

A Qualitative Study Investigating the Motives of Muslim Women for Studying Islam at a British University

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Abstract

This case study aims to explore how Muslim women studying Islam at a particular UK university, conceptualise the purpose of Higher Education (HE), by reflecting on their motives for choosing to study Islam at university through one to one interviews with the researcher. The study includes the voices of Muslim women at different levels of their studies at university, to not only understand different perspectives, but also to investigate whether or not there were any similarities or differences in their understanding of the purpose of HE. The findings suggest that there are various reasons why Muslim women choose to study Islam at university. Some of these include the sheer desire to learn and increase knowledge; to develop the ability to think critically; to aid them in serving their communities and the feeling of empowerment. The findings of this study also suggest that the attitude of Muslim women studying Islam at university, towards the purpose of HE, has not been as strongly influenced by the dominant instrumental discourse that appears to dictate the understanding of the purpose of HE within the literature.

Key Words

Higher Education, Muslim Women, Islam

Introduction

Being a student at university myself, I have been at the receiving end of the pressure HE institutions place on students into aspiring to work upon completion of their studies. I find this frustrating because I did not come to university with a goal of a career, but just because I was interested in education. Having completed units that explore the concept and construction of identity, and looked at the marketization of education, I wondered how other university students, who shared a part of my identity thought

about the purpose of their HE. I also spoke to lecturers who teach on the Islamic studies course at a UK university. I felt that their ideas as to why Muslim women (specifically) choose to study Islam at university, as opposed to alternative non-formal educational routes, were worth exploring further. Another factor leading to this topic was the lack of Muslim women's experiences in current literature (Ahmed, 2001) and the under-representation of Muslim women in HE worldwide (Taylor, 1993; Kettley, 2007; Rasheed & Bagheri, 2009).

This research is heavily influenced by the current debate about the purpose of HE. Within the literature there is an overwhelming focus on the instrumental purpose of HE within society. Due to globalisation forces, Stromquist (2015) argues that the emergence of the knowledge economy has resulted in the putative need for HE to facilitate social efficiency. As a result, greater attention is being given to knowledge dealing with science and technology. Islamic studies does not fall within these fields of study, thus there is debate as to the purpose of studying such courses at university. Sceptics such as Freire would interpret this issue as the interest of the oppressor laying in 'changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them' (1972:60) resulting in the disempowerment of individuals. Furthermore, the findings of lead researchers in the field of Muslim women's experiences in HE (e.g. Ahmed, 2001), can also be used to complement this research, as will be explained in section 4. However, there is a gap in the literature considering the perceptions of this minority group of the purpose of HE, which is what this study hopes to address.

The purpose of this case study is to understand how Muslim women in HE conceptualise its purpose, by reflecting on their motives for choosing to study Islam at a UK university.

Literature Review

Over time, the function of universities in England has changed drastically, and according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, the number of students who attend a university currently stands at over two and a quarter million (HESA, 2018). There are currently more students attending university than ever before, which has led

to many discussions as to what the purpose of HE is (Tomlinson, 2001; Browne 2010; Didau, 2011; Collini, 2012). McGettigan (2013) and others argue that recent academic debates imply that the purpose of HE is currently driven by an economic discourse, whereby the point of studying a course at university is to work within that field (Walford, 2002; D'Agostino in TedX Talks, 2014; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). Evidence of this can be found in the Browne review (2010), which suggests 'there needs to be a closer fit between what is taught in higher education and the skills needed in the economy' (Browne, 2010:23). This approach to HE is very functionalist (Murphy, 2009) and heavily economically driven (Felix, 2012), thus this research challenges this notion of seeking knowledge purely for material gains.

Brown (2006) and Foskett (2010) discuss the notion of the marketization of education and questions whether it actually drives up standards and values, as advocates of the marketization of education claim (McGettigan, 2013). Furedi (2010) also explains how the concept of the marketization of education is highly ideological and also rooted in political motives, while Saichaie and Morpew (2014) highlight the political struggle between competing purposes of contemporary education. Labaree (1997) identifies these competing goals of HE to be democratic equality, social efficiency and social mobility. Felix (2012) explains that democratic equality refers to the production of engaged citizens, whereas social efficiency is about educating productive workers, while social mobility is more to do with the personal or individual value placed upon ones HE. Leading on from this, the current literature on the purpose of HE implies that there is a stronger emphasis on the social efficiency role that HE contributes to, at the expense of the other multiple purposes of HE. Studies like those of Arum and Roksa's *Academically Adrift* (2011), brought to question whether students were learning and engaged enough in their HE studies. They concluded that HE institutions need to focus less on social aspects of the university experience and reinvest energy to promote academic engagement.

In addition, among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) main ranking criteria for a university, is whether its courses are designed to help with a career and how successful students are in getting a job after completing their degree (OECD, 2010). From this, it is also possible to deduce that the widespread perception of the purpose of HE is to prepare for a vocation (Saichaie and Morpew,

2014). Weisbrod (1998) argues that the fact that HE institutions have adopted and adapted such practices of private organisations, may result in the degradation of the purpose and reputation of universities. Saichaie and Morpew (2014) concluded that universities emphasized their roles as providers of individual advancement and enjoyment rather than as a means for improving communities and society. Thus, the dominant discourse present within the literature is the promotion of HE as a commodity, whereby its outcome is heavily related to job-relevant skills, and achievement of social mobility through the credentials it provides.

Furthermore, Saichaie and Morpew (2014) suggest that since the 1970's contributed to HE's embrace of savvier market-based approaches to attracting students, prospective students began to exploit this new supply-demand mismatch and assert themselves as consumers. This implies that students are the ones, who chose to be seen as consumers, whereas Williams (2013) would argue otherwise: that it was change in government policy and the marketization of education, brought about through neoliberalism, which forces university students to view themselves as consumers. She argues that students, who must pay tuition fees to study at university, are made to feel like the purpose of HE for them, is not only credentials but more importantly about preparing for a vocation, rather than intellectual development or democratic engagement (Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). For university students, there is a culture whereby they feel entitled to a recognised qualification at the end of their studies regardless of input, simply because they have paid for it (Williams, 2013). Moreover, the fact that world-class universities are recognised for their production of 'well-qualified graduates who are in high demand on the labour market' (Sami, 2009:23), also emphasises the purpose of HE as preparation for a vocation.

This contemporary debate in HE is significant to this research, since it has the potential to contribute to the debate of the purpose of HE from a unique perspective.

Research Approach

This case study aims to explore how Muslim women, studying Islam at a UK university, conceptualise the purpose of HE. Participants were carefully selected from diverse backgrounds and included a male lecturer (A); an undergraduate student (B); a

master's student (C) and a first year student (D). Although this study looks at the motives of Muslim women for choosing to study Islam at university, participant A was included in order to provide an insight from the angle of a tutor on the course.

This study was designed within the interpretivist paradigm of research to allow me, as the researcher, 'to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants' (Thanh, 2015:24). This was selected as the most appropriate approach since it was the participants' experiences that I wished to reveal through this research. Rubin and Babbie (2010) claim that such an approach reflects a worldview whereby multiple realities and truths exist. This is in juxtaposition to a positivist paradigm, where there is an underlying assumption that there is only a single reality, which implies that there can only be a single truth (Killam, 2013). By using an interpretivist paradigm as the umbrella under which this study was designed, the ontological and epistemological assumptions made correspond to the beliefs of relativism. The ontological belief is that reality is socially constructed (Willis, 2007), therefore shaped by the contexts in which they are found, resulting in the concept that truth evolves and changes as it is created by meanings and experiences (Killam, 2013). Cresswell (2003) asserts that interpretivist researchers reveal reality through participants' views, their own background and experiences (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2011), which is why I felt this approach would be the most appropriate for the context of this study. Furthermore, the epistemological assumptions are that knowledge is not found, but constructed (Killam, 2013). Therefore, one would expect the researcher to play an interactive role throughout the research process, which is what I did.

Thanh (2015) highlights that underlying principles behind research paradigms are important aspects to consider when designing an educational research project. This is especially the case for a study whereby the experiences of Muslim women, a marginalised group (Miles & Benn, 2016); whose perceptions of HE may be constructed and interpreted differently; are being explored. Furthermore, due to the explanations of interpretivism within the literature (e.g. Willis, 2007; Thanh, 2015; Killam, 2013), I felt it would be best-suited for this study to be underpinned by this worldview. An interpretive methodology allowed me to explore the understandings of participants and provided a context that allowed me to examine what the participants in this study had to say about their experiences (Cresswell, 2009).

In addition, academics (e.g. Willis, 2007; Thanh, 2015; Nind & Todd, 2011) assert that interpretivist researchers tend to prefer qualitative methods, such as case studies. Hence, I felt that a case study would be the best approach to use as it would enable me to encapsulate the 'subtleties and complexities of individual human behaviour' (Robson, 2002:98), and base this study on 'the lived experiences of people' (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:2). Moreover, due to being a Muslim woman, I shared an identity with the participants, thus the methodology of this study was also influenced by phenomenological ideas. Such an approach was ideal because Lester (1999:1) describes it as 'powerful for understanding subjective experience, gaining insights into people's motivations and actions', which was one of the purposes of this research. Furthermore, my shared identity with the participants, placed me as the researcher, at an advantage, as it enabled the establishment of what Rubin and Rubin (2005) call a relationship of 'conversational partner' with the participants, thus reducing tensions with power dynamics as highlighted by Curtis et al (2014).

Because the findings of this study are an interpretation of the experiences of the participants, issues of validity and reliability are slightly different from that of a positivist paradigm (Phothongsunan, 2010). The validity of this study, otherwise referred to as credibility or truth value (Noble, 2015) within qualitative research, can be demonstrated through the acknowledgement that the context of interviews were shaped by the research aims, as argued by Gee (1999). Therefore, before taking informed consent from each of the participants to record their conversations with me for transcription, the research aims were made clear to participants before the interviews, and I consciously did not mention the economic purpose of HE. In an attempt to lessen the likelihood that knowledge of the research aims would influence participant responses, I made interviews less structured and adopted the methods of data collection of others, such as Mir (2009), by allowing questions to grow from interview content and conducting interviews in multiple contexts (Farnsworth, 2010). In this way, I was able to gain rich, in-depth data (Willis, 2007), although it was more time-consuming. To increase credibility, I could have considered triangulating data by using another method alongside interviews. However, due to the limited time to complete this study, it was not possible. Despite this, the findings of this study corresponded to the findings of other independent studies in the field, which illustrates the reliability of this study.

In correspondence with qualitative research as outlined by Marguerite, Dean, and Katherine (2006), participants were not selected through a random method, but carefully selected as individuals who not only expressed a keen interest in the project, but also had valuable experiences for the purpose of this research. Data was collected through in depth interviews with each of the participants in a suitable setting of their choice. Consequently, interviews took place in a range of settings including the university and participant homes and were transcribed shortly after. In this way, I maintained an interactive role, by getting to know the participants and the social context in which they lived, while also being able to analyse the data more effectively in terms of impressions I received when certain comments were made. Such notes were made alongside the transcripts. Therefore, my own identity as a Muslim woman was vital in the context of this research in order to add an additional level of interpretation.

Moreover, after transcriptions were complete, I began a thematic analysis of the findings, focussing on what motives participants gave as to why they, or other Muslim women they knew, chose to study Islam at university. These were then applied to their conceptions of the purpose of HE, in order to address the purpose of the research.

Findings

The focus of this section will be on the themes that emerged, relating most to the conceptualisation of the purpose of HE. Due to the small sample size, findings should be taken as indicative rather than definitive.

Lack of knowledge / desire to learn

As also found by other researchers (e.g. Ahmed, 2001; Ahmed and Tyrer, 2006 and Oplatka & Lapidot, 2012), common to all levels of study on the Islamic studies course was the motive of lack of own knowledge, thus resulting in a genuine desire to learn. Participant D described her reason for choosing the course saying 'I wanted to know more'. However, when this student came to realise that the course repeated a lot of what she already knew and stopped being interesting to her, she left. Therefore, from this, it is evident that the purpose of HE for this student was in order to learn more

about something that she was passionate about. Furthermore, this particular student also mentioned:

‘I feel like when you go and study something in like an academic setting it kind of like kills your passion for it a bit’

When this student found that the course was not fulfilling what she perceived to be the purpose of HE, she left the course. The idea of being assessed on learning something she enjoyed did not appeal to her and she also acknowledged that ‘you need a degree to be worth something’ nowadays. However, her intrinsic thirst for knowledge for personal development clashed with the objectives of the degree. The desire to learn more as a motive for studying further was also a similar theme that came across from the interview with participant C:

‘I was just thinking I’ll do this course just to enlighten me and when I started to go into it ... I just wanted to know more coz I thought I knew it all’

Furthermore, participant B initially chose to study the course because she wanted to take a ‘step up from the mosque’ and learn about something that she didn’t know much about.

Ability to think critically

For those who took part in this case study, they also understood one of the purposes of HE to be the development of the ability to question the generally accepted norms within their communities. For example, participant C mentioned:

‘we’ve still got that notion in some of the communities where universities are not an appropriate place for a daughter to be... I know we’ve got a lot of the community that I live in... they’re quite judgemental in that aspect so we haven’t actually got a lot of people who go to university... and I wanted to prove to them that you can still be a part of the community you can still be a part of who you are and you can go ahead and do the degree’

From this, there is also a theme of defending identity within her community while also trying to be different. This theme of being pioneers within their communities, as a result of their HE, was also a common theme across all three student interviewees.

To equip themselves to serve others

Rather than choosing the course to work towards a particular career path, these Muslim women expressed a desire to either study the course in order to, 'step out the mould' (participant B) of what is generally expected of Muslim women from their communities, or to be able to equip themselves with the resources needed in order to serve others to better their communities. This is in contradiction to the findings of Saichaie and Morphew (2014). However, Oplatka and Lapidot (2012) also came to similar conclusions to this study, and Bullock (2005) adds that this attitude is found within Muslim women activists. From two of the interviews (with participants B and C), the theme of being able to run their house properly or be role models for children, were among the reasons for studying Islam at university, which was also found by Pickerden (2002). Furthermore, due to her belief that there are not enough Muslim women in public, participant D wanted to study the course in order to be able to represent her age group and relate Islam to them. Thus expressing authentic self-expression and disregard for social pressures (Oplatka & Lapidot, 2012).

Discussion

The findings of this study can be centralised around the concept of empowerment, although it was not used explicitly by any of the students. Their conversations eluded to this concept since Kabeer (2000:19) defines empowerment to be 'the expansion of people's ability to make strategic choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them' and Sen (1999:193) describes it as women's acquisition of 'agency and voice'. However, Stromquist (2015) highlights that some describe empowerment as an end point while others as a process. Among such academics would be Eldred (2013:13), who defines empowerment as 'the process of supporting people to become more aware of power relationships and systems and understand that just and fair balances of power contribute to more rewarding relationships'. Freire (2000) would further add to this by explaining that what Eldred (2013) is actually referring to here, is the learning process, which he terms 'conscientization'. Following on from Eldred's definition, it appears that the Muslim women, who took part in this study did understand one of the purposes of HE - to be empowered:

'I'm quite sure that a lot of the ladies have come to try to get a better understanding of where women stand in society according to the Islamic teachings' (Participant C)

For this student, going to university provided an opportunity to develop an awareness of the power relationships that exist within her religious community in order to be able to challenge them. This is in line with Stromquist's (2015:308) definition of 'empowerment as a set of knowledge, skills, and conditions that women must possess in order to understand their world and act upon it.' As a result of this understanding, participant B expressed her aim of being able to build rewarding relationships as a result of studying at university:

'they go to uni because they'll have the skills and the tools to develop to address mainstream'

For this particular student, the idea of addressing 'mainstream' implied being able to reach out to society and create dialogue with those outside of her religious community. Felix (2012) argues that the ability to create dialogue, is one of the ways in which HE institutions prepare students to become active citizens – a purpose of education propagated by Barnett (2005), which Felix (2012) believes is necessary in order to create critical beings, who 'are able to critically engage with the world and with themselves as well as with knowledge' (Barnett, 1997:1).

Furthermore, the impression given was that empowerment was a vital outcome of their Islamic studies at university as they felt it would help them to defend their identity as Muslims, one participant mentioned:

'[it] gave me a way of at least even salvaging my own tradition so it wasn't just when I was looking at it more critically as an outsider, actually as an insider that it's a way of articulating your tradition as well'

This was a unique perspective on the purpose of HE as this participant saw their studies as a means to validate and justify their own beliefs.

Moreover, another motive for studying Islam at university expressed by participants, was in order to be intellectually stimulated and challenge the tacit norms that exist within their communities. Participant C mentioned:

'the community that I live in we're not open to different opinions ... whereas here [university] you get the different perspectives and it makes you accept people more'

Participant B also mentioned:

'university teach broader aspects so you go to a madrasa you have a question you get one answer two answers when you come to university same one question you'll be able to generate 20, 30, 40 answers so that's how university is, its's critical'

Participant D also spoke about one of the reasons she initially chose to study the course:

'I wanna like question things I wanna change things'

From these quotes, there was an impression that university is a tool to challenge attitudes of migrant Muslim families, who are sceptical of education for their daughters. This finding contradicts Ahmed (2001), who found that families of Muslim women, from the same background as my participants, were highly encouraging of their daughters attending university, as it was seen as a means of raising one's status among their community. The findings of this study, compared to other research, suggest that this may only be true for courses that lead to a respected profession. However, the impression given from my interviews was that these students felt that they were pioneers by studying Islamic studies, in order to be able to 'be different' and 'step out the mould'. These Muslim women expressed their desire to act upon the knowledge they acquired and serve others. Thus, being able to think critically in order to bring about change was one of the purposes of HE for them. This should be one of the purposes of HE according to many academics (e.g. Barnett, 1997, 2005; Freedman, 2011; Felix, 2012), who argue that universities are slowly moving away from this aim, by replacing it with a more economic approach (Williams, 2013; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014).

However, it is also valuable to note that this theme of criticality also appeared in the independent conversation with the lecturer. Therefore, as a researcher, it was necessary for me to consider this, in terms of whether this motive was something that

was maybe instilled in the students of this lecturer as a motive for studying the course, when in actual fact it was something that they knew they were expected to do. Furthermore, there were certain phrases that one of the students used e.g. 'madrasa gives you the text and university gives you the tools to deliver the text', that had also been used by the lecturer when speaking to me about the subject. This could then bring rise to criticisms of this research approach thus, questions about ontology, and whether it is possible to get 'true' answers from participants, or whether their beliefs about the purpose of HE are internalised from what they are exposed to.

Furthermore, the issue of the constant negative media attention that Islam has recently received as highlighted by Versi (2016) and Williams (2012), was also a factor that arose in the interview with participant C in relation to why Muslim women choose to study Islam at university:

'all this Islamophobia and I think maybe that's pushing them [women] into understanding their religion more not from the perspective of why things are happening but just to make them more stronger about the deen [religion] as well'

From this, it is possible to deduce that there is also a theme of exploring religious identity through studying Islam at university. Although current literature that aims to give voices to Muslim women is centralized on the subject of identity (see Ahmed, 2001; Miles & Benn, 2016; Tyrer & Ahmed, 2006), according to the author's knowledge, the findings of this study are unique in the contribution to the exploration of Muslim women's identity through HE currently found in the literature. This is because the findings of this study imply that studying Islam at university enables Muslims to defend their identities, rather than using their studies at university to 'liberate' themselves as suggested by Kay (2006), who assumes that they are less likely to endorse traditional Islamic customs of looking after their home or family.

In addition, the traditional Islamic understanding of the role of Muslim women in the family, was not perceived by the participants of this study as something contradictory, which deterred Muslim women from accessing HE, as implied by some of the current literature on Muslim women (Kay, 2006; Jawad, 2003). In fact, one of the motives for participant B for choosing to study the course was in order:

‘to run my home properly after marriage’

Complementary to the findings of Tyrer and Ahmed (2006), one of the Muslim women expressed a desire to use her degree to try to be a good role model for her children and especially the girls in her family, while also serving her community, and participant D mentioned that she chose to study the course:

‘because I feel like there’s not enough women doing Islamic studies at all like especially people my age’

From the latter conversation, it became evident that this Muslim woman intended to represent her own age group and make Islam relatable to them - something she felt was missing in her community. Another key driving factor for her was her belief that

‘there’s not enough women speaking about women’

Therefore, from all three conversations with the Muslim women, a very strong message of their intention to serve others as a motive for studying Islam at university emerged. This is contrary to the dominant instrumental discourse in regard to the purpose of HE as discussed within the literature (e.g. Collini, 2012; Williams, 2013; McGettigan, 2013; Freeman, 2011).

Conclusions & Future Works

This research implies that the purpose of HE was perceived to be more than social efficiency. This is because there was no mention of a career as the objective of participants’ studies. Therefore, whilst this case study was carried out on a particular group of Muslim women, studying at a particular university, and findings cannot be generalised, it has prompted areas for further research. One of which is the need for research on the tension between studying Islam through university and non-formal routes such as madrasa. Although an awareness of this tension (AICUSA, 2013) influenced my approach, the limited length of this report did not allow me to elaborate on this issue further. However, the findings of this study did allude to the importance of the role of secular HE institutions as places that provided equality of access to knowledge for women that is not otherwise available to them.

Findings also imply democratic equality was perceived to be a purpose of HE for the participants of this case study. Therefore, the findings of this study are in agreement with Felix (2012), who argues that there is a need for an emphasis on democratic equality as an outcome of HE. Thus, individuals who pursue HE should be able to effectively participate in political decisions that affect them. This research could also be used to challenge the current hegemonic discourse, which dictates the purpose of HE as highly instrumental, by presenting a case whereby education is sought for the sake of knowledge. It also revealed that the Islamic Studies course was accessed by those coming from widening participation programmes, who may need to study at a slower, more flexible, pace (Pickerden, 2002). This is a challenge of HE institutions in seeking to appeal to students from a range of backgrounds, as was evident in the fact that participant D left the course due to lack of intellectual stimulation. Therefore, one recommendation that I would put forward for providers of HE courses, is to consider the diverse backgrounds of students, attracted to their courses, and ensure they are intellectually stimulating from the onset, to cater for all needs.

In addition, for further research in this field, I would also recommend that this study is replicated in other HE institutions, which offer Islamic studies courses, to investigate whether there are any commonalities across the sector.

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