinary routine of generating fieldnotes, and in some instances, recording conversations between ourselves. Aside from this sort of practice being relatively common for many qualitative researchers, it also served for us as a form of audit trailing through verbalizing and often documenting our experiences, especially those that provoked some degree of anxiety.

Meanwhile, for Maryam, EDI within HE settings does not necessarily lead to positive and meaningful impact on the behaviours and practices of her colleagues. On the efficacy of EDI, she stated:

> You can have policies in place. You can say that you’re committed to decolonization and inclusivity, diversity, all the rest of it. But whether that then translates and reflects in individual’s behaviours, I don’t know. (Maryam, Female, PhD Student)

Saleem, however, interpreted EDI work across universities as mostly performative and primarily driven by “interest convergence”:

> I look at the drive behind EDI, there’s a degree of interest convergence […] progress will be made towards racial equality when it is in the interest of those in power. If they’re not claiming to welcome you, irrespective of your background, that’s gonna hit the pockets. (Saleem, Male, Early Career Academic)

Whilst the convergence of interest relates to student recruitment, EDI’s presence becomes “business-critical” as it may enhance an institution’s financial well-being. No wonder, then, that pamphlets, web pages and media content representing HE are rich with ethnic diversity, signifying inclusive, welcoming and happy places. Although many campuses are by default ethnically diverse in their student bodies, the same cannot be said with confidence about university workforces, wherein academics of colour are relatively rare, with the exception of those who may be categorized as diasporic or “international”. Such academics may come equipped with higher levels of social, cultural and economic capital in comparison to British ethnic minority academics. Although this paper is not especially about intersectionality, especially that which relates to and through “class”, these facets remain cogent:

> At Stanford I encountered for the first time a black diaspora. Of the few black professors present, the vast majority were from African or Caribbean backgrounds. Elites themselves, they were only interested in teaching other elites. Poor folks like myself, with no background to speak of, were invisible. We were not seen by them or anyone else. (Hooks 2000, 35)

Despite a professed lack of trust in EDI, the majority of our sample had a critical yet nuanced appreciation for its necessity. It is, after all, a mechanism used by institutions to show commitment towards eradicating structurally ingrained inequalities. Whether or not it effectively measures positive impacts, however, is questionable. Speaking of the US context, which is relevant elsewhere, however, Ramdeholl and Jones argue that EDI helps protect:

> the institution against charges of racism levelled against them […] Examples might include celebrating religious holidays, issuing various statements in response to hate crimes, etc. While these are of undeniable importance on certain levels, on their own, they represent rearranging chairs on the Titanic. (Ramdeholl and Jones 2022, 55)

When EDI initiatives lean toward performative, tokenistic, as well as disingenuous "smokescreens", structural inequalities and discriminations become further obscured, continue to embed themselves and settle institutionally, compounding their impact and making them all the more challenging to recognize and thus, resolve. Inequalities are multi-faceted in their manifestation, as are the risks they produce. Similarly, how individuals respond to these risks is worth illustrating.

"Walking on eggshells", diplomacy, overthinking and overworking

In this final analysis section, experiences around sensitivity toward risk and how risk is mitigated are presented. For ourselves, being in HE presents an amplification of risk in relation to how we (and our works) are interpreted and responded to. For instance, we were informally advised that our linked publication (Alam and Chaudry 2025) was "confrontational", "aggressive", "unhelpful" and "potentially libelous". Based on communication from colleagues as well as how our work was being received and spoken about, we also regularly experienced instances of "bracing" ourselves for the potentially damaging impacts of innocuous and expected academic activity. Even whilst writing this paper, we are aware of potential risks that sit outside of the usual space of academic critique and scrutiny. However, and certainly during the write-up phase of our project (Alam and Chaudry 2025), we had several repetitive and, to some extent, psychologically draining conversations about how the report might be received and responded to.

> Izram: You know what? Don't you think it's interesting that we're actually even having this conversation about a piece of research that universities are supposed to value?

This is one of many examples that highlight how otherwise "ordinary" aspects of our working lives require extraordinary consideration and energy. Likewise, Saleem alluded to additional but routinized costs and burdens.

> You're walking on eggshells. You have to be diplomatic. Quite often you have to overthink scenarios and prepare for more than what I think is necessary. And I think that does take a toll. If I'm thinking about emailing colleagues within the department, I should think about tone, about use of language, about how is this gonna be received by certain colleagues. (Saleem, Male, Early Career Academic)

Such working practices involve risk assessment and then developing, testing and integrating safety measures. This may initially imply that some form of neurosis is at play. If this is the case, the "neurosis" is shared and emerges through a fraught environment. Like Malik and others, Saleem referred to a "double-standard" in that the pressures he experienced did not apply to non-Muslim colleagues:

> Sometimes I feel like I have to be overly diplomatic in situations rather than just speaking what my perspective is […] We don't just send the email, we have to prepare for sending the email. We have to discuss the email. Then we have to send the email and we have to brace ourselves for what's to come next. (Saleem, Male, Early Career Academic)

One significant method of inoculation and risk mitigation was through informal support mechanisms. A number of participants, particularly early career academics, mentioned how they had been guided by more experienced colleagues and/or had learnt to navigate risk through observing and reflecting on the biographies, practices and decision-making approaches of established academics. Some developed strategies against risk and harm through informal mentorships, predicated on recognizing excessive vulnerability to unwarranted critique and correction. Awais had learnt to document his experiences, constituting an audit trail that served as a form of protection, whilst helping him identify and avoid potential pitfalls:

> I found myself documenting at the end of every day what was going on and reflecting back and reading back on what I was going through. It was very interesting because things like coercion were coming into play, you know, from my line manager. (Awais, Male, Professional Services Colleague)

For many participants, going above and beyond the expectations of their role was normative. For academics in particular, productivity is more overtly measurable and thus important to prove, with some becoming over-productive, reciting versions of *I work twice as hard to receive half the recognition others get automatically.* Fizaan, for instance, reflected on overworking and overproducing in that he: "was publishing, and I was also teaching. And then at the same time, doing extra work". He had elected to continue in the same manner, stating he "didn't want anybody to use their racist assumptions or prejudices to squeeze me out" (Fizaan, Male, Senior Academic). Here, the presence of active racism translated into the risk of job insecurity, which elicited routines and practices that mitigated against such risks.

There were varied responses in how individuals coped with risks that were generated on the basis of religious identity. For some, an Islamophobic environment required them to counter with similarly active responses. Here, we also gauged expressions of assertive and overt forms of resistance as opposed to arguably passive approaches, which involved working *around* and *through* Islamophobia. Nadeem, for example, was especially robust:

> I don't make any apologies for being a Muslim. I don't hide it. I don't shy away from it […] I'm confident enough to be able to do that and I'm confident enough to be able to speak, challenge and speak to anybody that does that […] I acknowledge that it sort of accentuates my feeling of isolation and it sort of makes me stand out a bit, but I'm prepared to do that for the sake of Islam […] It's a hill that I'm prepared to die on. (Nadeem, Male, Senior Academic)

It is worth stressing that Nadeem was aware that his approach exposed him to isolation and hypervisibility, an extant reality for many Muslims in general, and in HE in particular

(Chaudry 2021). Nadeem's disposition, however, was not especially unique in that many of our participants were attentive to Islamophobic experiences, offering implicit assertions of Muslim identity in response. For some, accentuating religious identity whilst recognizing and responding to Islamophobia enacted resistance. Indeed, some participants referenced their approach as an integral element of their faith identity in terms of aiming to be just, principled and agentic.

Participants who countered Islamophobia demonstrated nuanced and operational understandings of racial literacy. Here, participants were explicit about the salience of cultural capital, particularly forms of knowledge, which could develop greater resilience and resistance. In this regard, some participants felt equipped and empowered enough to publicly challenge Islamophobia, whereas others were more comfortable in learning from first- or second-hand experiences. For Nadeem, this was a political matter which involved racial literacy being translated into action. As such, his agency was a critical element within the university space:

> So, we need to start first and foremost by acknowledging that racism and Islamophobia is rampant in the sector […] And we need to take that seriously. That's the most important thing that we need to do. (Nadeem, Male, Senior Academic)

For Nadeem, developing and deploying racial literacy is a core component that can lead to positive change. For racial literacy to be valued, there needs to be an acceptance that racism and Islamophobia are structurally located and thus, require structural responses. At a practical level, universities need to become more comfortable in publicly recognizing this reality before rehearsing lofty aspirations about eradicating inequality. Although policies, guidance, strategies and so on are in place, on their own, they are unlikely to produce necessary, meaningful and measurable change.

Conclusion

Whilst the diverse issues we have explored are operant and appear to manifest in seemingly ordinary settings, they frame and create an impact upon the experience of Muslims in academia. These range from how Muslims are obliged to inoculate themselves through overworking and overproducing, to "choosing" to censor responses or remain silent. Even raising matters of faith-based discrimination introduces the element of risk, and this, in turn, closes down possibilities through which Islamophobia can be addressed. Such ways of working and being sit within an increasingly fraught context which is now, more than ever, subject to unreasonable levels of simplicity which masquerade as one type of critique or another. Culture wars, "wokeism" and the intractable backlash against EDI have become noticeably routine elements of wider conversations, and any counters present a risk to those who profess to hold views wherein equity, justice, and a baseline recognition of humanity reside.

Although the bulk of this paper has explored a particularized context relating to Muslim experiences of and responses to Islamophobia in academia, these matters also reach into wider debates that are dominated by discussions around "race", especially the "integration" of Muslims, or, indeed whether or not British Muslims are or could ever be "full citizens". What follows are other questions that are premised on the view that Muslims are inherently "deficient", "problematic" and to be accommodated. And it is this issue that has been strikingly consistent throughout Islam's existence but took

on a particular modality in the UK in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Beginning with discourses of "assimilation", former postcolonial immigrants were then subject to conversations that moved toward integration. A generation later, policies flirted with the valuation of multiculture. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, this was hailed as a mistake because British tolerance had supposedly gone too far. A new approach in addressing the deficiencies of British Muslims centred around assertions of self-segregation, deficiencies in social cohesion, insularity, belonging and Britishness (Alam 2020; Alexander 2024; Husband and Alam 2011; Puwar 2004). What we have now, especially through mediated political and populist discourse, is a rapid retreat into the language of assimilation and an evolving reassertion of national identity which is accelerated through populist politics.

British universities have led on "important" "race" issues partly through conducting research on/with/about ethnic minorities. For the longest period, scholars of "race", regardless of discipline, were predominantly of white heritage. This is not to say that the academic canon that centres on "ethnic relations" has been devoid of political and anti-racist activity, although it is notable that ethnic minority academics only occasionally featured within the composition of HE. Whilst ethnic minorities occupied fertile research terrain, they were seldom in control of the narratives being written about them. There has been some expansion of minority ethnic academics in HE, and indeed, we are proof of this. Often, however, the space we inhabit is not always comfortable and has to contend with a nuanced but variegated racialized context. In its history, purpose, and certainly in operation, academia is a colonial vestige, a point that is explicitly borne out when we consider the "scramble" for international students, especially those originating from the Global South.

Unsurprisingly, ethnic minorities are still deemed worthy, important or "pressing" as research subjects. Whether academics are exploring the experiences of "Muslim Women", "Safeguarding Women and Young Girls", or cultivating fields for whichever crops happen to be in season, academia elicits a transactionality in which the political and ideological context identifies worthy research. One example is that of "grooming", with academics falling over themselves to submit funding proposals that will help shed light on why "certain" types of males undertake certain types of activities, despite child sexual exploitation having no ethnic specificity and is regrettably common across the globe. Another older but still in train example pertains to "terrorism". In the aftermath of 9/11, the number of academics who suddenly, quickly and with remarkable talent, dexterity and intelligence became "experts" in radicalization, Islam/Islamism, the Middle East, and South Asia was remarkable. What was not remarkable was the extent to which chasing research funding became a core element of the academic pursuit under neoliberalism.

All societies and their institutions need to evaluate how they interpret themselves, and the impact they create for their people. Academia does not operate in isolation and, therefore, needs to address current challenges that threaten its foundations. Freedom of expression and how it figures in the supposed battlegrounds of the culture wars is connected with the rise and decline of all that is deemed "woke" and feeds into an unhelpfully simplistic refashioning of identity politics (Haider 2018).

The present political and cultural context envelops academia, despite academia's attempts to resist through revived rhetorical pronouncements relating to justice, transformation, social good and the valuing of diversity. We note that what academia says

and what it does are not always consistent. For example, the fixed and seemingly permanent neoliberal model that has penetrated the root and branch of academia were, not so long ago, considered a moral affront to the values and principles that underscored the very identity of "the university". Like every other institution, academia is subject to the forces of whatever political ideology holds sway. In this regard, universities can counter, with courage, conviction and action, some of the more persistently toxic facts of life that are alive and well not just within its own walls, but are present across societies.

Notes

1. Muslimness is defined as the family of overlapping and flexible features that are commonly associated with the quality of being Muslim. Such features can range from the names people have (i.e. Muhammad or Ayesha) to the clothes that they wear (i.e. the hijab or the jubbah) to the languages that they speak (i.e. Arabic). These features are not fixed, but rather, historical and contextual (Sayyid and Vakil 2018).
2. These range, but include, physical and verbal racially motivated assaults as well as coded and for some, relatively reasonable comments about 'no go areas', a lack of 'integration' and so on. Robert Jenrick, for example, noted that he didn't see another white face when speaking in March of 2025 about a visit he made to Handsworth, Birmingham, which he also likened to a 'slum'). This reality, he added, was 'not the kind of country I want to live in' (Mason 2025).
3. In our research, we categorise early career academics as those lecturing, researching and publishing within the first 5 years of completing their PhDs. Conversely, senior academics we defined as having extensive years of teaching, researching and leadership in the Academy whilst being regarded as reputable leaders in their respective subject areas.

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Ethics statement

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ORCID

Yunis Alam http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3338-2178
Izram Chaudry http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3068-9414

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