Towards critical geographies of the university campus: understanding the contested experiences of Muslim students

This paper sets out an agenda for advancing critical geographies of the university campus. Despite the plethora of scholarship which highlights the complexity evident within other social locations, scales and sites, there is a dearth of geographical research about the construction and contestation of social and spatial relations experienced on university campuses. By exploring understandings of the contradictory and contested nature of everyday spaces developed by social and cultural geographers, I suggest that scholarship could usefully be extended to interrogate the complex ways in which different university campuses are constructed, contested and experienced. This paper explores these multiple constructions of the university campus through the narratives of twenty-nine Muslim students attending a British higher education institution. I use this data to explore the multiple and contradictory discourses which students utilise that simultaneously construct the university campus as tolerant and diverse and as discriminatory and exclusionary. This paper draws attention to the significance of spaces within universities as well as to the management of university space as crucial factors in providing environments suited to an increasingly diverse student body.

Keywords: Britain, students, qualitative methods, university campus, inclusion, discrimination

Introduction

For more than twenty years now, geographers have continued to excavate the multiple meanings, complex constructions and contested associations of different everyday spaces, scales and sites. Whether it be the home (Blunt and Varley 2004, Jacobs and Smith 2008), the street (Fyfe 2004, Johnston 1997) or the body (Longhurst 1997, Simonsen, 2000), geographers have developed a critical awareness and sophisticated understanding of the complexity and ambiguity of the construction, use and manipulation of these spaces. Such scholarship also includes critical investigations into a number of institutional contexts such as those associated with schools (Collins and Coleman 2008)
residential care homes (Andrews and Phillips 2002) and prisons (Baer 2005, Baer and Ravneberg 2008). With reference to institutional contexts, Philo and Parr (2000, 514) have observed that institutions ‘have usually referred to those material built environments … which seek to restrain, control, treat, ‘design’ and ‘produce’ particular and supposedly improved versions of human minds and bodies. Big buildings with large grounds, lots of rooms and corridors, and sizeable resident populations: these are the focus of those institutional geographies which have previously caught our attention. They have also queried the ‘intersection of the institutional and the geographical’ (Philo and Parr 2000, 513, see also Philo 2001), and distinguish between geographies of institutions (the relative spread of distribution of particular types of institution) and geographies in institutions (the geographies of internal social and spatial relations) pointing to the ways in which both of these are ‘practically and conceptually shaped in many different ways’ (Philo and Parr 2000, 514). So, although scholarship has focused on specific institutions, critical geographies of the university campus are curiously absent from research within human geography. Yet, university campuses are contested locations in terms of how they shape the production of knowledge, student’s lifecourse trajectories and in terms of politics and power relations.

This by no means suggests that the university campus has not been the focus of geographical research, as there is evidence of three bodies of scholarship which draw attention to the significance of university campuses to a range of local, national and global debates. The first and largest body of work tends to focus upon the relationships between university campuses and the regions and cities in which they are located. Research has drawn attention to the importance of university campuses for regional development (Goddard and Chatterton 1999) as well as debates about the relationships between local communities and universities (Chatterton 2000, Smith 2009). The influence of the seasonal in-migration of students to cities with universities has generated much research, with particular focus being drawn to housing issues (Fincher and Shaw 2009, Hubbard 2008, Smith and Holt 2007). Related to this phenomenon, Smith (2005, 73) has developed the idea of ‘studentification’ which refers to ‘the distinct social, cultural, economic and physical transformations within university towns, which are associated with the seasonal in-migration of HE students.’ Chatterton (1999) has also
discussed the ways in which university campuses work to create clusters of students around universities at particular times of the year. He observes how students tend to congregate around universities and often occupy local pubs, clubs and music venues whilst also spending time in the neighbourhoods in which they live, near the university. Overall then, this area of work tends to focus upon the relationships between university campuses and the cities and regions in which they are located. The focus tends to be upon issues of regional development, housing issues and city living. Both the internal geographies of the university campus and the embodied identities of students are largely absent from such work.

University campuses are also sites of activism and resistance. For example, Silvey (2000) has written about student anti-sweatshop activism on campuses in the US and Canada, and M’Gonigle and Starke (2006) have focused upon campus based activist activity aimed at persuading their university to follow a more sustainable plan with regards to campus development. Such work focuses not only on university campuses, but the ways in which such locations are interconnected with broader global and national forces, political issues and resistances to unjust processes. For example, with reference to student activism, Silvey (2000, 191) observed the ways in which student protest ‘directed attention to the embeddedness of academic institutions in the systems that perpetuate global economic inequality.’ This work also dovetails writings about the professionalisation of academia (Castree 2000, Castree and Sparke 2000, Roberts 2000) and the associated resistances and challenges to what universities are for and how academic work should be conducted (Mrs Kinpaisby 2008).

The internal places, structures and processes that operate in university contexts are also important factors in determining how university campuses are experienced in empowering or exclusionary ways. Research focusing on this theme is limited compared with the themes identified above. However, notable exceptions include Gieseking’s (2007) critical exploration of the embodied, institutional and extra-institutional gendered experiences of those attending a college for women in the USA between 1937 and 2006. Another excellent example is Turner and Manderson’s (2007) exploration of the behaviours and experiences of law students attending the ‘Coffee House’ in McGill University’s Law Faculty. They were interested in exploring how students experienced
this particular social space within the university context. Turner and Manderson (2007, 768) argue that the power of this space lies in the ways in which it ‘presents a certain model as central and marginalises alternatives.’ It promotes a certain image of ‘real law’ and so normalises particular practices, attitudes and values, whilst also operating to create an in-crowd who attend the events and a crowd who are on the margins of the community.

So, work has explored the relations between campuses and their broader localities and issues associated with activism on campus. However, far less has been said about social and spatial relations within higher (or indeed, further) education institutions and the different ways in which university campuses are constructed, contested, managed, and experienced in a range of exclusive, marginalising or empowering ways (although notable exceptions include Gieseking 2007 and M’Gonigle and Starke 2006). In order to contribute towards recognising the contested nature of the university campus, I draw upon the narratives of Muslim students attending a higher education institution in the UK. The narratives of Muslim students demonstrate the multiple and contradictory ways in which the university campus is experienced and draws attention to both the microgeographies of campus as well as the connections between global and national issues and how these influence and shape the ways in which the university campus is encountered. Although some research has explored the views of Muslim students (Appleton 2005a, 2005b, FOSIS 2005), these studies have not focused upon the spatial context of the university and have instead focused upon student views of global issues and events. As such, whilst developing contested geographies of the university campus, this paper also contributes to the continued development of work about the spatialities of Muslim identities (Aitchison, Hopkins and Kwan 2007, Dunn 2005, Phillips 2009) including understandings about engagement with urban space (Phillips, Davis and Ratcliffe 2007), negotiations of spaces of education (Archer 2003, Mohammad 2005) and the ways in which Muslim young adults engage with geopolitical issues (Hopkins 2007a, Horschelmann 2008).

The aim of this paper then is to advance critical geographies of the university campus through analysing narratives constructed by Muslim students during individual interviews. This paper is situated at the intersections of scholarship about institutional
geographies (Philo and Parr 2000), geographies of Islam (Aitchison, Hopkins and Kwan 2007, Hopkins and Gale 2009) and feminist critical geopolitics and international relations (Hyndman 2001, Pain 2009, Sylvester 2002). My intention here is to contribute to theoretical and empirical perspectives about the ways in which ‘global processes, whether economic, political or socio-cultural, are experienced in localized, everyday, embodied ways’ (Hyndman 2001, 212), using the university campus as the container through which to explore these experiences. This paper therefore embodies, locates and grounds geopolitics (Dowler and Sharp 2001), analysing the narratives of Muslim students to do so. Simultaneously, this paper advances discussion about the complexity of institutional geographies, how these are shaped by and respond to broader trends and processes and the ways in which such spaces are experienced by Muslim students. Overall then, I advance contested geographies of the university campus by exploring both the ways in which the university campus is embodied and experienced on an everyday basis by Muslim students and the ways in which geopolitical issues and national policies operate to shape their experiences of campus. In order to do so, first, I offer a brief summary of the project from which this paper arises. Second, I focus upon one of the three discourses advanced by the students whereby they argue that the university campus is tolerant and liberal. Third, I draw attention to how Muslim students see global issues and national policies filter onto campus in ways that make them feel increasingly monitored. Fourth, I draw attention to the microgeographies of the university campus and the lack of provision of specific facilities suited to the religious practices and beliefs of the students. Finally, I offer a conclusion that draws attention to the theoretical, empirical and policy implications of this research. I now explore each of these in turn.

The study

This paper draws upon twenty-nine interviews with Muslim students studying at a higher education institution in the UK during 2006 and early 2007. All of the interviews were taped with consent, fully transcribed and anonymised, then coded by theme. All names used in the text are pseudonyms - most of which were chosen by the participants themselves - in order to protect confidentiality. The primary method of recruiting participants was through initial contacts made with the student Islamic Society at the
university. A process of snowballing was then employed where initial contacts were asked to identify other Muslim students who may be interested in participating in the research. The majority of those who participated in the research were accessed through the Islamic society and or through related contacts with the remaining respondents being recruited via adverts on university notice boards or via an e-mail announcement. All of the interviews took place on the university campus in places chosen by the interviewees, which normally involved a quiet location such as the mosque, a college room or café. All interviews focused on the key themes of: the university campus; thinking about home; being Muslim; and international politics. This paper presents data from interview discussions where the university campus was discussed. In this part of the discussion, we focused on the use of the spaces of the campus, experiences of inclusion and exclusion, location of important facilities and general sense of place. I differ from the participants in that I am white, not religious and arguably occupied a position of power relative to the academic situation of the participants as a male middle-class academic. However, I accord with Mohammad (2001) in that I was never a complete insider or outsider as I possessed a range of similarities and differences with the research participants, and these varied throughout the study in different places and at different times. Furthermore, thinking only along lines of similarity and/or difference is further complicated by the fact that a British Arab Muslim woman also worked with me on this project and so the process of analyzing the data is sensitive to our multiple positionalities, and constantly changing senses of similarity and difference in relation to the research participants.

The particular focus of this paper is upon a university campus in the UK which was built in the 1960s in a site separate from the city of the same name. In terms of the sample recruited for this project, the research findings may only speak to specific experiences and may largely be reflective of the accounts of international postgraduate Muslim students. Of the twenty-nine student interviewees, sixteen were female and thirteen male. Twenty-one were postgraduate students with eight studying towards their undergraduate degree. 11 identified as home students and 18 as international. Reflecting the presence of a relatively large group of Malaysian students on campus, five of the research participants identified with a Malaysian heritage. Moreover, the sample also included students who identified with family backgrounds or personal histories in
Algeria, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Libya, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Singapore, with eight students being born in the UK. Although the different experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as home and international students may often be assumed to be the main point of comparison, the specific context of this paper demonstrates that the main factor influencing the student’s experiences was whether or not they lived on campus. Sixteen students lived on the campus and so used the services and facilities of the university campus more intensely than those students who only visited the university campus for lectures, seminars or to attend the library.

University campus as tolerant and liberal

A persistent theme that arose during interview discussions with Muslim students is their regard for the university campus as a tolerant and liberal place, and a context in which they felt comfortable and content. Ali said “I must say it’s been nothing but a positive experience,” Leena said “I feel like universities are very free … a free space” and Asif noted “I’m actually quite happy with it”. Consider the views of Yasmin, Atta and Ali:

Yasmin … I think universities are the most tolerant places in the country really cos we tolerate all sorts of things here that people outside in the real world don’t tolerate (23 years old, home postgraduate).

Atta …it’s very, very easy because people who come to university, they are quite broadminded compared to the people in town who haven’t been to university (29 years old, international postgraduate).

Ali … people on campus tend to be a little bit more sensitive to diverse living. Most of the people are educated people who are…I think the more education you have, the less…the racism goes down (33 years old, international postgraduate).

The sense amongst these interviewees is that universities as places are tolerant of diversity as people who occupy the spaces within the university tend to be more educated than society as a whole - and therefore less racist – than people elsewhere. Leena noted that she “feels like there’s a lot of educated people out there, I feel like that … that we
can get on with each other cos maybe we’re educated and we’re students and I don’t feel victimised in any way”. Later, she continued:

Leena Another thing is that you feel like you’re surrounded by educated people all the time, so you don’t feel…you don’t feel like people are stereotyping you as much cos you feel that they’re very educated people and we’re all in the same boat, we’ve all got deadlines, we’re all students, we’ve all left home, we’re all very similar in that way that we’re all students….the uni’s so diverse…so you don’t feel like you’re out of place (21 year old, home undergraduate).

There is also a sense here that the shared sense of identity as students and learners, coupled with the diversity of the study body, creates an environment in which there is clear senses of understanding between all users of campus space. This particular discourse about the university campus was expressed by the vast majority of the interviewees, including home and international, as well as undergraduate and postgraduate students. It could be that some of the students were making these suggestions in response to my whiteness and in reaction to their perceptions about my position within the university at that time. However, such statements are also found in the interviews conducted by the British Arab Muslim woman who was working with me at the time. Jenny, a young British woman who told me about the disgust and anger expressed by her (Catholic) mother on hearing about her daughter’s recent conversion to Islam, also noted:

Jenny: … all the friends who I communicate with now are in university and they’re intelligent enough to have no problem with it. They know I’m not gonna go and…they know I’m not gonna crazy and start doing crazy things and a lot of them were shocked at first but when you explain to them, they’re not gonna get angry with me or tell me I’m wrong or anything. They just accept it, which is really good (20 years old, home undergraduate).

So, overall then, there is a sense in which the university campus is tolerant, liberal, educated - and therefore not racist – and that there is a shared sense of identity as students and learners. In this residentially and educationally segregated location then, the students
interviewed effectively displace any sense of racism or discrimination elsewhere, maintaining that the university campus is free of such problems. This is similar to the ‘harmony discourse’ discussed by Back (1996, 111) in which he suggests that ‘a common claim is that the local “community” is free of racial tension and that harmonious relations exist between its various parts’. Moreover, it could also be read as a strategy of invisibilisation through which the students attempt ‘to avoid being perceived as a threat, and being placed, as a consequence, at risk’ (Hopkins and Smith 2008, 107). Accounts of racist abuse recollected by the students always referred to incidents outside of the university campus and so their perception of the campus is undoubtedly shaped by such experiences. For international students, these incidents tended to take place in the nearby town whilst home students tended to draw upon experiences from their home town or on public transport whilst travelling to university.

**Global issues, state policy, campus lives**

A second set of issues that arose in discussions with Muslim students reflects concerns about global geopolitical issues and the ways in which these have fed through into national policies and onto the university campus. In particular, the events of 11\textsuperscript{th} September 2001 in New York and the London bombings of 7\textsuperscript{th} July 2005 coupled with British government policies aimed at ‘promoting good campus relations’ were highlighted by Muslims students as having a negative influence on their experiences of negotiating the university campus. These issues arose in the context of guidance recently produced by the British Department for Education and Skills called ‘Promoting Good Campus Relations: working with staff and students to build community cohesion and tackle violent extremism in the name of Islam at universities and colleges’ (see also guidance produced by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills). This problematic guidance notes that ‘there is a real, credible and sustained threat to the UK from violent extremism in the name of Islam’ (p.4) and states that it is ‘concerned with recognising and tackling this form of extremist behaviour and protecting students, not with targeting or monitoring particular individuals or groups of individuals’ (p.4). It is clear from this guidance that a polarised set of perspectives about university campuses exists when comparing the views of the students and those of the government.
In seeking to assist higher education institutions with ‘recognising violent extremism in the name of Islam,’ a set of themes is identified that could ‘play a role in the process of recruiting and grooming individuals’ (p. 7) to participate in such extremist activities. First, ‘networks’ enable those interested in extremist activities to extend their own networks and establish new ones. A second concern is ‘segregation,’ with the assumption that ethnic segregation may lead to negative interpretations of relations between different communities. ‘Student societies and other groups’ as well as ‘outside speakers’ were also highlighted as potential recruiting grounds for extremism, alongside ‘peer group pressure and bullying’ and ‘meetings subsequently attended outside a university or college.’ This guidance received extensive coverage in broadsheet newspapers – and in particular, in the UK Times Higher Education Supplement – and the students were made aware of it through their own networks and through an article published in the student newspaper on campus. Contrary to the first discourse about the university campus as being liberal and tolerant, the narratives of the students suggest heightened and intensified emotional geographies of the university campus as their everyday movements are monitored, surveyed and open to constant critique. Many related the guidance to various global events, such as those on 11th September 2001 and 7th July 2005. Yasmin was aware that “there’s been repeated calls for this kind of monitoring since 9/11, so it’s been what … like 6 years and every now and then something like this will come up.” Electra said that “whatever you want to call it, it’s very disquieting,” and Shafqat commented that “it’s just like having a 24 hours guard in your house while you are doing your own kind of … daily house routine.” Similarly, Ali said there was a sense in which “people are looking over our shoulders, thinking, ‘are we being monitored’? This is a clear example of the ways in which geopolitical issues become embodied by particular agents (in this case, students) and located and grounded in specific places and contexts (Dowler and Sharp, 2001).

There was a sense amongst a number of students that the publication of the government guidance provoked a response from universities which has led to an increasing sense of distrust and insecurity being associated with the attitudes, behaviours and conduct of Muslim students. In particular, students felt a heightened sense of their
everyday practices being monitored, controlled and open to question. Shazia comments on the criteria set out in the guidance:

Shazia … you know what is crazy … the criteria I was reading for extreme students was if they’re hanging around in big groups, or if they’re speaking a different language. I’m studying politics, my friend is studying media, the other one is studying biological sciences – so are we under the watchful eye as well, because we hang around in big groups and sometimes we speak a different language, and we are quite loud and stuff so, and we carry big bags with us … I think that it is totally not acceptable at all, you can’t single out a student just because they’re Muslim, and say we’re going to watch them because they’re Muslim…and I wouldn’t accept that. If I found out it was me under the watchful eye I’d be so angry … or any of my friends or anyone, because that’s like violating somebody’s human rights (20 year old, home undergraduate).

Furthermore, a couple of students also observed how a senior employee of the university asked to be added to the mailing list of the Islamic Society as a strategy for monitoring the group:

Nurhayati This is a meeting that the Islamic committee had with the other religion societies and with the University Board. I’m not sure who it was in the meeting the representative. But they wanted to put this lady from the University Board on the Islamic Society mailing list. But everybody was there – Christian Society, Jewish Society - and they only asked the Islamic society, I don’t think this is fair. They can be in the Islamic society [mailing list] I don’t mind at all, but why don’t they include the lady’s name in the other religion’s mailing list as well? (27 year old, international postgraduate).

Although the aim of the senior university employee may not have necessarily focused on monitoring Muslim students, the response of the students is clearly understandable given that other religious groups did not simultaneously receive the same request. Clearly, this is very concerning for Muslim students who have an intense sense that their everyday comings and goings are being watched over, and the narratives of the students point to a
number of responses and readings of this particular set of issues. For example, Nurhayati is open about the situation and states “I think there’s nothing we as Muslims want to hide, so they can interrogate us as much as they like,” and Shafqat seeks to justify the practices of the Islamic Society to argue that monitoring is not required:

Shafqat: They say university students can be easily attracted to extreme groups...this is the way I understand it at least partially from that article...but this in itself doesn’t give them the right let’s say to have let’s say some kind of surveillance on Muslim groups at universities. I mean, I don’t know about other Muslim societies in other UK universities but here, I mean, what we do...we basically pray and we have our social kind of life outside (30 years old, international postgraduate).

A concern for some students related to the ways in which government policy and related issues results in students with specific embodied markings or practices being the subject of surveillance. As Puwar (2004, 51) observes, ‘some bodies have the right to belong in certain locations, while others are marked out as trespassers who are in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined, politically, historically and conceptually circumscribed as being ‘out of place’ (Cresswell, 1996). These policies therefore operated to make Muslim students sense that they were invaders of the spaces of the university campus, had less legitimacy than other students and therefore were under surveillance. This concern was further heightened by reports in the Times Higher Education supplement about lecturers being asked to monitor students who looked ‘Asian,’ the assumption being that all Asian students are Muslim and vice versa. This therefore points to the racialisation of religion (Dunn, Klocker and Salabay 2007, Howard and Hopkins 2005) as the highly problematic and racist assumption is that Muslim students can be identified directly as a result of their phenotypical features. Asif notes:

Asif: I was really, really disappointed. I saw like the front page of the Guardian...it said, Muslim students and in particular it said Asian looking as well. So I thought it’s just stereotyping and you can’t really...I’m really not comfortable with the fact that what I do on campus might be monitored or might be seen as suspicious, even if I was say typing an email to the Islamic Society, I don’t see how that has got anything to do
with anyone else or the events they put on. So it’s quite unnerving to be honest as well, that certain people just because of appearance or beliefs are targeted in this way (20 year old, home undergraduate).

Others felt that the formation of policy was not necessarily the best option, and instead support should be offered to Muslim students given the geopolitical context. As Asad notes:

Asad:  I feel that there are a lot of new negative attention being drawn on Muslims, especially a lot of prejudice after September 11 and the bombing tragedy in London, but to control the students, I think the best way is just to provide support or...I think trying to be friendly with Muslim students, if there’s a good relationship I don’t see any problem (19 year old, international undergraduate).

There was also a feeling amongst some of the students that the government were negatively targeting Muslims in a strategy to silence opposition to their unpopular foreign policies:

Mai:   … how do I put this? I think it’s a diversion tactic. They were an easy target, Muslims, especially Muslim students because of the odd nutcase who has made it to the news and the July 7th bombs. But I think it’s to draw attention away from their foreign policies, especially their policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, to justify their wars … especially as universities are breeding grounds for anti-war movements and peace movements, I think they really want to get onto campus and ostracize Muslims and start with the younger generations: ‘Yes we are in danger, Yes, we need to spend loads of money on defence, yes, we do need to invade other countries’ (28 year old, home postgraduate).

Related to the above, Muslim students were very concerned about the constant misrepresentation of their religion in the media, and how this played out in their everyday lives (Dwyer 1998). There were claims that Muslim did not have a voice and that the negative coverage of their behaviours and practices was already creating a situation in which they were being monitored, controlled and “under siege”:
Jenny ...what’s happened here is Muslims don’t have a voice, they don’t have somebody to speak for them. So...the media have run away with this idea of Muslims as extremists and because Muslims don’t have a voice to speak for them, they’ve got no defence (20 years old, home undergraduate).

Yasmin ...If they want to monitor Muslim students, please don’t publicise it and put it in the newspapers cos it’s only making Muslims feel even more insecure, more fearful, more under siege. It really, really doesn’t help the confidence of the Muslim community and the feeling of sort of...feeling of comfort and rootedness or security. The more we get told that we’re gonna be scrutinised and monitored, the more sort of closed and uncomfortable that we’re going to be and the more ...not feeling we belong we’ll feel … (23 years old, home postgraduate)

Here then, we see a discourse about the experiences of being a Muslim student on university campus that differs markedly from the first set of issues explored above. Rather than seeing the university campus as tolerant and liberal, here Muslim students feel an increasing sense of surveillance as their everyday movements are monitored and watched (Hopkins 2007b). Whether it be through the monitoring of their e-mails, the surveillance of their racialised and religious bodies, the negative coverage of them in the media, or their concerns about the negative impact of government policy, it is clear that aspects of their experiences of university campus are also interwoven with the national and the geopolitical, resulting in them being monitored in series of complex ways. In narrating such concerns, these students are contributing to Pain’s (2009, 9) call for ‘emotional geopolitics’ that are sensitive to ‘the feelings, perceptions, views, subjectivities or bodies’ who experience the outcomes of geopolitical decisions and processes firsthand during their everyday lives (see also Pain and Smith).

**Institutional discrimination, student facilities and campus geographies**

A third set of issues relating to social and spatial relations on campus also arose in interview discussions with Muslim students. In particular, the concerns raised by students here focus on the provision of particular services on campus, the location of the campus
mosque and the dominance of a stereotypical student drinking culture on campus. All in all, these issues point to the influence of institutional discrimination and everyday marginalisation in determining the provision of student facilities and student’s experiences of campus geographies. With regards to such discussions, it may have been useful to have spoken to a number of university employees who have responsibility for campus relations and who may have been able to explain specific decisions about the provision of facilities. At the same time however, it is important to respect the views of Muslim students about their personal experiences of studying, living and socialising on the university campus.

An important issue that was raised regularly by the respondents was the location of the campus mosque. Although the students expressed an appreciation for the mosque as an important site for them to practice their religion and meet fellow Muslims, some – such as Wakas and Jenny - questioned the location of the mosque separate from other world faiths:

Wakas ....I would prefer to stay with the other faith groups in the same building, the Chaplaincy Centre, but I think this one is ok (32 year old, international postgraduate).

Jenny It really … puzzles me as to why they think Muslims need to be put … as far away from the community as possible, where the Jews and the Buddhists can be with the Christians in the chaplaincy centre. I don’t see why … it feels to me … like they’ve found the location furthest away from the heart of the university … it’s cold, muddy … (20 years old, home undergraduate).

Aside from the mosque being physically separated from the other religious groups and so marked out as different, there were also concerns raised about the route to it:

Jenny: the journey to the mosque, which is very desolate … I wouldn’t like to … especially with the dark nights … I wouldn’t like to make the journey on my own (20 years old, home undergraduate).

Iman: I think the mosque should be in a slightly more convenient place.
Yasmin: Well, it is out on a limb. Obviously the university’s expanding and maybe that was the only free space to put it in but it would be nice to have it a bit more central (23 years old, home postgraduate).

Concerns about the route to the mosque were particularly prevalent amongst the Muslim women students consulted in the research with very few of the male participants mentioning this as an issue. Muslim women students tended to be concerned for their safety and well-being, particularly when the days were shorter and the route was very dark. As such, the location of the mosque not only marginalises Muslims generally but is particularly exclusionary for Muslim women in particular (Phillips 2009). The mosque was located on the periphery of the university campus due to the lack of space available within the Chaplaincy building for the growing population of Muslim students, so although the students appreciated being provided with space to practice their religion, they felt the marginal location of the mosque was reflective of wider inequities with regards to how their religion was perceived. Overall then, although the relocation of facilities for Muslim students was undoubtedly due to practical issues associated with the lack of space available with existing facilities, for some this was part of a broader set of subtle – and not so subtle – processes of exclusion and discrimination.

Related to the marginalised placement of the mosque, students also felt excluded due to the lack of availability of halal food. Although there were reportedly 2 take-away food outlets on campus that sold halal food, some Muslim students complained that they couldn’t buy halal food on campus or even in the nearby town. This resulted in some students having to either travel to the nearest city – 25 miles away - or find an alternative means of obtaining such food. One former Muslim student even started cooking food and selling it to Muslim students at the mosque in order to overcome this issue.

Nurhayati: The food itself we have difficulty not just in campus but in the town … it’s really difficult. Even if you go to the town, there is only one shop, and it’s not easy access (27 year old, international postgraduate).

Yasmin: There’s only 1 shop in town who sells halal meat and it’s really extortionate rate, so a lot of people don’t even bother shopping from there. They go to the city, it has a lot more halal meat shops, which is … well, I mean, it’s not a trek but it’s sort of out of the way having to go to the city.
to get your meat. But yeah, so a lot of people complain that they can’t find meat and that they need to go to the city (23 years old, home postgraduate).

Electra: I have to go to the city. Like I go to the city once every couple of weeks to buy stuff (34 years old, international postgraduate).

Related to the practice of their religion, some participants also suggested that a small room could be provided in their department as a prayer room:

Faruk: Maybe each department if they can have like… just a small room just at least for some time during winter it is very cold to go outside, so sometimes I think even like I’m lucky because my office mates are very open and can accept when I pray. I don’t know about … because the office might always keep on changing, so it’s hard for me like to explain every time why I need to do this. So if like each of the … this building can have just a small room for us to pray, that should be okay (37 years old, international postgraduate).

Alongside concerns raised about the location and the mosque, the availability of halal food and other factors relating to the practice of their religious faith, the most frequent remarks reflected the dominance of a drinking culture and the presence of college bars on campus. Although some respondents mentioned that they chose to ignore such places, others raised issues about the lack of appropriate spaces for them to socialise in, others felt pressurised into using such spaces by other student groups or societies, or by other staff working at the university. Consider the views of Wakas, Leena and Abdul:

Wakas The only thing I don’t like about the university is this huge number of pubs….each college has its own bar ….I think this is the problem with….I find it a problem for me and I think the other students, Muslim students, they share the same viewpoint. We don’t have lots of places to socialise, for somewhere to go. The only place to go is…..even, for example, we were going to a meeting with the other postgraduate students in law school and the meeting….we were thinking about meeting at 6 o’clock. The problem all the coffee shops close at 5:30 and the only choice is to go to a pub or a bar, and this is a problem because as Muslims we are….it’s quite
prohibited to go to sit on a table where….in a place where alcohol is served (32 year old, international postgraduate).

Leena I might feel … I might … I might feel a bit uncomfortable in a bar, just because we have to avoid being in an alcohol environment and so I might feel uncomfortable being there (21 year old, home undergraduate).

Abdul I mean … yeah, I think that the college bars … I’ve been into a couple of them in my undergraduate times … I’m really interested in the philosophy society and I always get their emails and they tell me about the events and I’d really like to attend these events but they always have to meet in the bar, so I’ve never gone to one of their events. I remember last year they had an event … it was about the hijab debate … so they were having a debate about this and I got the email and I replied to the guy and I said, look I’d really like this event so much and I’d really like to participate but I feel that you’re preventing Muslims coming because you’re holding it in the bar and he said, right, I didn’t think of that, thanks for letting me know and he changed it to another location (23 year old, home postgraduate).

So, Muslim students tend to feel they have a restricted use of the spaces of the university campus compared with other students, given the dominance of the college bars as a feature of campus life. This situation was exacerbated by the lack of other available spaces and points to the social and spatial marginalisation of a broader range of students who, for a variety of religious and cultural reasons, choose not to consume alcohol. As Mai suggests, an alcohol free space was made available but was eventually closed:

Mai It would be nicer if there were non-alcoholic places to meet which are open late at night as well. I remember there was one place in Graduate College, but they didn’t keep it up for very long. They had a kitchen there, with tea and coffee and stuff. It didn’t take off because it was quite smelly [laughs] not very clean. So they just decided to end it all, and I thought: what a shame. So that would be one thing, a social place for people who don’t want to drink? (28 year old, home postgraduate)

Further unease was expressed by the use of college bars for socialising associated with research groups within departments. A couple of postgraduate students who participated
in research groups in their departments mentioned that it was common practice to retire to
a college bar after a research group meeting or after an invited speaker had completed
their presentation. This was often a difficult situation for Muslim students leading them to
withdraw from taking a more active role:

Danya  Well … I tend to like cafes … the coffee shops. I really, really don’t like
the fact that there are pubs in the middle of campus. Actually the other
frustrating thing is that for example when they used to invite me to
departmental meetings or just a group going, they always go to a pub
which is I think … obviously I found that it’s kind of inappropriate (23
year old, international postgraduate).

Ali  I notice that after … we have these research groups in the department
where there’s a bit of a tension there because after the research group
meets, they have this sort of habit of going to the bar after the research
group is done, which is a nice sort of social sort of less formal way of …
you can talk … and some people say that that’s the best way to talk to the
faculty is sort of outside the department and it’s nice because students and
faculty get together and they talk about various issues. I sort of feel like I
miss out on that sometimes (33 years old, international postgraduate).

Clearly then, there are a number of ways in which student facilities are provided and
campus geographies played out, that work to marginalise and exclude Muslim students
and institutionally discriminate against them. Furthermore, the discrimination
experienced by some Muslim students is such that there may be cases where universities
could be in breach of government legislation, such as The Employment Equality
(Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003. This set of regulations covers issues associated
with recruitment, pay, terms and conditions, promotions and dismissal along with
provisions relating to direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation.
Placing people of faith in a disadvantageous position – such as through excluding them as
a result of holding meeting in places associated with alcohol consumption – could lead to
a claim of discrimination according this legislation.

So, although the students may advocate the university campus as a liberal and
tolerant place, there are also clearly aspects of it that are deeply marginalising, culturally
exclusive and institutionally discriminatory in nature. Although issues of everyday experiences of exclusion were raised by the vast majority of participants, home students tended to be more outspoken and angry about such experiences compared with international students. This was particularly the case when student drinking culture was the subject of discussion where many home students displayed a vehement dislike and disgust for such practices and the spaces associated with them. This contrasted with the perspective of most international students who were generally accepting that alcohol consumption was an important aspect of everyday life for many students in the UK. This difference may be due to the ways in which home students see the drinking culture as contributing to their everyday experiences of being the subjects of suspicion and discrimination, thereby acting as a key point of differentiation between themselves and other students. International students, however, were inclined to accept the presence of the drinking culture as a normal part of British society in contrast to social and cultural practices in their home countries. The student’s views therefore also contribute to advancing understandings about the spatialities of alcohol consumption and its associated inclusions and exclusions (Jayne, Valentine and Holloway 2008, Nayak 2003).

**Conclusion: contested geographies of the university campus?**

In this paper, I have used data collected during interviews with Muslim students to demonstrate the multiple and contradictory ways in which they construct and seek to understand the university campus. As their narratives suggest, the students argue that the university campus is tolerant and diverse whilst also experiencing it as exclusionary and hostile. This is due to the ways in which global issues and national policies shape their experiences on campus as well as the methods whereby they encounter discrimination and exclusion in their everyday use of campus facilities. The narratives of the students also provide direct evidence – a grounded and emotional geopolitics - of the ways in which government policy has negatively influenced their everyday experiences and has worked to misrepresent their religious faith and associate them with suspicion and scepticism. Yet, the accounts of the students also show that they are not simply accepting the global-national-local transmission of negative discourses about their religion and are instead actively responding to this through everyday resistances, creative dialogues and
challenges to the status quo. This paper therefore contributes directly to literatures about the relationships between universities and the cities and regions in which they are located (e.g. Goddard and Chatterton 1999, Smith 2005), institutional geographies (e.g. Philo and Parr 2000) and geographies of Muslim identities (e.g. Aitchison, Hopkins and Kwan 2007).

There are also both theoretical and policy implications arising from this study. Drawing upon work in feminist critical geopolitics (Dowler and Sharp 2001, Hyndman 2001, Pain 2009), this paper provides a clear example of the embodying, locating and grounding of geopolitics (Dowler and Sharp 2001). Rather than assuming a global framing of the debates presented, I have instead drawn attention to the processes through which geopolitical issues are experienced in everyday lives and in a specific context (Pain 2009). At the same time, the embodied, located and grounded accounts of Muslim students demonstrate the ‘entangled geographies of power’ (Sharp et al 2000, 24) in which their everyday experiences are situated as global discourses and national responses to these have implications for the embodied experiences of Muslim students. As we are all located and entangled within these geographies of power (Sharp et al 2000), we are arguably – and in particular as university staff or students – part of the process which operates to create such exclusion and could usefully be more reflective or and critical about our academic and institutional practices, in order that such exclusions can be minimised.

At the same time, the issues explored here have important policy implications, specifically in relation to counter-terrorism and the experiences of religious and ethnic minorities. Spalek and McDonald (2009) draw attention to the ways in which government initiatives that aim to prevent extremism have questionable value in terms of both their effectiveness and the influence they have on Muslim communities (see HM Government 2006, 2008, 2009). Although two of these publications were published after the research presented here was conducted, this research is still very relevant to such issues. The often explicitly aggressive and discriminatory nature of these government initiatives is such that – as Spalek and McDonald (2009, 124) have lucidly observed - ‘the subsequent alienation of the very communities needed and expected to aid counter-terrorism efforts’ is occurring as a result of such policy initiatives and clear evidence of this is presented.
through the grounded and emotional geopolitics of the Muslim students consulted in this study.

Furthermore, there are three additional conclusions that arise from this paper. First, the particular case study used in this paper focuses upon a very specific type of university campus within the UK higher education sector. Many university campuses in the UK are located in city centres or urban fringes, and in some cases, the boundaries of the university campus are not clearly delineated as nearby offices, shops and cafes sit alongside lecture theatres, seminar rooms and other university facilities. Yet, there are also university campuses that are separate from urban areas, located in rural settings, adjacent to smaller villages or indeed operate as villages in their own right. Similarly, some campuses are regarded as local, others regional and others still national or global in their focus and scope. Future research could usefully seek to investigate the experiences of students studying and living in different types of university campuses in different national and educational contexts in order that contested geographies of university campuses can be better appreciated and understood.

Second, despite the student’s experiences of marginalisation and exclusion, their promotion of the university campus as tolerant and diverse compared with places outside campus raises worrying questions about how they negotiate socio-spatial relations in contexts outside of the university setting, particular given the marginalisation and exclusion they also experience on campus. Understandings of the university campus could therefore usefully be explored in relation to other contexts such as the neighbourhood, the workplace or the home (Mohammad 2005) or with reference to issues such as residential segregation (Phillips 2006) in order to advance relational and contested understandings of the multiple ways in which university campuses are experienced and negotiated.

Furthermore, although this paper has focused upon the experiences of Muslim students, their accounts highlight the need to explore the circumstances of other religious and minority groups on university campuses and the complex ways in which they may feel content and included or stigmatised and on the margins. Such analysis could usefully include not only minority ethnic or religious groups but also other groups of students who are minoritised on campus. A useful example here is the work of Desforges and Jones
(2001, 337) about the experience of students who speak Welsh and how language often results in particular shared experiences and ‘socio-cultural groupings with the student body.’ Moreover, students are only one set of actors who occupy the multiple spaces of the university campus. Just as Phillips, Law and Turney (2004) explore with regards to widening participation initiatives, it would be useful for future research to include the views of university managers and staff about the experiences of different groups on university campus thereby contributing multiple voices in the move towards critically understanding the contested geographies of university campuses in diverse settings. As such, the findings of this article and further related research may be of use to academics, university managers and administrators in seeking to promote good practice and create less exclusionary university campuses for an increasingly diverse group of students.

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