

Paper Title: Muslim Students – An Islamic Cultural Perspective

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Introduction: Cultural differences for Muslim students studying at Charles Sturt University

The interactive workshop will aim to provide participants with an overview of how Muslim students who come to Australia to study experience culture shock. We will discuss some of the problems concerning adapting to living in Homestay, University Halls of Residences or in the wider community and dealing with cultural differences including dealing with inter-gender relationship with other students, teachers and counsellors. The workshop will enable participants to interact with other participants and discuss their experiences working with Muslim students.

Word definitions:

Defining the difference between terms commonly used in Australian society but not fully understood by the general public.

“Islam or Islamic” - the Arabic word ‘Islam’ means ‘submission’ and it is derived from a word meaning peace. In a religious context it means complete submission to the will of God. It is usually used in reference to countries, laws etc rather than in defining a person.

“Muslim” - followers of Islam are called Muslims (pronounced moos-lim with a strong emphasis on the “s” sound). Muslim refers to people or a person who peacefully submits his or herself to God, a follower of the faith of Islam. The term Muslim is used when referring to people. Examples; my teacher is a Muslim; the Muslim students studying at Charles Sturt University are faithful followers of the Islamic Law.

Homestay accommodation:

Homestay providers in regional areas are generally reluctant to offer Homestay to Muslim students either through ignorance of the Islamic culture or through fear of the unknown Islamic laws and its perceived dangers. However with some forethought and sensitivity, hosting Muslim students can be very rewarding in terms of learning of another religion and other cultures.

In my experience some Homestay providers that have been prepared to “give it a go” by hosting Muslim students have had very mixed reactions. Some families have had very positive experiences and their students have stayed with the family for the entire time of study and then have recommended the Homestay family to other Muslim students. Others have had students that have been culturally disastrous for both the Homestay family and the student. Some frequent problems experienced in Homestay are;

- Separate bathroom and washing facilities required by the student
- Preparation of food and meals shared with families
- Preparation for the fasting period of Ramadan
- Cultural differences in the family home, eating with women in the family home
- Single mothers as Hosts
- Modesty within the family unit
- The family pet. Muslims generally do not wish to stay in a home that has a dog.

Issues concerning food:

Food tends to be one of the major areas of concern for Homestay hosts and the student. The dietary code observed by Muslims forbids the consumption of carrion and food derived from certain animals – pigs, crocodiles, spiders, frogs, dogs and cats. Muslims therefore consume what is commonly referred to as Halal. Food derived from sheep, poultry, cattle, camels, goats and some seafood is permissible. The consumption of wholesome food and leading a healthy lifestyle are seen as religious obligations. Therefore this does not just mean eating approved foods, but also means the avoidance of any toxins and the consumption of drugs and alcohol. This includes alcohol used in cooking.

One of the reasons for the difficulties between Muslim students and Homestay families is that the students don't always trust the family to prepare the foods according to Islamic law. Even if the hosts purchase Halal foods they are not considered to remain Halal by the time they are stored in the refrigerator with Haram foods such as bacon and ham. Cooking oils can also be a problem area as no animal fats are permitted. Another issue is in using cooking utensils that have been previously used to cook pork products. These matters are enough to convince the student that they can't possibly eat with the family. These problems often lead to the student not eating with the family and seeking alternative food sources or the student looking for private accommodation.

Ramadan

In the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims have an obligation to fast during the daylight hours. This means abstinence from food, drink and sensual pleasures from the break of dawn until sunset for the whole month. During Ramadan, Muslims generally wake before dawn to take a small meal (suhor) before abstaining during the day. Muslims will then break their fast at sunset with a large meal and prayers. The holy month of Ramadan is seen as a time for Muslims to strengthen their religious belief through prayer and reciting the Quran, the Holy Book of Islam.

In 2005 Ramadan commenced 4 October and ended 2 November. The dates change each year according to the moon.

Homestay families can help by understanding the significance of Ramadan and by showing a willingness to make allowances for its physical demands. Special consideration needs to be given for students to access the kitchen to prepare their suhor and also for the large meal to break the fast. It is also considerate not to eat or drink in front of a person who is fasting. Muslim students will attend Eid prayers at the end of Ramadan. Eid is as important to Muslims as Christmas and Yom Kippur are to Christians and Jews. Perhaps a gesture on behalf of the Homestay family would be to provide a card to mark the end of Ramadan similar to giving Christmas cards.

On Campus accommodation:

On campus accommodation is available to Muslim students studying at Charles Sturt University and this is offered as self catered accommodation. This style of accommodation is the most successful as the student's like to prepare and cook food according to Islamic Law, even though the Muslim students are usually men and are not accustomed to caring for their everyday domestic needs such as cooking, cleaning, shopping and laundering of clothing. Some other issues concerning on campus accommodation are;

- Muslim students are at times confronted by the Australian culture and lifestyle led by the Australian University students
- The consumption of alcohol in the Halls of Residence
- Accommodation is non segregated
- Haram food and lifestyle including parties
- Western style clothing for women

Inter-gender relationships

Difficulties do arise from living on campus as the accommodation is not segregated and both male and female students share housing, including amenities, with other students from many different countries and nationalities. It is interesting to see some of the reactions from students starting their courses with students from such diverse countries and cultures such as; Japan, South Korea, India, Pakistan, China, Mexico, Thailand and how difficult it can be for them to understand each other's cultural idiosyncrasies.

At times the first meeting can be quite negative but over time spending long hours together in the classroom the students form friendships. Some Muslim students are surprised that women in Australia lead such free independent lifestyles and are free to come and go as they please.

Australian Etiquette and the shaking of Hands:

One of the greeting customs in Western culture is shaking hands. This custom is a very polite gesture used by both men and women upon greeting. However this is an area of uncertainty working with Muslim students as it is forbidden under Islamic Law for a Muslim man to touch other women that are not intimately related to him. Rather than creating embarrassing or awkward situations for students we no longer offer our hands to shake unless the student initiates the greeting first.

Conclusion: Preparation of relevant information and contacts for student:

Homestay and Education providers should endeavour to ensure that students receive pre departure information before they arrive, and an orientation session upon arrival. This will help to reduce the cultural shock that is often experienced by Muslim students. The information should cover the following points;

- Non segregated society
- Women in the workforce and Education sector
- Western dress styles
- Australian culture and customs
- Accommodation issues
- Food issues

Recommended websites:

Etiquette and shaking hands

www.rukhsanakhan.com

www.fatwaislam.com

Explaining Ramadan

www.ramadan.com.uk

www.submission.org

Explaining Halal and Haram

www.ifanca.org

www.uh.edu

www.ehalalfood.com

What is Islam?

www.islam.iinet.net.au

www.afic.com.au

Halal Guide

www.icnsw.org.au

Email: info@halalhelpline.org

Why do Muslim women wear the Hijab?

www.jannah.org

www.jamiat.org

www.allfreeessays.com