

## **Building Bridges – building understanding for Muslim students in social and learning environments**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the development of resources for the increasing population of Muslim students within the Newcastle area, where the cultural and linguistic diversity of the population is quite narrow compared to the national population. Collaboration between the Newcastle Muslim Association, TAFE, Department of Education & Training, the Northern Settlement Services (formerly the Migrant Resource Centre) and the University has resulted in the development of a resource to give students and their families information about specialised services within the community so that they can quickly and easily make connections. The result of this collaboration has been the resource “Welcome to Newcastle: Information for Muslim students and families”.*

*After the production of this resource, a smaller project team has continued to work together to produce a second resource in brochure style “Understanding Islam” and a third web based resource “Focusing on Islam: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions”. Both of these resources aim to (1) assist the wider community to gain more information about Islam, (2) better understand Muslim beliefs and practices, (3) to dispel myths and (4) to encourage positive interactions in the workplace, classroom and the community generally.*

*The successful launch of these resources in November 2006, attended by more than 150 people representing local, regional and national organisations has inspired the project team to continue to work together in 2007. Two new projects are currently being developed – the first to assist academic staff from the School of Medicine to gain greater understanding of the needs of Muslim students in the learning environment and secondly the development of a guide for Muslim students to ‘Understand Australia from a Muslim Perspective’.*

**Keywords** Muslim, resources, relationship, community

### **The Newcastle context**

The 2006 Census recorded 141,752 persons in the Newcastle Local Government Area (LGA), an increase of 3.2% since 2001. The overseas born population in the Newcastle LGA in 2006 was 16,092 persons, an increase of 602 persons from 2001. Countries of overseas birth for the Newcastle LGA include United Kingdom, New Zealand, Italy, Macedonia, Germany, China, Philippines, Greece, Poland and India.

Christianity (70.8%) is the main religious affiliation for Novocastrians; with 24.4% of the population identifying as having no religion. There are 641 people who identified as Muslim in the most recent census (0.452%).

Given this information from the most recent Census data, it can be seen that Newcastle LGA, in which the main Callaghan campus of the University of Newcastle is located, has a less culturally diverse population than other cities of Australia.

As a result, international students are highly visible among the broader community. Organisations and networks that may operate in larger Centres to support students who have come from diverse backgrounds do not always exist in places like Newcastle. For this reason it seems to us extremely important that the University takes a pro-active approach to building connections and relationships with community organisations, developing in partnership projects that will support international students within the broader community.

## **How did the initial projects come about?**

During 2005 the University of Newcastle and The Hunter Institute of TAFE (vocational education) received a cohort of students from Qatar who had come to study English language. Most of these students were young, single and male, but there were also a small group of older male students who had spouses and children that they intended to bring to Newcastle early in 2006, after they had established themselves in the local community. These students had concerns not only for how they would adjust to the local environment, but also for their partners and children.

This was the first large cohort of students who had come to Newcastle from Middle Eastern countries. The University and TAFE were keen to ensure that the students settled in as quickly as possible. On arrival many of the students chose to live in Homestay and the host families expressed interest in learning more about the students' culture and what they could do on a day to day basis to accommodate their cultural and religious practices. At the time, many of the students were fasting for Ramadan. To assist the hosts, information was gathered and distributed about Ramadan, and through undertaking this exercise, it was immediately recognised that there was a need to produce a more comprehensive resource to assist Homestay hosts and others in supporting and caring for Muslim students. At the same time it was acknowledged that the students were seeking specialised support and information to help them adapt and adjust to the local community. For example, the students were seeking information about where to purchase halal food, information about how to connect with the local Muslim community and how to obtain culturally sensitive childcare for their children.

In early 2006, representatives from the University, TAFE, DET (Department of Education and Training) and the Migrant Resource Centre of Newcastle & Hunter Region (MRC) met to discuss the possibility of collaborating to produce resources that would meet student and community needs. It became apparent from the first meeting of this group, that if we were to be successful, then it was vital that the Newcastle Muslim Association (NMA) become advisers for the project. An invitation was sent to the NMA, which was accepted and a working group was formed. With considerable effort the working group was able to draft the resource, *'Welcome to Newcastle: Information for Muslim Students and Families'* for trial during semester 1 orientation in 2006.

The group had come together because of shared concerns for the growing number of Muslim students and families living and studying in Newcastle, and through the process of working together, a strong working relationship among group members had formed. This resulted in a decision that the University, the NMA, DET and the MRC would continue to work together after the production of the initial resource to develop a brochure style resource that would eventually be titled, *'Understanding Islam'*. This resource aimed at providing a snapshot of information about Islam for the wider community. From this a web-based resource was developed entitled, *'Focusing on Islam: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions'* which expanded the brochure's content for readers who were interested in obtaining more information.

During production of the resources, the working party came to recognise that there was considerable interest in the project from organisations such as the Newcastle City Council and Hunter New England Health. Acknowledging this

interest led the working party to approach the Newcastle City Council for funding to print the resources. Despite interest from the Council, the working party finally declined the Council’s offer to investigate funding options on their behalf, as we did not want the resources to become marketing tools for the city, but rather to remain true to their original intention of being sources of information and support. We were concerned that the relationships that had been built would become marginalised in such a process.

In May 2006, an opportunity arose to apply for funding under DIAC’s (formerly DIMIA) National Action Plan. The funding application was successful and sufficient funds were allocated for the production of the three resources mentioned above. A new relationship had been established, this time between DIAC and the working party members.

Given the growing interest from the community in the project, a decision was taken to launch the resources during a community dinner in late 2006. This was jointly planned by the Newcastle Muslim Association and the University. With financial support from the University, the launch was a huge success, with more than 150 representatives from local, regional and national organisations in attendance. Copies of the resources were distributed during the dinner which was hosted by the NMA at a hall adjacent to the Newcastle Mosque. The dinner included halal food and the evening accommodated members of the Muslim community participating in evening prayers. The resources were officially launched by the Vice Chancellor of the University, cementing the partnership between the University and the NMA. DIAC, DET, TAFE and the MRC were well represented on the occasion and acknowledged for their role in the partnership.

Since their publication the resources have been distributed widely not only to TAFE and University students, but also through local schools, libraries, local Councils and in public places such as the local shopping centre. The intention from the beginning of the project has been to share – knowledge, information and capacity, as well as to produce resources that are useful not only for students, but also migrants and refugees. The project has been a collaborative one, with shared ownership by all key stakeholders.

Following the launch of the resources, members of the NMA commented that they could never have considered it possible that such an event could take place and that so many people from the local, regional and national community would attend the dinner to show support. The launch has been a public recognition for the Muslim community of their value and place within the local Newcastle community and has in some way managed to grow the confidence of the NMA so that they now take their place more openly on community committees and in local events.

## **What have been the outcomes since the launch of the resources?**

### **➤ Outcomes in teaching and learning**

Following the launch and distribution of the resources there have been a number of opportunities to discuss the material with staff from the University and to consider opportunities for training. Training has been of particular interest to areas of the University where students’ religious beliefs and practices are perceived by staff to impact on teaching. Two areas of the University approached us: the Language Centre and the Faculty of Health School of Medicine and Population Health. Additionally we have consulted with administrative staff from the Faculty of Education and Arts, where there are Muslim students studying in Linguistics programs.

- The Language Centre

The issues of concern to the Language Centre were about how staff could teach sensitively and confidently a group of students from Saudi Arabia. Staff requested training so that they could:

- Better understand Muslim beliefs and practices.

- Develop strategies to accommodate students in the classroom environment.

In response, the training that was provided introduced the resources that had been produced in the initial project with particular emphasis on Muslim beliefs and practices. Staff were given the opportunity to talk together and to ask questions; to talk with each other in small groups and to review the resources to find answers to some of their questions. A panel of Muslim students were also involved and presented information about their religion, explained how they managed their religious practices within the academic context and answered the questions staff had about creating an inclusive teaching environment for Muslim students.

- School of Medicine and Population Health

Staff from the School of Medicine and Population Health approached the Equity and Diversity Unit early in 2007 about specific cross cultural training as they were concerned for the growing number of Malaysian Muslim students undertaking their academic program. The University had previously run some workshops on cross cultural teaching and the staff had found these sessions useful, but wanted more specific information on teaching Muslim students. The staff were referred to us because of the work that we had carried out already in this area. After initial discussions, staff from the Faculty were surveyed about their needs and a three hour training session was developed to answer their specific questions. These questions focused on cultural issues (dress, practices around birth and death), clinical examinations, and academic issues including teaching. For the training, a panel of practising Muslims was brought together. One member of the panel was involved in health research at the University, one was from the NMA and the others were a registrar working with Hunter New England Health Service and a GP from Sydney. The panel members had different experiences and perspectives to share. During this session it became apparent that staff were willing to develop new ways of working that were culturally sensitive, but often didn't feel confident about what they were doing and so were inclined to be very careful. The workshop gave them more confidence in how to engage with the issues and have more proactive discussions with the students. One of the major outcomes from the workshop was a decision that the School would introduce strategies to ensure students were made specifically aware of what was involved in the medical program earlier – either before they commenced their studies or soon after their arrival in Newcastle. The School is currently looking at ways to ensure students are given the opportunity to meet practising Muslim doctors, people from the Muslim community or senior Muslim students during the initial weeks of their program, so that commencing students have support in thinking through how they will manage the challenges of living and studying in Newcastle. We hope that this will also enable mentoring relationships to develop so that issues associated with physical examinations or other challenges could be supportively addressed.

The workshop and the resources that have since been drafted are:

- A brochure entitled, *‘Teaching International Muslim Students in Health Areas’*
- A web based document with similar information to the brochure, but in expanded form

These were funded by a grant through the University's Equity Grants Program. Both of the resources include information that was delivered during the workshop. These resources are applicable to all staff who are teaching in health related areas, not specific to Medical Sciences.

➤ Outcomes for students

As the projects have developed, the relationship between the University and Muslim students on campus appears to have become closer and more trusting. Hopefully, students have seen a willingness of staff to engage with their issues and to ensure they are understood and supported. Certainly anecdotal evidence suggests that some Muslim students have an increased confidence in being on campus and talking about their needs. The University of Newcastle Islamic Society (UNIS) now holds regular sessions during the Islamic Awareness Week for staff and students across the University and these sessions attract good attendance.

Earlier this year (2007) a focus group was facilitated with students in the School of Medicine and Population Health to gather ideas that have contributed to the brochure, *‘Understanding Australian Culture through a Muslim Perspective’* and also the brochure, *‘Teaching International Muslim Students in Health Areas.’* During the focus group students spoke openly about their fears of coming to Australia because of media reports of racism. Their subsequent experience did not bear this out to the extent they feared, but there remains a potential within communities for these students, because of their visible differences (dress etc), to be targets of racism. This was highlighted in the consultations held with Australia-wide representatives of Muslim communities by the Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission in 2004.

The willingness of these Newcastle University students to engage with staff to talk about their experiences and to offer information that has been used to assist new and prospective Muslim students, demonstrates that they regard the University as open to their ideas. Hopefully it also demonstrates that they have confidence that the University will try to work with them to improve support where possible.

➤ Outcomes for the University community

Since the three initial resources have been distributed a broad range of staff have had the opportunity to learn more about Islam, Muslim beliefs and practices. There seems to have been a greater willingness amongst many staff to consider the needs of Muslim students and staff on campus. Opportunities have opened up for open dialogue about the provision of halal food on campus. Discussions are continuing with the anticipated outcome that there will be more food outlets on campus serving halal food in the future.

During the launch of the resources, members of the University of Newcastle Islamic Society (UNIS) had discussions with the Vice Chancellor about the possibility of upgrading the Prayer Facility on campus. There is now a strong commitment from the University to ensure that this happens. This has been an important process as there have been discussions about location and facilities with all involved trying to work together to achieve something that will work for everybody.

A third important outcome since the launch of the resources has been the engagement of the Muslim community, particularly the Newcastle Muslim Association in University activities. The local Muslim community is now regularly consulted on matters pertaining to the care and support of Muslim students. They act as advisers where there are conflicts and difficulties, and they are included in University forums and information sessions. For example, each semester, representatives from local organisations are invited to the University for a Briefing Session on International activities. The Muslim community is now integral to these sessions as they interact closely with many Muslim students and are often the first point of contact for Muslim students in times of trouble.

A fourth outcome has been the development of a deeper understanding of the needs of Muslim students throughout the University. In community programs such as Homestay and Community Connections, there has been training to assist community volunteers and Homestay hosts to understand the challenges that Muslim students experience. Hosts and volunteers have appreciated the opportunity, through this training to talk openly about the issues they face in caring for and supporting Muslim students on a day to day basis. They have also shared strategies and helped each other to overcome difficulties. This has been an important way of educating the broader community about Islam and dispelling myths that are often circulated through the media.

The University has attempted to recruit more Muslim families into the Homestay program, but this has been difficult because of broader cultural differences.

➤ Outcomes for the Muslim community

The relationship between the Muslim community, the University and the broader community has strengthened in recent times. This is evidenced by the fact that Newcastle City Council has invited the Newcastle Muslim Association (NMA) to facilitate sessions for their Councillors so that they can better understand Muslim beliefs and practices. The NMA also regularly participates in community consultations facilitated by Council and works with local organisations on projects that aim to increase cultural harmony within the community.

An outcome for the Muslim community that is difficult to quantify is the feeling of confidence and ‘place’ that Muslims now seem to have within the broader community. This is evidenced by the fact that early in 2007 the NMA approached the University and asked if we might work with them to produce the brochure for students as well as migrants and refugees on understanding Australian culture. The content of this brochure, which is currently in draft form, has come primarily through feedback from Muslims who have recently arrived in Newcastle. The feedback about their experiences has been provided in the first instance to the NMA, who have analysed the issues and are now working with the University in drafting the content.

The confidence to approach the University; the willingness to share information and the desire to work in collaborative partnerships with the University are signs that the NMA regard the University as a trusted partner.

➤ **Outcomes for the broader community**

Organisations and businesses within the local community have been supportive and interested in working with the University to support Muslim students. The involvement of many organisations in Community Briefing sessions has meant that they are aware of the challenges and concerns of international students generally and Muslim students in particular. The local shopping centre, Stockland Jesmond, has been very pro-active in managing issues within the Centre. The Manager has briefed all shop owners on the needs of Muslim students and has alerted staff to some of the challenges our students face, especially those wearing hijab and full covering, as in the case of women from Saudi Arabia. She provides information to customers who are curious about our students and moves quickly to dispel myths. As a result issues that could build community tensions are addressed pro-actively.

The Multicultural Health Unit within Hunter New England Health, have shown considerable interest in all the projects that have been developed to date. In 2005, Muslim students from the University as well as the broader Muslim community were invited to contribute as part of the Arts for Health program. This was a month long display at the John Hunter Hospital and other Hunter New England Health facilities that focused on Muslim people in the community.

There has also been considerable interest from social groups such as Rotary, who have invited Muslim students, especially from Saudi Arabia to attend one of their meetings as guest speakers. This occasion was extremely well received by all who attended and plans are underway for a women’s evening and for further dialogue between the two groups. It was necessary to organise this event with great sensitivity and care, but the willingness of all parties made it possible for everyone’s needs to be met and for the evening to be enjoyed by all.

## **CONCLUSION**

From very small beginnings there have been considerable outcomes for all who have worked together and continue to work together on these projects. With the growing number of Muslim students, particularly from Saudi Arabia, who are coming to study and live in Newcastle, there are new challenges in educating the broader community to the needs of this emerging group, whilst at the same time supporting and orientating these students to the University and the local community. The University is endeavouring to be pro-active in this area and is currently talking with key community organisations (local school, the NMA, providers of community English classes, local shopping centre) about how we can work together to facilitate more open communication with new students so that issues can be

resolved before they escalate into major misunderstandings. In this way students and their families can feel supported in becoming part of the broader community.

When we reflect on this process, we started with the idea of producing one resource. After completing this resource we continued the dialogue about what would support students in social and learning environments. In the process of doing this, relationships built and understanding grew. Trust and relationships are key factors in managing challenges and taking on new ones.

## REFERENCES

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