

Islamic Studies, Social Cohesion and Public Engagement

Background

Well-established links with Leeds' Muslim communities in Harehills, Hyde Park and Beeston culminated in the development of a part-time Islamic Studies programme in 1996. This was in direct response to concerns expressed by local Muslims about i) the lack of Islamic knowledge in their communities and ii) the interpretations and bias from particular sects and ideologies. Parents wished to have an adequate understanding of their religion and Islamic culture to impart to their families. They indicated little trust in the quality of teaching in supplementary schools, madrassas and study groups attached to some of the mosques.

The programme content was negotiated from the beginning with members of the Muslim community and the Head of Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies. Subsequently the growth of the inter-disciplinary programme has been developed in response to requests by groups in this community and also people from the wider community with an interest in social cohesion and awareness of different cultures. The programme has continued to evolve with 1825 students recruited to date. Provision is delivered in local settings with every attempt being made to overcome structural barriers such as finance, childcare, transport and timetabling.

Student Intake

Inner city socially-deprived areas are specifically targeted e.g. Harehills and Chapeltown, Beeston, Hyde Park in Leeds; Manningham, Barkerend, Girdlington, Lidget Green in Bradford; Batley and Dewsbury in Kirklees. The courses attract a cross section of both Muslims and non-Muslims from a wide age range. Participants have included imams, taxi drivers, community workers, factory workers, unemployed people, vicars, social workers, serving soldiers and the police.

Programme as Pathway

The programme has also successfully served as a widening participation tool with local people initially attending out of interest and then being encouraged and motivated to progress. We now have students who are taking postgraduate study in Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies who began their academic study undertaking modules in the community. Some of those had attended purely out of interest and had no thought of progressing to a degree.

Programme promoting inter-community understanding

One of the key drivers for Muslims attending this programme is seeking an understanding about the differences between their cultural heritage and religion. It is clear, particularly for women, that exploring the tenets, history and interpretations of Islam has liberating consequences. This was made very explicit recently at a seminar we organised on Women and Islam which attracted a large number of our students and where the questions demonstrated the confusion and tension of culture and religion and the barriers to wider opportunities faced by people living in closed and often inward-looking communities. In addition critical debate about their multiple identities is made more problematic when living in a society, exacerbated by the media, which is perceived as Islamophobic and where their cultural heritage is seen as 'other' than the 'British' norm.

The Future of the Islamic Studies Community Programme

Feedback from our students, teaching staff and colleagues in community organisations have indicated that there is an overwhelming need in West Yorkshire to establish platforms which promote greater inter-community understanding of all aspects of Islamic culture and religion. The University is perhaps unique in offering a) the knowledge and expertise to do so as well as b) being viewed as providing a safe, secure neutral space where students can debate, challenge and critique, without any fear of censure. This programme has gained a great deal of credibility and goodwill amongst those with an interest in this area and students have come from as far afield as Birmingham and Leicester to take part in these courses. National profile has included a Universities UK Adult Learning Award and acknowledgement of our good practice in government documents relating to Islam and pedagogy.

The changes in HE funding in 2012 will have a detrimental impact on accredited short course provision given that pro-rata fees will be prohibitive. However, we are exploring ways to ensure that LLC will continue to deliver community-based courses on a non credit-bearing basis. This will serve a dual purpose of a) utilising academic expertise for the purpose of facilitating dialogue and debate within and between communities and b) encouraging progression to the University from communities under-represented in Higher Education.

APPENDIX

- i) Explanation by an Islamic Studies tutor of the programme's wider objectives and impact:

We are trying to give people a greater sense of identity and confidence. Women in particular have to deal with racism and sexism; they are often living in patriarchal cultures and have to deal with these oppressions. Muslims here have to reconcile Islam and identity with European values which they are told are in binary opposition – Islamic fundamentalism and the fundamentalism of capitalism, 'If you're not with us, you're against us'.

Students do have a radical change of attitude...they start to understand that they have a commonality of values. At the beginning of the course students, both Muslims and non-Muslims, can be on the defensive - they can self-censure and they stereotype. There are very diverse opinions in Muslim communities but one thing they have in common is anger, they want to know why they are being portrayed as they are...The Iraqi war and Afghanistan intervention has really affected the students. They felt a widening gap between them as Muslims and the rest. They want to know about Islam and are desperate to understand what is going on.

- ii) Some initial reasons for undertaking an Islamic Studies course:

Shazia *I came to learn about my religion to pass on to my children.*

Zaida *Because it's hard for women. OK we've got brothers and dads or husbands who have got the knowledge and can go to mosques and places to get it but we can't get it from anywhere. I don't know any place where I could sit down and ask questions or even find out about*

Islam that's in English as well - usually it's in a different language and it's hard for us to understand.

Peter *My interest in doing the course was because I feel that we in Britain need to try to understand the profound changes which the future will bring, especially in West Yorkshire as we move into a true multi-faith society.*

iii) Students have indicated that University involvement is a key factor in their attendance:

Nadya *It's very important because you know that you belong to something that is recognised and what you're doing is going to be recognised. The credits and Certificate mean a lot to me – it means I can go to someone and say 'I did this course with Leeds University', the name means a lot.*

Zaida *I know if it's a university course then it's going to have quality and it's going to be in English...at study circles there's no assessment to see if we really understand what we're studying – there are not different interpretations.*

Riffat *They give a different view – when you change to these courses, they open a different door to it: what is the Qur'an and Hadith, what is faith?*

Tahira *I came into it purely to find out about my religion...I didn't know it was Leeds University, I just thought 'fantastic, there's a course where you can find out how to read the Qur'an'. I had tried many times to read the Qur'an in English but found it quite a hard book to read...[with the University] I was actually learning what the Qur'an was and how to read it and at last I could understand that you could actually read this book... so it made us put it into context and helped us to work out how to read things and what the meanings of them are. So for me, it's totally changed how I looked at my life, how I lived my life, how my children will be brought up.*

Shazia *The reading list that they give you is very good, it's got Muslim and non-Muslim authors, it gives you a good view to form your own opinion. In Islamic history, I'm finding that really enjoyable to know the background of Islam, how it developed and that it was once a great empire, and to look at it from both an Orientalist and Muslim point of view.*

Nadya *I always wanted to learn about my religion and I wanted to learn the way this course teaches – the wide view – not from one narrow point of view – the community we were living in and the religion we've been taught was just through a keyhole really...and then we came to this course and it's helped me to look at religion in a wider range and there was nowhere else I could go...It opened other doors for me...I can see more places and more options.*

Shazia *It's an intellectual way of teaching. What we learn from mosques, it's more practical. This helps because it goes into a more detailed, intellectual way of teaching...the tutor knows about this world [Britain] as well and then he explains about the other world...to compare and learn.*

- Kareema *I wanted a platform where I can safely explore my religion. As a convert is not in our culture to study in a madrassa, I was looking for a more professionally structured, tried and tested system, where questioning is encouraged, and doubt is not frowned upon. These courses gave me the opportunity to learn analytical skills from qualified unbiased teachers.*
- Mohammed *During my course I experienced for the first time discussing issues on Islam with non-Muslim students in my class. It was great to see tutors deal with sensitive issues professionally...I think the Arabic and Islamic Studies programme will no doubt increase the knowledge and self-esteem of individual students...For me it also gave me enough increased confidence to pursue a full-time degree and to go on to think of a whole new career change.*
- Milena *I really enjoyed the Islamic Law classes which were taught at a very professional level. They allowed me to see the differences and the similarities between law in Arabic countries and western ones and I am happy that I have such a knowledge which not many English people have.*