KEYNOTE · ISLAMOPHOBIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION SYMPOSIUM

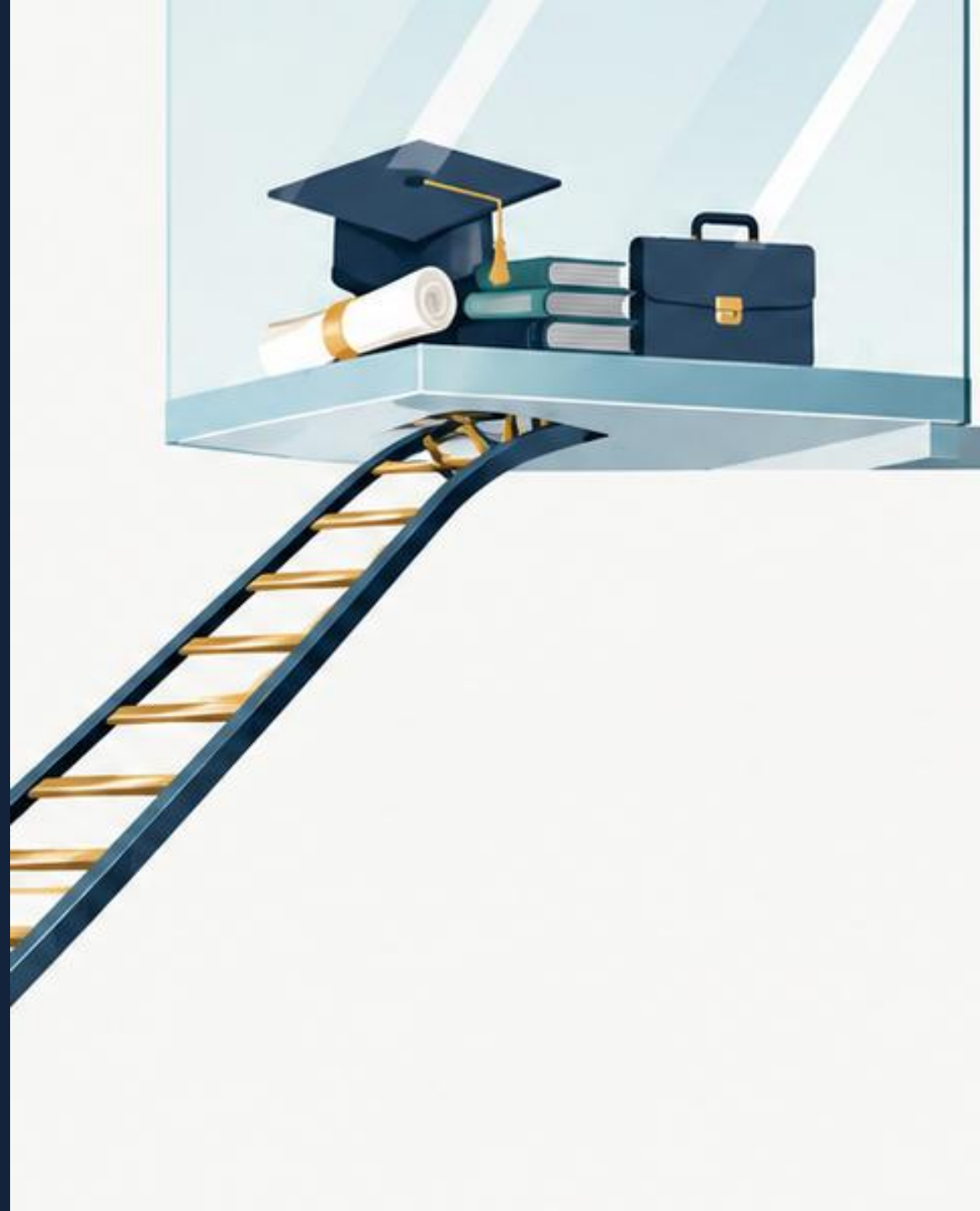
Participation Without Progression

Islamophobia, Credentialism and the Structural Limits of British Higher Education

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Aston University · Centre on Radicalisation, Inclusion and Social Equity

New Adelphi Theatre, Salford · 5 November 2026



The Bent Ladder



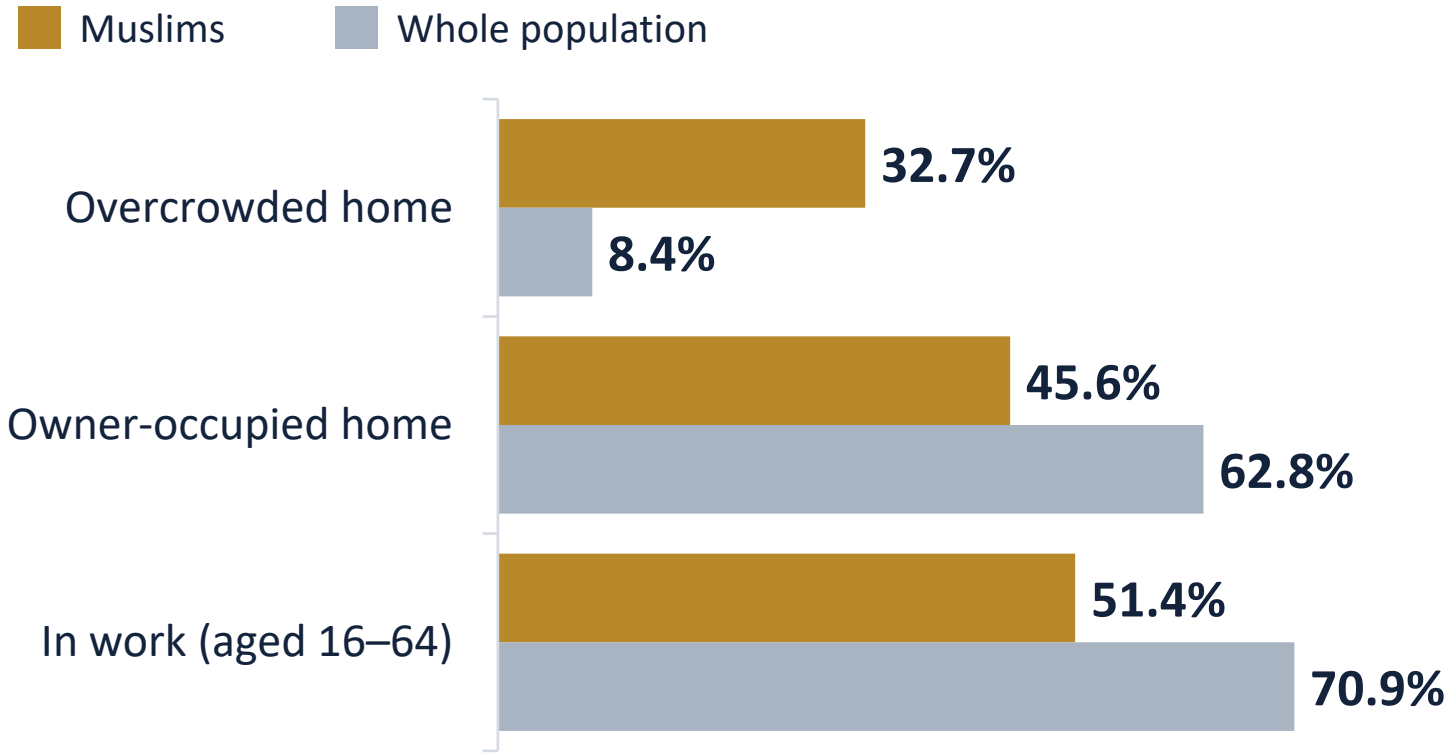
Achievement, but blocked mobility

Exclusion changes form as people move upwards

Structural marginalisation

A class position before a religion

England and Wales, Census 2021



Source: ONS, Census 2021; employment and deprivation figures via press reports of ONS data

3.9m

Muslims in England and Wales, 6.5% of the population

61%

live in the most deprived two-fifths of areas; 4% in the least deprived fifth

"The geography of Muslim Britain is, to a large extent, the geography of deindustrialisation."

On participation, the climb is working

255,000

Muslim students in UK universities, 2020/21

around one in ten students

11.3%

of UK-domiciled undergraduates are Muslim

15.9

average years of continuous education, British Muslims

vs 14.6 for non-Muslims

67.9%

of Muslim respondents hold tertiary qualifications

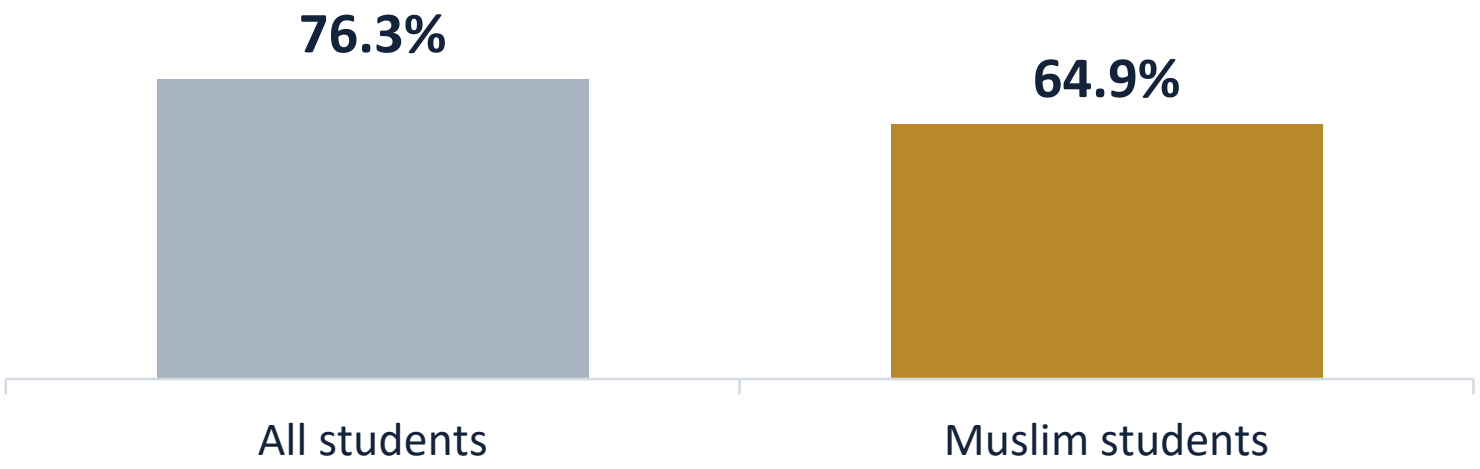
vs 48.7% of non-Muslims

Families with little money and less inherited cultural capital have invested in education with remarkable determination.

Sources: analysis of HESA data (2022); European Social Survey 2002–2023; DRIVE survey, UK arm

The awarding gap, and a ladder that thins

Awarded a first or upper second, 2017/18

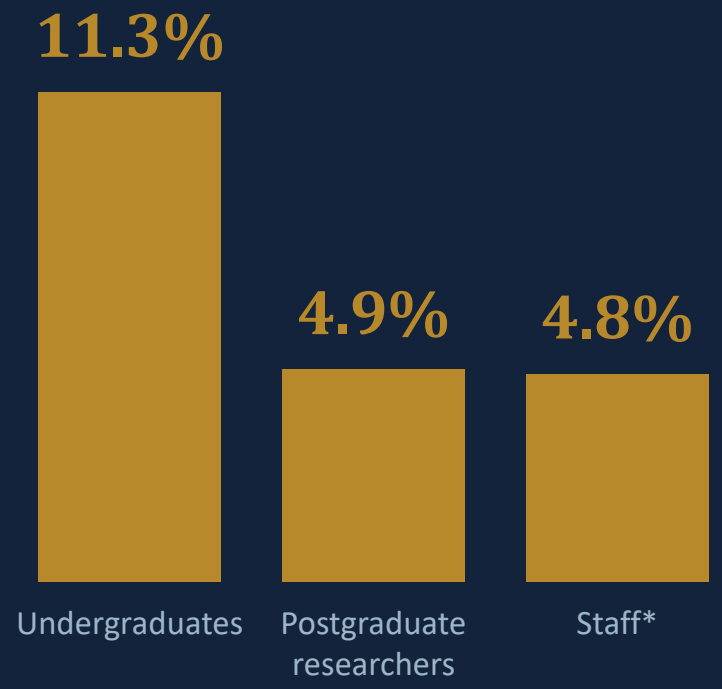


Least likely of any religious group to get a good degree, whatever their parents' education

The gap is **8 points** where over 12% of students are Muslim, **19 points** where under 3.5%

Sources: Advance HE (2020); Hall et al. (2025); analysis of HESA data (2022); Advance HE (2024)

Muslim representation thins with every step up

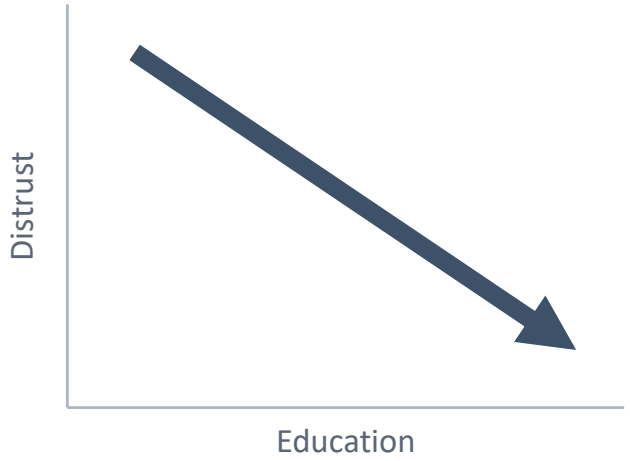


**where religion is recorded; it is missing for 35% of staff*

The credential reversal

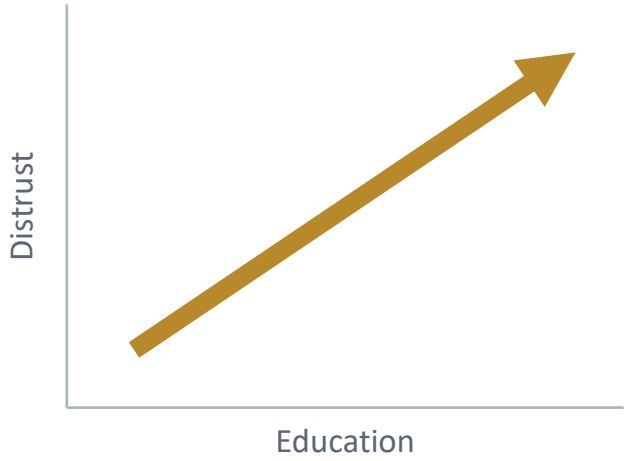
Majority

More education, less distrust



British Muslims

More education, more distrust



European Social Survey, 2002–2023. The two slopes differ significantly. Schematic: direction only.

Starting point

Less-educated Muslims start with some of the highest trust of any group

Specificity

No comparable reversal among Hindus, Sikhs or Caribbean-heritage groups

Timing

No different under 35: the shock comes at entry

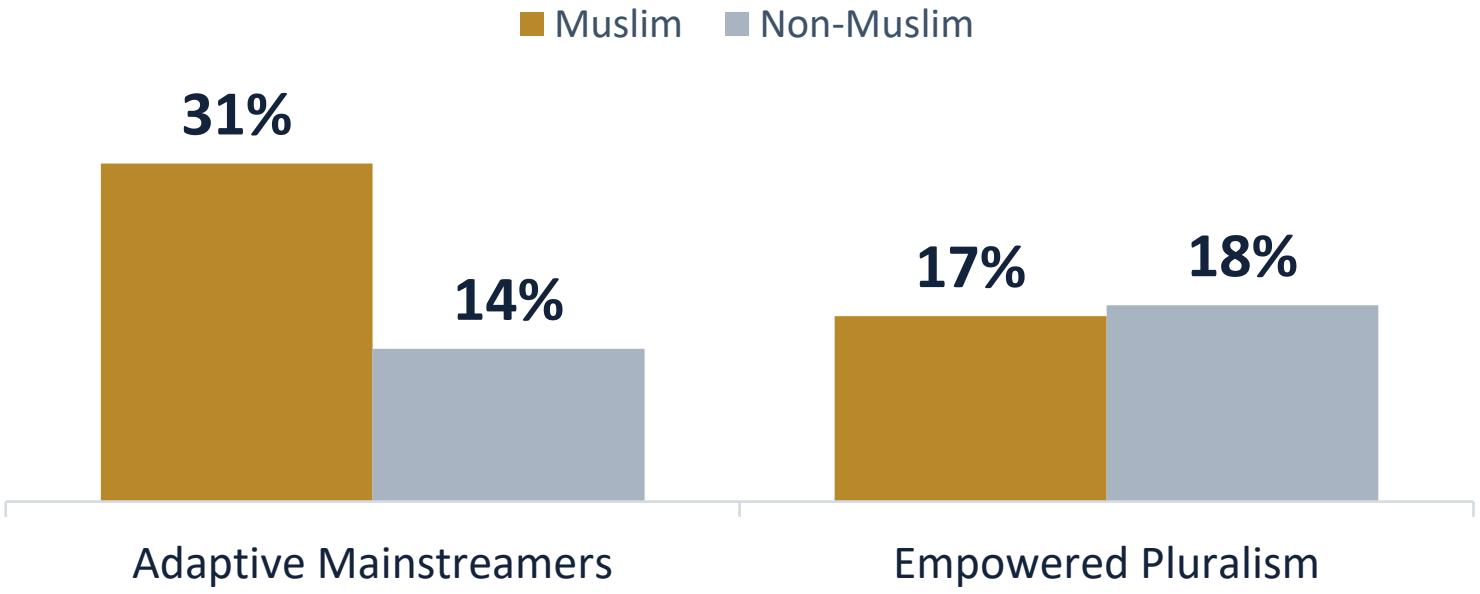
Alienated competence

trust in neighbours kept, trust in the state withdrawn

Source: Abbas and Onay (2026), Ethnic and Racial Studies; European Social Survey, UK, 2002–2023

Equal position does not buy equal recognition

Predicted probability of reporting humiliation



Within Empowered Pluralism the gap disappears

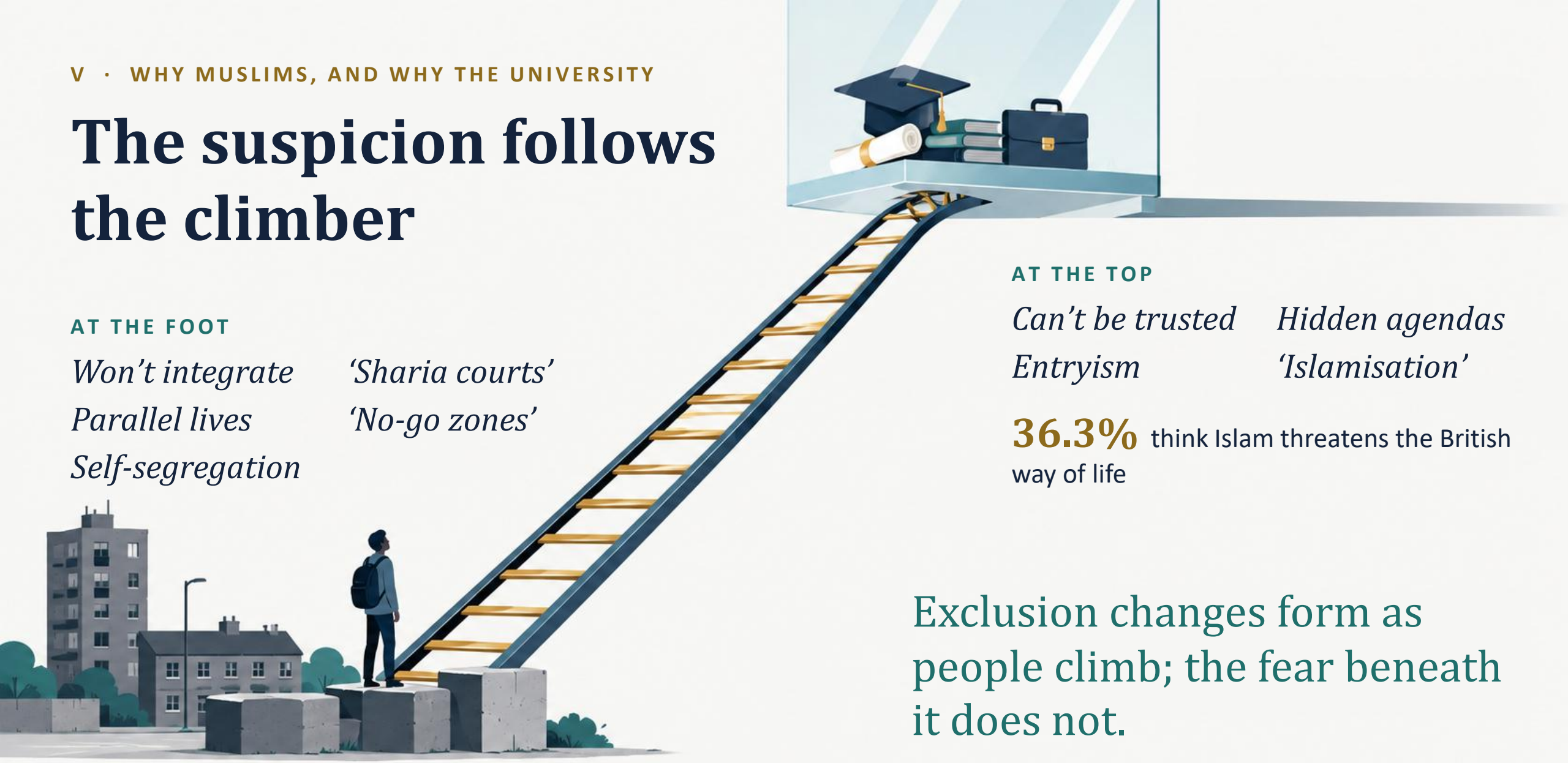
Source: Abbas (2026), Sociology; DRIVE survey, UK (N = 2,535; 109 Muslim respondents)

2.8×

the odds of Muslim respondents reporting they had been made to feel humiliated because of their background

holding position, education, employment, age, gender and mental health constant

The suspicion follows the climber



AT THE FOOT

Won't integrate
Parallel lives
Self-segregation
'Sharia courts'
'No-go zones'

AT THE TOP

Can't be trusted
Entryism
Hidden agendas
'Islamisation'

36.3% think Islam threatens the British way of life

26.5% think parts of Britain are under Sharia law and closed to non-Muslims

Exclusion changes form as people climb; the fear beneath it does not.

Survey: Jones and Unsworth (2022), University of Birmingham and YouGov, n = 1,667

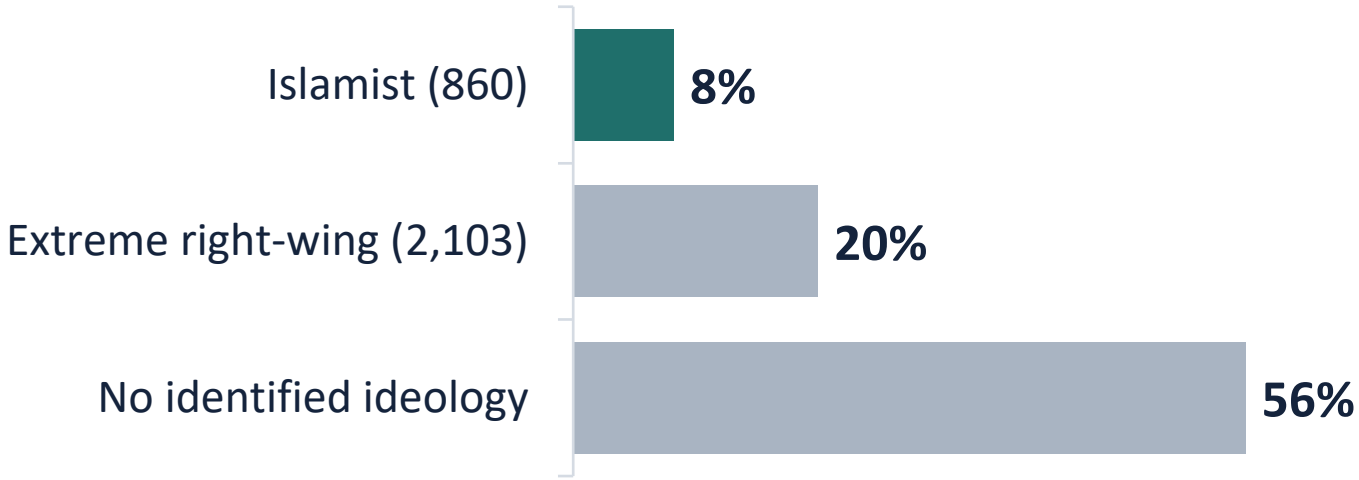
Prevent outlives its imagined subject

10,293

referrals in the year to September 2025, the highest on record

Education the largest source, at just over a third (includes schools)

Share of all referrals



March 2026: a definition of anti-Muslim hostility

Silent on credentials discounted at the point of conversion

A sector under financial strain

35.8% of English providers in deficit in 2024–25

Sources: Home Office Prevent statistics via ITV News and Sky News; UK Government (2026); Office for Students (2026)

VI · WHAT THE BEND COSTS

A bend the country cannot afford

27

median age (all: 40)

British Muslims are the youngest religious group in England and Wales

7.7%

of GDP on state pensions

by the early 2070s, up from about 5% today, as the population ages

£24bn

a year

if ethnic minority workers progressed at the same rate as white colleagues

THE POLITICS IS MOVING THE OTHER WAY

'An island of strangers'

Prime Minister, May 2025: a phrase he later said he regretted

Graduate Route: two years to 18 months

Proposed in the Immigration White Paper, May 2025

Sources: ONS Census 2021; OBR (July 2025); McGregor-Smith review (2017); Immigration White Paper (2025); ITV News (2025)

Five places to act

Participation has been the sector's measure of success. Progression now has to become its measure of accountability.

1

Count what matters

Report outcomes, progression, appointment and promotion by religion, and publish them

2

Audit the gates, not the students

Classification boards, funding panels, appointment and promotion committees

3

Separate pastoral care from security

Review Prevent with proportionality as the test, and Muslim students and staff inside the review

4

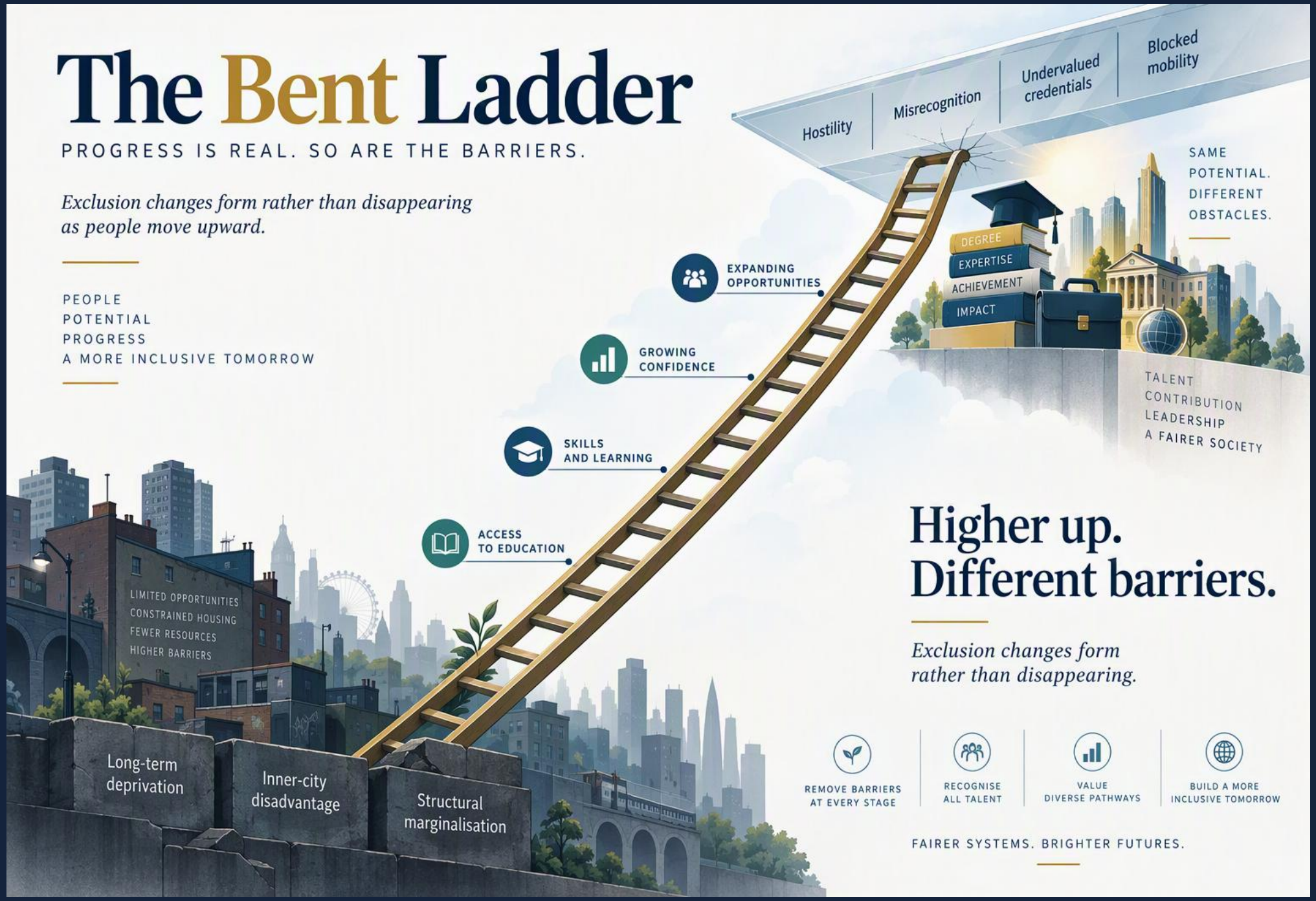
Treat community-anchored identity as an asset

Faith societies, prayer space, Ramadan-aware exams, visible Muslim staff at every grade

5

Define Islamophobia to reach recognition

Ask of every restructuring: does this sharpen the bend?



Participation has been won.

Progression has not.

The question is whether, when they reach the top, the institution recognises that they were never anywhere but home.

Thank you

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