

# AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE INTERCULTURAL CONTACT EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL MUSLIM STUDENTS IN AN IRISH UNIVERSITY

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*Abstract*— Universities are rapidly internationalising in today’s globalising world and the need to respond to this growth in Ireland as an English speaking country has become only more significant during the past few years with the launch of new plans by Higher Education Authority (i.e. National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030)<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, current debates on campus diversity and internationalisation of higher education include a need to understand and accommodate Muslim students in western campuses. With that in mind, this project aims to explore the experiences of international Muslim students in an Irish university. The study employs a grounded theory approach with use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews and draws upon the existing body of research exploring the experiences of Muslim university students on campus (Ali, S. R., & Bagheri, E. 2009, Asmar, C., Proude, E., & Inge, L. 2004, Cole, D., Ahmadi, S. 2003, Hopkins, P. 2011).

*Keyword*— internationalisation of higher education, Muslim students, international students, intercultural relations.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Student interaction that takes place on a site composed of diverse and educated body of individuals is what internationalisation desirably offers to the delivery of post-secondary education and the development of the global citizenship. Looked at from this perspective, “International students are now seen to be at the heart of university and a valuable source of cultural capital”<sup>2</sup> (Jones 2007: 25). They provide many benefits for one another, such as creating diversity on campus, adding new perspectives into the classroom debates and interactions outside the class. Most

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.heai.ie/en/policy/national-strategy>

<sup>2</sup> Cultural capital is referred to the high status cultural signals used in cultural and social selection as developed by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron to analyse culture and education’s contribution to the social reproduction (Lamont and Lareau 1988).

significantly they enable participants of the institution to become culturally aware (Bevis 2002; Harrison 2002).

## II. INTERNATIONALISATION IN IRELAND

The mobility of students still significantly channeled into the countries with long history of immigration and diversity<sup>3</sup> (i.e. the United States or the United Kingdom). Nevertheless, international students have become one of the contributing factors to the changing face of Ireland within recent years since a flow of students from diverse backgrounds arrive in the Republic with the aim of furthering their educations (Keane 2009).

UNESCO’s statistics<sup>4</sup> on international student movement worldwide include Ireland’s outgoing and incoming student movements along with other countries. Even though the thickest links are historically between Ireland and the UK or US, there seems to be a trend among international students who has origins in countries with sizeable Muslim populations towards Ireland for education.

Muslims hold a significant place in the diversity studies as a result of their media image following the associated attacks over the past decade. However, universities accommodate and embrace diversity in a context where the occupants are inclined to be “more educated than the society as a whole” (Hopkins 2011: 160). The university also brings the people together under the student/learner “shared identity” where they do not firstly have to negotiate their religious or ethnic identity in a “residentially and educationally segregated location” (Hopkins 2011: 161). This makes university campus a worthy place to study in the axis of international Muslim student experience. Current debates around the Muslim belief and identity also make this project timely.

<sup>3</sup> Source Education in Ireland 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See

<http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>

### III. INTERCULTURAL CONTACT

Linguistically speaking “culture derives from the Latin word root *colare*, and is associated with activities of preservation, of tending to and caring for” (Benhabib 2001: 2). Joann Gottlieb Herder (quoted in Benhabib 2002: 2) also refers to the word *Kultur* as representation of the “shared values, meanings, linguistic signs and symbols of a people, itself considered a unified and homogeneous entity”.

In an attempt to define ‘intercultural’, Gareis (1995: 3) “denotes situations involving two or more cultures and is used mainly to refer to relationships between two people from different cultures”. Nevertheless, the blending of cultures and interactions among them cannot be achieved without subsequent effort to facilitate meaningful intercultural engagement between the parties.

Previous studies point out to certain challenges encountered by international and host students such as cultural distance, language, and nature of friendships when involved in intercultural contact. Studies also highlight factors that contribute to the well-being of the international students such as institutional support or social connectedness.

In addition to these challenges international students might encounter, Abu-El-Haj (2002) and Schlosser and Sedlacek (2001), stress that Muslim students studying at Western campuses sometimes find themselves in a situation where they have to cope with manifestations of ethnic discrimination and/or Islamophobia. On those campuses, they also report being identified as outsiders (Arar & Haj-Yehia, 2010).

The prevalent perception of Muslim minorities among the Western societies is not associated with a strong and progressive image. Besides, Western societies are inclined to deem the Muslim women submissive and dominated (Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006). Consequently, Muslim students attending universities, where the culture is largely Western oriented, might experience otherness, alienation and marginalisation (Modood, 2006; Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006).

However, it is also noted that Western modernisation might have a certain impact on students' university experiences with regard to growing aspiration for self-realisation and career development, which is endorsed by the education prosperities offered by those higher education institutions (John, 1989; Modood, 2006; Perry, 2000). As Weiner-Levy (2008) suggests living away from home is closely related to modernisation as a phenomenon and we can expect the international Muslim students that come to Ireland for education purposes to undergo a certain set of adjustment phases.

### IV. RESEARCH QUESTION

This study, therefore, aims to conduct a grounded theory investigation into intercultural contact experiences of international Muslim students in an Irish university. The questions that are central to this study are:

- What are intercultural contact (IC) experiences of international Muslim students (IMS) in DCU

- Does a religious preference have an impact on IC experiences of IMS in DCU
- What factors impact (facilitate/hinder) IC experiences of IMS in DCU

### V. METHODOLOGY

This study employ grounded theory approach into data collection and analysis. There are two reasons behind this decision. The first is the insufficient number of research conducted in intercultural contact on campus literature, which takes religion into account besides particularities such as nationality, ethnicity and race. It is crucial that a study highlights the role and impact of religious preference on intercultural contact on Irish university campuses, as well as challenge the tendency to see specific religious groups as homogenous entities.

The second main reason is, in the dearth of the studies conducted highlighting the experiences of international Muslim students, to excavate a deep understanding of their situation through their lenses. This is essential both to discover the current climate on campus and facilitate further studies in the field.

### VI. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The basics of a qualitative study lie in the need to understand and explain the world through interpretation of the participants. Meaning is constructed through their interactions with their social worlds, which hence construct reality (Merriam et al 2009), as Crotty (1998:42-43) puts forward “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting”. Thus, this project sought participation of IMS in DCU in semi-structure interviews as source of data. Upon collecting the data, simultaneous transcription and initial coding commenced. This was followed by focused-coding, which enabled creation of core categories and its sub properties. Each interview as well as each category were compared and contrasted rigorously for theory building process.

Data was gathered between autumn of 2014 and spring of 2015, on DCU campus. A poster was created and pinned on school boards to initiate the first interviews. This was followed by snowball sampling. A total of 23 IMS participated in the study (f=16, m=7). NVivo software was utilized in early stages of data analysis. In later stages, categories and its sub-categories were built manually by the researcher.

### VII. FINDINGS

In the data analysis it was found that IMSs experience certain challenges in IC in DCU. Nevertheless, it was also evident that the host culture context and the institutional support played a significant role in facilitating IC for IMS.

#### 7.1. Challenges

The entire population of the study confirmed encountering several types of challenges as part of their international student experience in DCU. Major elements were cultural differences,

adaptation problems, course-related responsibilities and individual responsibilities.

The reported cultural differences were largely resulting from their Muslim identity in the Irish context. For instance IMS' dietary observances were reported as a mismatch with Irish Ss' drink oriented socializing habits. However, course-related responsibilities such as unfamiliarity with elective courses, time – management or research ethnics that already exist international student literature were also found as overlapping features in IMS experience. The level of differences and related distance with the host environment varied from student to student depending on their gender, nationality, duration of stay and marital status. For instance, one of the participants who come from a European country reported higher levels of connectedness with the host culture, which is also a European country, as well as lower levels of discrimination. Even though she identified as Muslim, the fact that she was not following Muslim female dress code avoided instant prejudice.

The culture and course-related challenges were coupled with individual responsibilities such as housekeeping, budget planning, grocery shopping, which links back to Weiner-Levy's (2008) "living away from home" argument. However, the government scholarship most of the students were availing of assisted them in financial matters, which could have negative effects on international student experience. This is an obvious facilitator since it reinforces students' general well-being and a secure feeling. It is also a significant point that set IMS apart from the general international student literature.

#### 7.1.1. Role of host culture and institutional support

20 out of 23 participant lived with host family at some stage during their stay in Ireland. Students who stayed with host families reported higher level and faster pace of access to informal culture. This in turn offered them insight into the culture they were adjusting to hence enabling effective use of active thinking in intercultural encounters. Host families also played a significant role in reducing likeness of homesickness and depression by closing ranks between the culture of origin and that of settlement. In other words, host families compensated for absence of family and provided security.

Students also reported receiving high levels of institutional support such as international office and prayer facilities. They also reported that this contributed substantially to their general well-being as well as offering a place to socialise for them.

#### 7.2. Coping strategies

It was identified that IMS employ certain coping mechanisms to cope with the intercultural situations they are involved. These strategies show cognitive, affective, psychological and behavioral properties, such as; active thinking, peer support, participation, resilience, devotion, perfectionism, gravitation

The entire population of the study reported resilience through their ethnic heritage and spirituality, which they directly link to their Muslim heritage. This played a significant role in their well-being, nevertheless, in the case of head-

scarved females from Gulf countries, gravitation towards inner-self or religion (devotion) as well as culturally close student groups was evident. Female students from more secular or European backgrounds (i.e. Bangladeshi, Italian), however, displayed additional gravitation tendencies towards the host, or in a broader sense, European culture. Male students reaction and coping strategies and gravitation patterns varied from case to case as they were able to compensate for abstinence from drink-oriented activities with other ways of socializing such as sports. This was not evident in female cases.

Students also suggested they benefited from peer support in academic sphere as well. Interventions such as group projects were found to facilitate IC between IMS and the host culture as lecturers paid close attention to create culturally mixed groups.

All students reported to utilize active thinking when engaged in IC. They reported to adopt cognitive strategies when involved in intercultural encounters especially during first time. This entailed analyzing the context and deciding what behavior and language would be best suited to the situation they were in. To illustrate this point, head-scarved female students suggested that they were shaking hands with males in the first encounter assuming they did not know about their cultural patterns which restricts bodily engagement between opposite sexes. However, in the second encounter, they feel more comfortable to introduce their culture and its patterns to their male peers. As another example, female students who did not wear the headscarf reported adapting more pious behavior with their head scarf wearing peers, whereas more secular with the host or non-Muslim students.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

The number of IMS is growing in Ireland and other Western countries. This study was undertaken in order to gain a better insight into the IMS experience in these campuses, and point out to certain patterns and factors that might exclusively play a role in IMS IC experience. The study found that the context of host culture might increase the likelihood of a meaningful IC between the parties, religious preference might improve the well-being of international students, culturally-mixed student groups for projects assist students to be involved in IC and that nationality and gender play pivotal roles in IMS adaptation process. Nonetheless, this project was conducted in one university campus in the Irish context and future research might compare and contrast different cases to improve our understanding of IMS experience.

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