

ISANA INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE – SYDNEY 06
“EDUCATE, ADVOCATE, EMPOWER”

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Fawzan Malas

Member Executive Committee, Affinity Intercultural Foundation

Key issues impacting on Muslim students today

1. INTRODUCTION

- Muslim students are having a number of issues upon arrival and some later on into their time at Uni. Most prominent of these issues deal with:
 - Difficulties upon arrival like finding the right housing and setting up their family in school or college (for spouse)
 - Halal food outlets and restaurants in or right around Univ.
 - Prayer facilities at Univ.
 - Consideration for religious holidays and Friday prayer.
 - Interaction with social scene.
- People’s sensitivities to Islamic matters could be diverse depending on their level of Islamic practice. Therefore you may be confronted with different requests and behaviours. We can generally find 3 classifications:
 - **Not very religious (5%)**. These students will not have most of the issues discussed here.
 - **Moderately religious (30%)**. These students usually display *some flexibility on certain religious matters*. They mostly require the basic religious needs like prayer halls, and access to Halal food.
 - **Very Devout (65%)**. These students will *require full support for all their religious needs* and will not compromise on any religious issue

2. LOGISTICAL ISSUES

2.1 Lodging and children’s schooling

- First few weeks are the most difficult.
- Finding appropriate and convenient lodging is difficult.
- Some may experience acceptance issues with real estate agents. (*Uni. help would be good here*)

- Those with families (large number) also have to worry about their partners' admittance into a university or TAFE.
- Arabic and Islamic teaching for children is essential for families. If available around university would encourage students to live in local areas.
- School fees are high; **Example:** Cost for day care per day per child is \$60, and about \$8,000 per year per child for primary school
- **Example:** Queensland laws enable children of int'l students to attend school and receive resident benefit.
- **Observation:** Students are already advising their friends back home to avoid NSW universities and head for Queensland.

2.2 Visas

- Formalities are complicated and expensive
- Restrictions on wives for studying
- **Example:** Total number of Univ. students studying in Australia from Saudi Arabia alone used to be about 25; now it is up to 1300, and projected to become 2500 next year.

2.3 Early help and guidance

- Lack of information prior to arrival.
- Promote the Muslim students committees early
- **Example:** Monash Univ. has a "Welcome" pamphlet in English and Arabic for Muslim students indicating locations of mosques, Halal food outlets and restaurants, prayer halls on campus, etc.

3. ACADEMIC ISSUES

3.1 Value of education for Muslim students

- International Muslim students value higher education greatly and it is a source of pride for families to have their children highly educated.
- Education is highly promoted in the teachings of Islam (Qur'an and its prophet (pbuh))

3.2 Absences for religious holidays

- Students are being penalized for being absent during the two main Muslim religious holidays (2 days) – Fitr & Adha Eid.
- They have limited number of absence days before they are given a fail mark even for medical illness with report.

4. SOCIAL ISSUES

4.1 Integrating into Australian life

- Family events could help families of students integrate better and meet people on campus.
 - Especially if catering for Halal food
 - Keep in mind that Muslim students don't drink alcohol.

4.2 Physical interaction with others

Main points I would like to mention:

- **Hand shaking** – You need to use your judgment and through personal dealing and knowing the person will know what to do. However, don't get offended if refused a hand shake. It is not personal.
- **Touching in General** – Muslims observing Islamic guidelines will not casually touch members of the opposite sex, like a tap on the shoulders or even during a sport activity.

Summary

Working together in group settings is ok **but** be aware of those who observe Islamic guidelines in regards to hand shaking and touching in general.

Female students will be possibly more reserved about handshaking.

5. RELIGIOUS ISSUES

5.1 Prayer facilities

- 2 or 3 daily prayers will fall within Uni. Attendance time.
- Some students have to walk long distances on daily basis to reach the main prayer hall for noon and after noon prayers. Temporary prayer rooms across large campuses or multiple campuses would be very helpful. Eg. Between 1 & 2 pm daily.
- Friday prayer allowance (time)

5.2 Wudu' (Ablution) is not well understood

- Students need to wash before prayers, a ritual we call "Wudu'": This is performed to prepare the person physically by cleaning himself and psychologically by putting him in a spiritual state.

"Wudu'" basically consists of Washing the face, hands, feet, and wiping head/hair with water.

Some non Muslims witnessing a Muslim student performing ablution in restrooms see it as a weird or disrespectful act. (this is feeling some Muslims students have)

5.3 Halal Food

- Halal food includes:
 - Pure Vegetarian food
 - Fish

- No Pork meat
- No pork fat or alcohol used in cooking
- Other Meats like chicken, beef, and lamb must be slaughtered according to Islamic rites (similar to Kosher)
- All Muslims must only consume Halal food if available.
- Halal food is more easily available in some areas in Sydney than others.
- Catering Halal food to Uni. is easy. (**Example:** Qantas uses a company called SNAPFRESH to cater Halal food and they also cater for universities).
- There are many other meat providers that cater Halal chicken, beef and lamb.
- **Example:** Bond University at request of students opened the cafeteria during month of Ramadan at 2am for the “Suhur” traditional meal and it was very popular.

5.4 Ramadan and Islamic Holidays

- **Ramadan** - The fasting Month – next one starts around 13th Sep 2007 and ends 10th Oct 2007

No food is consumed between Sunrise and Sunset

You need to be aware of this if you offer a drink or some snack to fasting student and they turn it down that you are not offended.

- **End of Ramadan Eid (Eid al-Fitr) (3 days)** - End of Ramadan Festival
Muslims all around world observe a 3 day holiday
- **Eid Al-Adha (commonly called Big Eid) (4 days)** - In memory of Prophet Abraham story answering God’s call to sacrifice his son Ishmail when Ishamil was spared and a lamb was sacrificed instead. – 20-23 Dec 2007

Signals End of Pilgrimage Season (the 12th month of the Islamic Lunar calendar)

6. SUMMARY

- International Students are relatively a **new market** for Australian Universities
- Many **more Muslim students will keep coming to Australia** and avoid the traditional no.1 destination, USA.
- **Which state** they come to will depend largely on **laws affecting personal cost and convenience**.
- Making international Muslim students feel comfortable and welcome now makes **economical** sense.
- **Needed facilities** like Halal food and convenient prayer rooms and Ablution outlets are a **major deciding factor for choice of University**.