Participation Without Progression: Islamophobia, Credentialism and the Structural Limits of British Higher Education

Keynote speech

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► SLIDE 1 Title: on screen as you are introduced

- Thank you for those kind words and the warm welcome and thank you so much too, dear colleagues and the organizing team, for the kind invitation and the opportunity to be with you here today.
- My title is ‘Participation Without Progression’, and I’d like to start by unpacking it, because each of its terms carries a claim of its own.
- Participation is the good news.
- Over the past two decades, British Muslims have entered higher education in numbers their parents’ generation could scarcely have imagined.
- Progression is the problem: what happens after entry, through degree classification, into doctoral study, onto the academic staff, into the professions, and into the quieter currency of being recognised as someone who belongs.
- Credentialism is the promise meant to connect the two: the idea that qualifications are a fair and sufficient basis for allocating position, something sociologists since Randall Collins have rightly treated with suspicion.
- And ‘structural limits’ names my argument: the gap between participation and progression is produced by institutions, not by the people passing through them.
- Let me show you what that looks like.

► SLIDE 2 The Bent Ladder

- The ladder is the oldest image we have of meritocracy.
- You start at the bottom, you climb, and if you do what is asked of you, you reach the top.
- But look at this one more closely.
- Its foot rests on concrete blocks in an inner-city street.
- Its rungs are real, and they hold.
- Yet it bends as it rises, and at the top it meets a glass shelf where the degree, the books and the briefcase sit on display, just out of reach.
- My argument is easy to state but harder to accept.
- For British Muslims, exclusion does not disappear as people move up.
- It changes form.
- At the foot of the ladder it is material: poverty, overcrowding, insecure work.
- Higher up it becomes institutional, as credentials are awarded less generously and convert less reliably.
- At the top it turns symbolic: misrecognition, suspicion, and the demand to prove, yet again, a belonging that should already be settled.
- Participation puts people on the ladder; progression is what the bend withholds.
- Universities stand exactly at that bend, which is why this conversation belongs here.
- My evidence comes mainly from two sources: the European Social Survey, which has put the same questions to British Muslims and the rest of the population for two decades, and the British arm of the DRIVE survey, which measures how people belong both to their own communities and to wider society.

I. The foot of the ladder

► SLIDE 3 Census figures

- Let’s begin where the climb starts.
- The 2021 Census counted 3.9 million Muslims in England and Wales, 6.5 per cent of the population.
- Almost a third of them, 32.7 per cent, lived in overcrowded homes, compared with 8.4 per cent of people overall.
- Fewer than half were owner-occupiers, 45.6 per cent against 62.8 per cent, and Muslims had the highest share of any religious group in social rented housing.
- Sixty-one per cent lived in the most deprived two-fifths of areas; just four per cent were in the least deprived fifth.
- Among those aged 16 to 64, 51.4 per cent were in work, compared with 70.9 per cent of all working-age people.
- The ONS noted that part of this gap reflects the numbers studying or caring for family, which itself tells us something about a young population and about how care is organised in households with little room to manoeuvre.
- These figures describe a class position before they describe a religion.
- Families from Mirpur, Sylhet and the Punjab came to work in the mills, foundries and transport depots of Bradford, Oldham, Birmingham and the East End, and they inherited the decline of those industries rather than their prosperity.
- When the mills closed, the neighbourhoods remained, and so did the housing, the schools and the reputations attached to them.
- To a large extent, the geography of Muslim Britain is the geography of deindustrialisation.
- Islamophobia works here as the hidden hand of structural and cultural racism, and the causal arrow runs both ways.
- Class disadvantage does not simply produce Islamophobia as a side effect; Islamophobia is one of the ways class is made today.

- It helps to manufacture ‘the white working class’ as a political address, and it pushes Muslims out of the very working class whose most exposed positions they occupy.
- Picture two bus drivers in Bolton, one Muslim, one white.
- They share a rota, a wage and, very often, a landlord, yet a great deal of political energy goes into persuading them they have nothing in common.
- So the foot of the ladder is not neutral ground.
- It is already marked: by deprivation, by the long shadow of industrial decline, and by a discourse that reads the disadvantage of Muslim neighbourhoods as proof of cultural failure.
- The ‘parallel lives’ diagnosis offered after the 2001 disturbances turned a geography of poverty into a theory of self-segregation.
- That move shapes everything that follows, because it sets up the presumption that when Muslims fall behind, they have only themselves to blame.

II. The climb: participation

► SLIDE 4 On participation, the climb is working

- And yet people climb, and that is the part of the story that rarely makes the headlines.
- Analysis of HESA data puts the number of Muslim students at UK universities at around 255,000 in 2020/21, roughly one in ten of the total student body, and 11.3 per cent of UK-domiciled undergraduates.
- In the European Social Survey, British Muslims report an average of 15.9 years of continuous education, against 14.6 years for both religious non-Muslims and the non-religious.
- In the British arm of the DRIVE survey, 67.9 per cent of Muslim respondents held tertiary qualifications, compared with 48.7 per cent of non-Muslims.

- Families with little money and even less inherited cultural capital have invested in education with remarkable determination.
- On participation, the climb is working.

► SLIDE 5 The awarding gap, and a ladder that thins

- Look more closely, though, and participation itself turns out to be stratified.
- Muslim students are under-represented at the most academically selective universities, the institutions that feed most directly into the elite professions.
- Access has widened, but unevenly, and where a degree is taken shapes what it later buys.
- Then watch what happens to that investment once it is inside.
- The first bend appears in degree outcomes.
- When Advance HE first analysed results by religion, using 2017/18 data, 76.3 per cent of all students received a first or upper second, but only 64.9 per cent of Muslims did.
- They were the least likely of any religious group to get a good degree, whether or not their parents had been to university, which makes the gap hard to dismiss as a matter of family background.
- More recent analysis suggests the national gap in first-class degrees widened from eight to ten percentage points between 2018/19 and 2022/23.
- The second bend shows in the shape of the institution itself.
- Muslim representation thins with every step up.
- Among UK-domiciled students, Muslims made up 11.3 per cent of undergraduates but just 4.9 per cent of postgraduate researchers, less than half.
- Among university staff whose religion is recorded, 4.8 per cent are Muslim, and religion is missing for more than a third of all employees, partly because institutions are not required to return it.

- There is no reliable sector figure for Muslim professors.
- We are governing something we have chosen not to count.
- One further comparison deserves attention.
- At institutions where more than 12 per cent of students were Muslim, the awarding gap was eight percentage points; where fewer than 3.5 per cent were Muslim, it was 19 points.
- Whatever produces the gap, it is not a fixed property of Muslim students.
- It varies with the university that receives them.
- Part of the reason lies in how British universities have learned to see Muslim students.
- Over five decades the categories have shifted: from colour, to race and ethnicity, and most recently to religion.
- That change took place against the backdrop of the sector's neoliberalisation, which pulled universities towards their localities and towards global markets at the same time.
- Once Muslim students are seen chiefly through a religious lens, and a lens ground by securitisation at that, their difficulties are easily read as cultural rather than institutional.
- This is the defining challenge of the present period, and Prevent is its high-water mark.
- The ladder bends, and the institution blames the climber for the bend.

III. The bend: when credentials stop converting

- Credentialism rests on a promise that runs through every widening-participation strategy in the country: get the qualification, and the rest will follow.
- One part of that promise can be tested by asking what education does to a person's relationship with the institutions of the state.
- For most people, the answer is well established: education builds institutional trust.

- Graduates tend to have more faith in parliament, the courts and the police than early school leavers do, because the system has rewarded them and they understand how it works.

► SLIDE 6 The credential reversal

- European Social Survey data from 2002 to 2023 show the familiar pattern holding for the majority: the more education, the less distrust of institutions.
- For British Muslims, it runs the other way.
- Higher attainment predicts greater distrust, and the difference between the two slopes is statistically significant.
- This is the credential reversal.
- Three features of this finding matter.
- The first is the starting point.
- Less-educated British Muslims report some of the highest trust in parliament and the legal system of any group in the data, which makes the erosion that follows all the more telling.
- The second is specificity.
- Among other ethnic minorities, including Hindus, Sikhs and people of Caribbean heritage, no comparable reversal appears.
- This is not a generic minority experience.
- The third is timing.
- You might expect a reversal like this to build slowly over a working life.
- It does not.
- The education penalty is no different for Muslims under 35 than for their elders.
- The shock comes at entry: at the application, at the interview, or in the first encounter with an institution that carries a statutory duty to watch for signs of radicalisation.
- The mechanism is best understood as an exposure effect.
- Education does not make Muslims distrustful through some inner process of disappointment.

- Rather, it carries them to the thresholds of professional life, where they meet gatekeepers whose exclusions people lower down the ladder may never witness.
- That reading fits a long line of labour-market evidence.
- Nabil Khattab's work has shown ethno-religious penalties in occupational attainment, with Muslim women facing distinctive disadvantages whatever their qualifications.
- In 2017, the Social Mobility Commission found that only six per cent of Muslims held higher managerial and professional jobs, compared with ten per cent of the population.
- Field experiments by Anthony Heath and Valentina Di Stasio showed that ethnic minority candidates had to send around 60 per cent more applications than white British candidates to get a positive response, with no real decline in discrimination against those of Pakistani heritage since the late 1960s.
- The result is alienated competence.
- Highly educated Muslims keep their trust in their neighbours while withdrawing it from the state, and they report a marked fall in their sense of having any say in government.
- Their education equips them to see precisely how the system ought to work, and therefore where it fails them.
- There is one striking exception.
- Second-generation Muslim women, who face some of the steepest penalties in the labour market, hold on to institutional trust where their male peers lose it.
- Call it strategically engaged realism: a refusal to surrender to a suspicious state the very institutions through which claims for justice still have to be made.

IV. The top: progression denied

- If the credential reversal shows what happens to trust, the next question is what happens to recognition.

- Migration scholars describe an integration paradox: in some minority groups, the most educated and best established report the sharpest sense of rejection.
- The usual explanations treat this as a matter of perception.
- Integrated people expect more, encounter more majority institutions, or become more alert to discrimination.
- Each account locates the problem in the minds of those who complain.
- Bourdieu offers a different route.
- On this reading, integration means converting capital across fields: turning qualifications into jobs, and jobs into the social standing and settled belonging that ought to follow.
- Every conversion has an exchange rate, and dominant groups set and police it.
- For racialised minorities the rate is unfavourable, so the same qualification buys less recognition.
- What looks like a paradox is simply what blocked conversion feels like from the inside.
- In these terms, credentialism promises a fixed exchange rate and delivers a racialised one.
- The British arm of the DRIVE survey identifies four configurations of belonging: Adaptive Mainstreamers, Empowered Pluralism, Individualised Assimilation and Double Alienation.
- Muslim respondents were younger, better qualified and more often in work than non-Muslims, and at least as likely to fall into Empowered Pluralism, the most resource-rich position, which pairs a strong sense of being valued by wider society with deep roots in their communities.
- The configuration public debate fears most did not appear at all: no group combined strong community ties with a sense of rejection by the mainstream.
- The ‘parallel lives’ profile is simply not in the data.

► SLIDE 7 The recognition gap

- Here is the decisive result.
- Holding position, education, employment, age, gender and mental health constant, Muslim respondents had nearly three times the odds of reporting that they had been made to feel humiliated because of their background.
- Equal standing did not buy equal recognition.
- The gap was uneven, too.
- Among Adaptive Mainstreamers, the conventionally integrated without strong community ties, the predicted probability of reporting humiliation was 31 per cent for Muslims, against 14 per cent for comparable non-Muslims.
- Within Empowered Pluralism the difference disappeared: 17 per cent against 18.
- A strong Muslim identity worked as protection, a position from which slights could be called out for what they are rather than absorbed as verdicts on the self.
- The picture inside the Muslim sample points the same way.
- Among UK-born Muslims, not a single respondent fell into Double Alienation; all six doubly alienated Muslims were born abroad.
- Thirty-three of the 34 Muslims in Empowered Pluralism described themselves as religious, and ethnic identification was highest in that configuration and lowest in Double Alienation.
- The numbers are small and should be read descriptively, but they cut directly against an assumption built into a generation of counter-extremism policy: that a strong Muslim identity is the antechamber of disaffection.
- Two composite figures, drawn from these statistical patterns rather than from any single respondent, make this concrete.
- The first is a UK-born woman of 27, a devout graduate professional embedded in family and mosque, who moves through majority institutions every day; her employment converts, and her community gives her ground to stand on.

- The second is a man of 58 who arrived in the 1980s to an industrial labour market that has since vanished.
- He has worked through every restructuring, yet his experience now buys neither advancement nor esteem.
- The same labour-market virtue, formed under different conditions, is exchanged at different rates.
- That contrast points to two clocks.
- One is the clock of the field: older workers' capital was formed for a labour market that no longer exists, and in the survey, employment goes with the most secure belonging only for respondents under their mid-fifties.
- The other is the clock of expectation.
- Humiliation is reported most by the young, the best-qualified cohorts, because they were promised that credentials would convert and can measure the shortfall precisely.
- A system that expands the promise of conversion faster than it reforms the exchange rate will produce its sharpest discontent among those it has most successfully brought in.

V. Why Muslims, and why the university

► SLIDE 8 The suspicion follows the climber

- Why should the ladder bend for Muslims in particular?
- The comparison with other minorities points to the answer.
- In post-2001 Britain, the line between Muslims and the majority is what Richard Alba calls a bright boundary: sharply drawn and constantly re-marked, so that crossing it never fully settles the question of membership.
- What keeps the boundary bright is a suspicion that climbs the ladder alongside the people on it.
- In the early years of this century, the charge was that Muslims would not integrate.
- They lived parallel lives, chose to self-segregate, ran 'Sharia courts' and presided over 'no-go zones'.

- Much of what those claims described was inner-city poverty recast in religious terms.
- In 2015, a guest on American cable news declared Birmingham ‘totally Muslim’, a city ‘where non-Muslims just simply don’t go’.
- He apologised within days, and the Prime Minister called him ‘a complete idiot’.
- Yet in a 2022 YouGov survey, more than a quarter of Britons agreed that parts of the country operate under Sharia law and are closed to non-Muslims.
- Now watch what happens when Muslims do everything that charge demanded: leave the inner city, earn degrees, and become teachers, head teachers, lawyers, mayors and chief executives.
- The suspicion does not go away; it simply changes its terms.
- Success becomes evidence of entryism, of hidden agendas, of creeping Islamisation.
- Birmingham had already shown how this works.
- In 2014, an anonymous letter, almost certainly fake, alleged a plot to take over the city’s schools; inspections and inquiries followed, and the professional misconduct cases against teachers collapsed in 2017.
- Ten years on, a sitting MP claimed that Islamists had ‘got control’ of London’s Muslim mayor.
- The Muslim in the inner city is suspected of refusing to join; the Muslim at the top is suspected of joining too well.
- This is a cultural fear, not just an institutional fault, and it is widely held.
- In the same survey, more than a third of Britons agreed that Islam threatens the British way of life, and Muslims were the second least-liked group in the country.
- Prejudice towards Islam as a set of beliefs was, if anything, more common among the better-off and better-educated, the very people who sit on appointment panels and promotion boards.
- Sayeeda Warsi warned in 2011 that Islamophobia had passed the dinner-table test.

- It still does.
- A prejudice held at that level does not stay confined to attitudes.
- It shapes who is trusted with a school, a budget or a newsroom, and that is how culture becomes structure.
- Exclusion changes form as people climb; the fear beneath it does not.

► SLIDE 9 Prevent referrals

- Universities are not bystanders in this.
- On campus, the same fear turns achievement into a possible threat: the Islamic society is treated as a site of concern, and academic writing on Palestine as a reputational risk.
- Since 2015, the sector has carried a statutory Prevent duty.
- In the year to September 2025 there were 10,293 referrals to Prevent, the highest since records began, and education was the largest single source, at just over a third.
- Yet Islamist concerns accounted for 860 cases, about eight per cent of the total, and were falling, while extreme right-wing referrals had risen to 2,103, and more than half involved no identified ideology at all.
- The duty's apparatus in higher education was built with the Muslim student as its imagined subject.
- The evidence no longer supports that picture, but the machinery remains, and so does the chill it produces.
- That chill reaches the classroom and beyond.
- Under the Prevent duty, British Muslim university students have found their thinking treated as pre-crime.
- Across north-western Europe, young Muslims encounter a pedagogical Islamophobia, and they build resilience and resistance against it.
- And the academy itself has become a security actor, practising a form of institutional counter-insurgency.
- The policy climate is shifting, if unevenly.

- In March this year, the government adopted a non-statutory definition of anti-Muslim hostility and said it would engage with universities on its use.
- That is welcome, but its strands concern criminal acts, unlawful discrimination and stereotyping intended to stir up hatred.
- It says little about the quieter mechanism at work here: seemingly lawful judgements that discount Muslim credentials at the point of conversion.
- A university could comply with it in full and leave the ladder exactly as bent as it is.
- All of this is unfolding in a sector under acute financial strain.
- The Office for Students reports that 35.8 per cent of English providers were in deficit in 2024–25, and that under a no-growth scenario nearly six in ten would be within five years.
- Restructuring falls first on fixed-term and early-career posts, and equality work is easily reclassified as discretionary.
- Participation is protected because it pays; progression risks being cut because it costs.

VI. What the bend costs

► SLIDE 10 What the bend costs

- The cost falls first on British Muslims, and it falls twice: on talent that never gets going because it is trapped at the foot of the ladder, and on talent that is recognised yet still held back at the bend.
- Both losses are borne by the whole country.
- No one has costed the Muslim share.
- The closest estimate, the McGregor-Smith review of 2017, put the gain from ethnic minority workers progressing at the same rate as their white colleagues at £24 billion a year.
- The arithmetic will only get sharper.
- The Office for Budget Responsibility projects that an ageing population will push state pension spending from about five to

7.7 per cent of GDP by the early 2070s, with public debt above 270 per cent of GDP on current policy.

- Tomorrow's pensions will be paid by today's young workers, and British Muslims are the youngest religious group in England and Wales, with a median age of 27, compared with 40 for the population as a whole.
- Even on the narrowest fiscal terms, a country in that position cannot afford to bend the ladder for some of its youngest and most highly educated citizens.
- Yet the politics is moving the other way.
- Across Europe and North America, parties built on hostility to immigration have shifted from the margins into government, and mainstream parties have borrowed their language.
- In Britain, a party with that hostility at its core has been leading national polls.
- In May last year, the Prime Minister warned that Britain risked becoming 'an island of strangers', a phrase he later said he deeply regretted, and the white paper launched that day proposed cutting the time international graduates may stay from two years to eighteen months.
- That politics makes no distinction between the new arrival and the British-born graduate whose grandparents came to work in the mills.
- It folds both into the same suspicion, and it feeds on the fear I have been describing.
- Universities stand where these stories meet.
- They train the young workforce the country will depend on, and they recruit the talent it says it needs.
- A sector that accepts the bend fails both its students and the country that will rely on them.

VII. Straightening the ladder

- So what follows for higher education?

- The evidence carries one clear policy lesson: the supply side of integration is working; the failure lies in what institutions offer in return.
- British integration policy, and much of the widening-participation effort in universities, has concentrated on the climber, through aspiration, attainment, skills and mixing.
- Muslim students have met those demands.
- The exchange rate applied to what they have achieved is set inside our institutions, which means universities can change it.
- Participation has been the sector's measure of success; progression now has to become its measure of accountability.
- I want to suggest five places to act.

► SLIDE 11 Five places to act

- The first is to count what matters.
- Religion data are collected for students; for staff, they are voluntary and missing for over a third.
- Universities should report degree outcomes, progression to doctoral study, appointment, promotion and retention by religion as well as ethnicity, and publish the results.
- A gap that ranges from eight to nineteen points across the sector is one that institutions can move.
- The second is to audit the points of conversion rather than the students.
- The bend occurs at identifiable gates: classification boards, doctoral funding panels, appointment and promotion committees, and graduate employer partnerships.
- Each should be examined to see whether equal achievement yields equal outcomes, with the same seriousness we already bring to admissions.
- The third is to separate pastoral care from security.
- Given what the referral data now show, every institution should review how the Prevent duty operates on its campus, with

proportionality as the test, and with Muslim students and staff inside that review rather than consulted after it.

- The fourth is to treat community-anchored identity as an asset.
- The survey evidence shows strong religious and community ties going hand in hand with recognition rather than estrangement.
- Faith societies, prayer provision, examination timetables that take account of Ramadan, and visible Muslim staff at every grade are not concessions.
- They are part of the infrastructure that allows students to hold their ground.
- The fifth is to define Islamophobia in a way that reaches recognition.
- Institutions adopting the government's definition, or any other, should make sure their own policies capture the discounting of credentials and the presumption of suspicion, not just incidents that would interest the police.
- And when restructuring decisions are made, equality impact assessments should ask a direct question: does this sharpen the bend?

Closing

- Let me return to the ladder, and to my title.

► SLIDE 12 The Bent Ladder (closing)

- Its rungs hold.
- British Muslims have climbed them, often from the least promising ground in the country, and they have done so while being told that their faith and their neighbourhoods were the problem.
- Participation has been won.
- Progression has not, and the ladder is bent by the institutions that grip it, and by the fear that grips them in turn.
- Universities hold it at precisely the point where it starts to curve.

- Derrida distinguished between a conditional hospitality, which asks guests to keep justifying their presence, and a hospitality that asks for no such proof.
- The trouble with that framing is that most British Muslim students are not guests at all.
- They were born here, schooled here, and they arrive at our universities already qualified for everything we ask of them.
- The question is no longer whether they can climb.
- They have.
- What matters now is whether, when they reach the top, the institution recognises that they were never anywhere but home.
- Thank you.