

How Further Education can Promote Community Cohesion

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Mr Chairman, Minister Mr Rammell, ladies and gentlemen - I greet you all with the Muslim greeting – Assalamualaikum (may peace be upon you). Thank you very much for inviting me to speak on this subject. This conference, I think, is unique in its aim to promote good race relations in further and higher education world, and to challenge racism and Islamophobia.

While there may be challenges in this area of our educational system, I think on the whole, higher and further education represents a unique platform in which people from a diversity of backgrounds come together for the first time in pursuit of learning. In further education in particular, there is an agency, an added impetus from students themselves – eager to learn, and happy to meet people different from themselves. Up and down this country there are tales where bonds of friendship being formed between different people, which endure well into peoples professional lives.

So in many respects, further and higher education establishments already offer environments where communities become cohesive – which is the subject of this conference.

In Britain today, where the subject of identity and belonging comes under much scrutiny, community cohesion is the all important buzz word for policymakers, thinkers and commentators. Sadly, this term 'community cohesion' is associated with the phenomenon of terrorism and the inquiry into the place of Muslims in Britain today. But, in a globalised world nations, communities and people are inter-

dependent. We swim or sink together. The issue of social justice, law and order and security is common to all in a society. So when we talk about community cohesion, we should go beyond scrutinising one faith community, beyond looking simply at threats and focus on opportunities.

It is encouraging to see the gradual shift in language and tone in government circles, away from the blind following of a hysterical and deeply prejudiced media after the aftermath of 7/7. Then, Higher Education institutions were given guidelines to deal with 'Violent Extremism in the name of Islam', which were picked up by some media and civil rights groups to be encouraging to 'spying on Muslim students' in universities.

Now, the emphasis is on promoting 'Community Cohesion, fostering Shared Values and preventing Violent Extremism', and less on a hard-nosed search for Muslim 'subversives'. But we still have a long way to go. Community cohesion is laudable and commendable. Supporting initiatives that foster dialogue and mutual understanding is long overdue. However, our problem is simple – this is all done through the prism of anti-terrorism, through the belief that by underwriting such initiatives, we will prevent terror. My chief concern, therefore, is the conflation of security with community cohesion. And this is an analytical impediment that is hampering policy across government, not just in the education system.

My belief, shared by many, is that community cohesion is an end in itself, and should surpass faith and ethnic identities. It is as important to engage the white working class as it is with Muslims. Just as it is important to quite properly undertake robust anti-terror operations but without resorting to the victimisation of one community in order to appease blustering right-wing editors in Fleet Street.

Last month, despite his Nottingham University supervisors insisting the materials were directly relevant to his research, a young man of 22 was held for nearly a week under the Terrorism Act, accused of downloading the materials for illegal use. The case highlighted what lecturers had been claiming was a direct assault on academic freedom led by the government in its over-enthusiasm to establish a "prevent agenda" against terrorist activity.

I applaud Sally Hunt, the General Secretary of the UCU, who then said: "If we really want to tackle problems like extremism and terrorism, then we need to be safe to explore the issues and get a better understanding. The last thing we need is people too frightened to discuss an issue or research a subject because they fear being arrested or reported." Along with some other demands the UCU called on colleges and universities to make the RRAA duty to promote good relations between different races the cornerstone of their response and called for continued work to challenge Islamophobia.

Let us see what the word 'cohesion' means. In a report of the Commission on Integration and Community Cohesion chaired by Darrah Singh, called 'Our shared Future', it is defined as principally the process that must happen to ensure different groups of people get on well together. It is a social process that needs emotional attachment and ownership from all communities. Tolerance, respect and ethos of partnership are the ingredients for any meaningful community cohesion.

That is a definition of community cohesion that I fully subscribe to. But the social process to achieve that will be difficult when it comes to British Muslims – from within and without. It is difficult because of a powerful narrative that presents startling assertions of how large swathes of young Muslims are susceptible to terrorism, how the very faith of Islam leads to radicalisation and how Muslims, because of

their creed, choose to live in ghettos and therefore create swamps from which terrorists feed. The most extreme form of this narrative is found in the idea of "Eurabia", an incendiary term that purportedly describes a phenomenon where Muslim hordes have already breached Britain's defences and are now contaminating Britain's very DNA.

From this narrative, the fear of homegrown terrorism resonates the most, as does the impetus to deal with Muslims as a foreign foe who must be treated harshly. So too does the idea that accommodating religious differences is dangerous. A false dichotomy is created in which Muslims must choose between a western and European identity or a supposedly separate Islamic identity.

These notions are given currency in the media, when isolated Muslim stories are reported as regular occurrences and polls are cited out of context. And, sadly, when the media opines, Whitehall quickly follows. FE and HE guidelines from DIUS seem reflect this narratives, even though many in our community do not recognise the narrative being imposed upon us.

It is significant that the DIUS wants FE to play a positive role to promote the values of openness, free debate and tolerance to create an environment of trust and respect. FE colleges are very important for our communities. In many of the inner city FE colleges there is a significant presence of BME communities, including Muslims. Most of these colleges go along very well with their local communities. As for Muslims, I can confidently say that, despite being portrayed negatively they have overall played a very positive role in contributing to the local vibrancy of a pluralist Britain. The Muslim contribution is also historical and wider, including in the armed forces, emergency services and in our public services, thanks to the contribution of FE colleges and HE institutions.

I know a number of FE colleges and universities which have built good partnership with the local Muslim communities. Further education in this country plays a very important role in the development of future generation of the citizens. The suggestions made in the consultation documents and some initiatives taken to encourage colleges to foster debates and facilitate greater involvement of its students for open discussions are laudable.

Faith in one's own self, community, religion or ethnic root is central to one's life. The government should have sought greater involvement from the Muslim community when it provided one of the biggest educational reforms of recent times in regards to 14-19 education. Local authorities are directed to develop education and training opportunities to meet the demand of its population. We are not seeing enough local authority enthusiasm to cater for its Muslim population at the moment. In boroughs, such as Newham and Tower Hamlets, there is demand for religious and Islamic Science courses which would help address the issue of 'home grown Imams'.

This is an area where Further Education colleges and the local Muslim community can work together to fill in the gaps. I am proud to have played a leading role in starting an independent private institution in East London which has as its aim to assist young people to become Imams in the UK. It is oversubscribed and has made several attempts to get government funding. In fact, with govt help the Muslim community can establish some Academies specialising in developing Imams. This in reality will help the community cohesion.

FE colleges could also do more by working towards developing GCSEs, A Levels and diplomas in subjects that are useful to some local communities which are struggling to enter into the fray of mainstream society. MCB's education committee is in a position to help colleges in this area.

The challenge for further education colleges, and even higher education colleges, is to ensure that they meet the aspirations of those who pass through their doors. It is not enough to simply instruct, invigilate exams, and graduate students. We must provide viable options for employment, and the promise of the possible for those who excel. One concern for further education colleges, therefore, is to tackle graduate unemployment.

Religion is a positive academic motivator for many communities. For Muslims, education is both an individual responsibility and a sacred duty laid on the community as a whole. Muslims seek educational environments that are infused with values that promote respect for teachers, good discipline, respect and tolerance for others and care for the physical environment of schools and colleges. These are shared values in our pluralist society.

As the Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, I am proud to affirm that we are committed to play a constructive role in building a nation full of diversity, a nation able to appreciate shared values, acknowledge common interests and build inclusive communities through collective endeavour. In many respects the needs and aspirations of Britain's Muslim community are no different from those of our fellow citizens. Concerns about health and education, national prosperity, strong public infrastructure and good public services are common to us all. From our diverse backgrounds and beliefs we can make common cause to achieve a better Britain for everyone.

The government has a cross-departmental initiative and is investing tens of millions of pounds to promote initiatives 'on community cohesion and preventing violent extremism'. This extra focus on the Muslim community is creating unease in not only within the Muslim community but also in others. In a recent Von Hugel Institute report

'Moral, But No Compass – Government, Church, and the Future of Welfare' commissioned by the Rt Rev Stephen Lowe we see dissatisfaction in the church establishment on the government's attitude towards Christianity. If communities are not seen in balanced ways on social issues there could be backlash from others. Is extremism the only issue in our society? What about gun crime, knife crime and other severe crimes that often blight our society?

In conclusion, I can emphatically say that faith can bring about a solution rather than a problem. The Muslim community with its root in traditional Islamic teachings has many common values to share with other fellow citizens. In a statement recently issued by a coalition of Muslim organisations, including the MCB, we said

“We urge all fellow British Muslims to reach out and create positive connections with neighbours and friends. We remind ourselves that with rights comes responsibilities and that we remain at all times accountable to God for our thoughts as well as deeds.”

Our commitment is for a common good of Britain, a better Britain. Let there be no doubt in our minds that we have the obligation to participate and engage. We have the obligation to contribute. We have the obligations of good-neighbourliness, of being concerned for others, to share their joys and feel their pains, to provide support and help wherever we can. This is what our faith requires of us. This is our unilateral responsibility. We have an obligation to encourage all that is good and discourage all that is harmful. I conclude with a remarkable verse from the Qur'an,

“Help one another to virtue and God-consciousness and do not help one another to sin and transgression.” (The Qur'an 5:2)