

## The Needs of Muslim Women at QUT

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### Abstract

*The aim of this study was to examine issues facing female international Muslim students and spouses of international Muslim students at QUT. The needs of these women were identified and recommendations made to better support Muslim women at QUT. Methods used included key informant interviews with academic and professional staff who engage regularly with female international Muslim students, an online survey and focus group discussions with female Muslim international students and female spouses of Muslim students.*

*Findings indicate that Muslim women at QUT have concerns about being misunderstood by non-Muslims and some difficulties in interacting with them. There are challenges that Muslim women face in regard to dietary needs; feelings of social marginalization; lack of suitable facilities to fulfil their religious obligations; working with male counterparts; support for women raising children; language barriers and the higher than expected cost of living.*

*Suggestions elicited to meet these needs included forming a Muslim women's support group; education for women on how to deal with mixed group work situations; arranging social activities; provision of information on locating cheaper groceries, halal food and prayer facilities, publication of a booklet providing information of general Muslim beliefs and culture to reduce misconceptions and conducting employment workshops.*

### Keywords

Female Muslim international students, Muslim female spouse, challenges, needs

### Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that Australia is a multicultural society (Bouma 1995; Chiswick & Miller 1999; Martina 2011; Special Broadcasting Service 2002). Multiculturalism is an inclusive social policy to incorporate people with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds into an integrating social entity (Shahram & Abdullah 2001). According to the data, 27% of Australia's population was born overseas and 43.1% has at least one overseas-born parent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). This ethnic diversity contributes enormously to the multiculturalism in Australia along with the variety of languages and religions. Australia's language statistics revealed that more than 200 languages were spoken in Australia in 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). In terms of religious background,

the majority of Australians (61%) reported themselves affiliated with a Christian religion. However, there has been a continual increase in the number of residents who identify as non-Christian (from 4.9% in 2001 to 7.2% in 2011) and having no religion (from 15% in 2001 to 22% in 2011). Within the non-Christian category there has been a 69% increase in the number of Muslims from 281,600 in 2001 to 476,300 in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). Muslim communities are mainly comprised of immigrants and their Australian-born families from Lebanon, Indonesia, Turkey, Malaysia, the Indian subcontinent and Africa (Collins et al. 2011).

An increasing number of international students studying in Australia also enrich the diversity in the Australian society. In 2009 international students made up 22% of the tertiary student population in Australia which now has the highest proportion of international students in all OECD countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). In 2011, there were 426,728 international students studying in various courses in Australia. Chinese students made up 28.8% of the total international student population, making them the single largest international student community in Australia, followed by India with 11.4% (48,647). The remaining students came from Republic of Korea (22,439), Malaysia (20,901), Vietnam (18,193), Thailand (14,211), Indonesia (14,170), Nepal (11,871), Brazil (10,526), Saudi Arabia (10,084) and other nationalities (11,033) (Australian Government, Australian Education International 2012).

Because information on international students' religious affiliation is not collected when they are enrolled in Australian universities (Asmar 2001), there is no accurate data providing the number of students with an affiliation to Islam. Population studies report that the largest Muslim populations are domiciled in Asia; Indonesia (202,867,000), Pakistan (174,082,000), India (160,945,000), Bangladesh (145,312,000), Turkey (73,619,000), Afghanistan (28,072,000), Uzbekistan (26,469,000), China (21,667,000), Malaysia (16,581,000) and other countries in the region (49,148,000) (Pew Research Center 2009). Additionally, 90% of people of Arab heritage are Muslim, contributing 20% to the world's Muslim population (Clark 2003). Due to the correlation between the countries that represent the majority of international students and the distribution of the Muslim population in these countries, it can be assumed that there is a considerable number of Muslim international students in Australia.

In order to ensure quality education and student satisfaction, the university aims to identify the needs of students and provide adequate support to meet their needs (Gunawardena & Wilson, 2012). This study investigates the issues faced by Muslim women at QUT and their needs and the study suggests some recommendations to meet their needs.

## **Background to study**

Through QUT's provision of specialised services and programs International Students Services (ISS) is committed to meeting the needs of international students. With increasing numbers of international students at QUT it is essential that equity for international students and the quality of their university experiences are ensured.

ISS assists international students in relation to their various needs including those related to academic adjustment, financial security, and family and accommodation issues. Among many other support groups established by ISS, the 'International Women's Group' was established to create an environment for female spouses of international students to socialise and interact with each other. Only a few female Muslim spouses are actively involved in this group.

Given that Muslim international students are required to fulfil their religious practice every day, it is crucial to assess their particular needs. However, no study had been conducted to explore issues and concerns encountered, especially by female Muslim students and female spouses of Muslim students, during their stay at QUT. This study was undertaken to examine the needs of Muslim women at QUT to provide adequate support. It focused on female International Muslim students and female spouses of students at QUT. The objectives of this study were to:

- Identify the needs of Muslim women at QUT by interviewing staff members who work with Muslims students and to collect feedback from International Muslim students and spouses of Muslim students at QUT,
- Make recommendations for appropriate services and programs to meet the needs of Muslim women.

## **Literature review**

Previous studies about Muslims demonstrate that with the negative beliefs and perceptions about Islam, there has been an internationally growing Islamophobia (Council on American-Islamic Relations 2007; Henderson & Sims 2004). In Australia Muslims have often been stereotyped in the media (Manning 2004; Dunn et al. 2007). In response to the anti-Islam sentiments publicly presented, several studies have been conducted to examine perceptions and experiences of Muslims living particularly in England, United States, and Australia. These studies (Asmar 2001; Cole & Ahmadi 2003; Speck 1997; Tyrer & Ahmad 2006) commonly found that Muslim students experienced being stereotyped and discriminated against. Particularly it is suggested that prejudice towards religious practice and lack of respect from academic staff and peers negatively influence Muslim students' educational experience.

In regards to the issues faced particularly by Muslim women, some studies suggested that misconceptions about veiled women in the non-Muslim community have caused female Muslim students some degree of academic and social discomfort and isolation (Cole & Ahmadi 2003; Seggie & Sanford 2010). Interestingly while the studies were conducted based on the assumption that veiled women may be the most visible Muslim population, the participants claimed that veiling is not a necessity for being a good Muslim but a personal choice. Unlike aforementioned studies that focused on Muslim students' experience in relation to their religious practices, McDermott-Levy (2010) explored how female Arab-Muslim nursing students view their life in a more profound perspective. The study revealed that despite students reporting they encountered issues, they also experienced a newly found freedom and strived to adapt to a new culture and the new self-directed learning. Findings suggested that students believed these experiences allow them to have much responsibility for their lives and enable them to mature and grow (McDermott-Levy 2010).

Hofstede(1980) defined that "culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede 1980, p.260). According to Hofstede, countries are identified by five different cultural dimensions which enable us to assess the similarities and differences between countries or regions (Hofstede et al 2002). He claimed that to comprehend the cultural differences, it requires an inclusive understanding the cultural dimensions (Hofstede 1998). Preconceptions, stereotyping and judgments based on one's own cultural bias are great barriers to understanding and communicating across cultures (Hofstede 2002). Muslim students may have cross-cultural challenges when learning a new culture similarly to other international students (Sherry, Thomas & Chui 2010). Therefore, the university needs to educate non-Muslim students on Muslim beliefs and ensure that the faculty staff are sensitive about Muslim student needs (Seggie & Sanford, 2010).

In line with this argument, Gresham and Walsh (2007) focused on developing resources to enhance the relationship between Muslim students and academic staff at universities in Australia. In the research (2007), they launched a project to produce resources to assist homestay hosts who accommodate Muslim international students in understanding Muslim cultural and religious practices. It succeeded in building connections for Muslim international students by organising cross cultural training and publishing brochures for staff (Gresham & Walsh 2010).

To examine Muslim students' level of satisfaction with varied aspects of campus life in Australia, Asmar, Prude and Inge (2004) conducted a survey and compared the results between female and male respondents of the study. The study found that about two third (68%) of Muslim students were satisfied with academic courses. However the satisfaction with university support and services was somewhat lower with 41%. The results also highlighted that female students had a tendency to report more negatively towards a sense of belonging, perceptions of discrimination and more difficulties in interacting with non-Muslim students than their male counterparts. Considerably, the research concluded that women wearing a hijab have a lower satisfaction rate with services and they encounter more challenges than women without a hijab.

In prior literature, it has been frequently argued that international students encounter a variety of challenges of adjusting to a new environment, a different educational system and language barriers when they study overseas (Baker & Hawkins 2006; Constantine et al. 2005; Mallinckrodt & Leong 1992; Zhai 2004). While there has been various research conducted about Muslim communities in relation to religious practices, gender studies and media effects (Collins et al. 2011; McCue 2008; Rane et al 2010), studies focusing on Muslim international students are relatively limited. Furthermore, although Muslim women are seen as a vulnerable group in previous research (Cole & Ahmadi 2003; Seggie & Sanford 2010; McDermott-Levy 2011), very few studies have been conducted to identify the needs of Muslim female international students in Australia (Asmar 2001; Asmar 2004) and none of them investigated the needs of female spouses of Muslim international students. Therefore, it is important to identify the needs of both female Muslim international students and female student spouses and develop recommendations to address their needs.

## **Methods**

### **Interviews with key stakeholders**

Key informant interviews were conducted with QUT academic and professional staff working closely with female international Muslim students as well as community leaders and student representatives. Eight interviews of approximately one hour duration were carried out to identify key concerns and issues that female Muslim students may encounter. These interviews raised awareness of the issues Muslim students' experience that may have an impact on the students' quality of life in Australia as well as their academic performance. Through these interviews a questionnaire and a focus group schedule were developed.

Table 1: Interview with staff

Gender (number of interviewee)	Position
Male (3)	Student Adviser, Saudi Arabian community member, President of Muslim Student Association at QUT
Female (5)	Student Adviser, Professor (Faculty of Education), PhD student Professional staff from Exchange Office, and undergraduate student

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprised of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions included yes or no choices and multiple-choice responses. The questionnaire was designed to examine;

- what issues and concerns Muslim women face during their time at QUT,
- whether Muslim women's perceived needs are met at QUT,
- what resources and supports could be delivered to fulfil their needs,

The questionnaire was reviewed by Student Advisers at QUT and placed online using 'KEY Survey'. The online survey was distributed to QUT international students via an electronic International Newsletter with information regarding the purpose of the survey, voluntary participation and confidentiality. The questionnaire was also provided as a hard copy during the focus groups. 47 Muslim women completed the survey.

### Focus Group Discussions

With the key informant interviews and literature review, the focus group schedule was developed to be used as a guide. A total of 17 female Muslim international students and female spouses of Muslim international students participated in three focus group discussions. The participants originated from Malaysia, Indonesia, Iran and Bangladesh. There were three focus group discussions held at both QUT Kelvin Grove campus and Gardens Point campus between March and May 2011. The discussions lasted from 1 to 1.5 hours and each session was recorded on tape with consent from the participants. Once the discussions were transcribed, the transcripts were distributed to the participants to be validated.

Focus Group	Number	Country of Origin	Status
Group 1	3	Malaysia, Indonesia	International Student
Group 2	9	Malaysia, Indonesia, Iran	International Student
Group 3	5	Iran, Bangladesh	Spouse

Table 2: Focus Group

### Data Analysis

*Quantitative data analysis:* Descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyse the data collected from the questionnaire. The sum of the answers given to each question was calculated to provide simple descriptive statistics of the data.

*Qualitative data analysis:* qualitative data gathered from the key informant interviews, answers to open-ended questions in the questionnaire and focus groups was analysed using Sarantakos' theory (1998, cited in Alston & Bowles, 2003) to identify key themes.

### Findings

#### Survey results

47 Muslim women at QUT completed the questionnaire and 16 of the participants indicated they have children. Figure 1 shows that over half (53.2%) of the respondents were undergraduate students while 46.8% were postgraduate students.

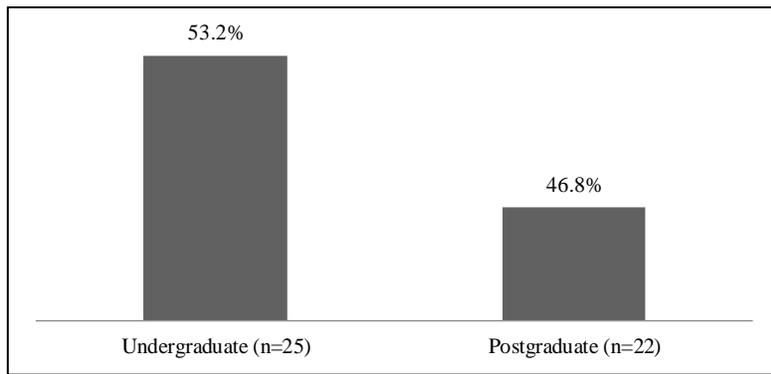


Figure 1. Respondent's study level

Figure 2 shows respondents' age distribution. The majority (68.0%) of respondents were in their 20's and 21.2% were in their 30's.

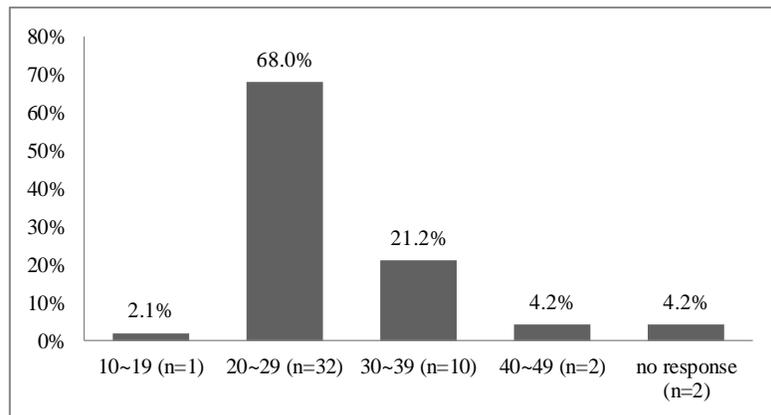


Figure 2. Respondent's age distribution

In relation to respondents' country of origin, the highest number of respondents (44.7%) originated from Malaysia followed by Indonesia (19.1%), Saudi Arabia (8.5%) and Iran (8.5%). A few participants were from Singapore, Brunei and Bangladesh (4.3 % each) and 2.1% from Turkey, Afghanistan and Jordan (see Figure 3).

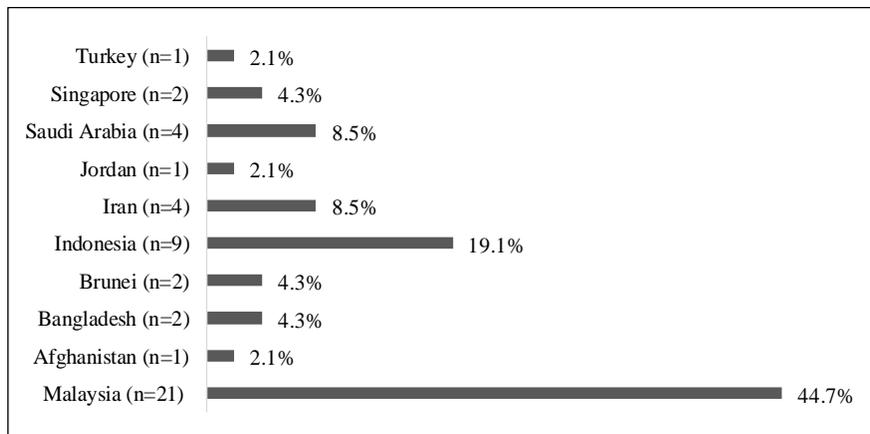


Figure 3. Respondent's country of origin

56% of respondents reported that they were living alone in Brisbane and 44% were living with their family, among which 68% were with their husband.

In relation to the question of the religious needs, 68% of respondents answered their religious needs are met at QUT. Further aspects of their religious needs will be discussed later.

The participants were also asked about the challenges they encounter during their study in Brisbane and multiple answers were allowed. Table 3 indicates that the most concerning issue was food (65.2%) followed by cost of living

(56.5%), making new friends (47.8%), English language for academic use (41.3%), financial concerns (41.3%) and adapting to new and different studying methods (39.1%). English language for social use was chosen by 37.0% and adjusting to a new place as well as relationship with QUT staff and students were ranked equally at 28.3%. While more than 20% of respondents indicated that meeting religious needs, child care support, studying in a new environment and having family support were challenges for them, fewer respondents selected accommodation, health and medical needs and feeling homesick.

*Table 3: Challenges Muslim women at QUT face*

<b>Challenges</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>
Food	65.2	30
Cost of living	56.5	26
Making new friends	47.8	22
English Language (academic use)	41.3	19
Financial concerns	41.3	19
Adapting to new/different studying methods	39.1	18
English Language (social use)	37.0	17
Adjusting to a new place	28.3	13
Relationship with QUT staff/student	28.3	13
Meeting religious needs	23.9	11
Child care support	23.9	11
Studying in a new environment	21.7	10
Having family support	21.7	10
Accommodation	17.4	8
Health & Medical needs (finding a female doctor)	10.9	5
Feeling homesick	8.7	4

In response to the question asked if they think their concerns are addressed at QUT, 54% answered 'Yes' while 46% chose 'No'. Respondents who selected 'No' were required to provide a reason for the answer and their answers were consistent with the concerns identified during the focus group discussions, which is stated in latter part of this report.

Figure 4 shows whom Muslim women seek help from when they have difficulties. The largest proportion of respondents (68.1%) preferred to see religious groups, followed by family at home (59.6%) and family in Brisbane (36.2%). On the other hand, friends within QUT (27.7%), lecturer and tutor (23.4%) and ISS adviser (19.2%) were indicated by a smaller number of participants.

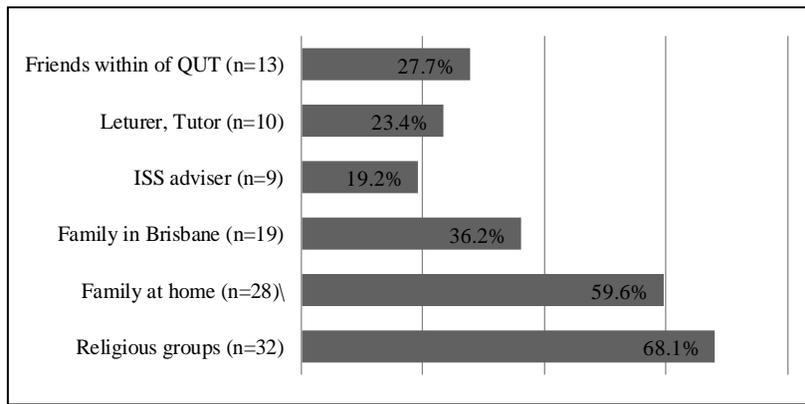


Figure 4. Consulting figure

### Focus group

Data analysis from the focus group discussions revealed six key concerns identified by Muslim women at QUT and recommendations have been collated to support a female Muslim group at QUT.

#### Being misunderstood by non-Muslim groups and discrimination issues

Participants emphasised that non-Muslims are sometimes insensitive or discriminating as they do not understand Muslims' religious beliefs and culture.

*'I find myself in uncomfortable situations when some students (non-Muslim) make negative remarks in tutorial groups or classes that have been mentioned in the media. I think Media plays a big role in negativity towards Muslims and promotes untrue points about Muslims.'* (Focus Group 2)

*'My house mate has a partner and she doesn't understand that in our culture the presence of males/ boys are not acceptable around the same house... I feel uncomfortable when my house mate has a party in the house which includes drinking alcohol... Many do not understand that we cannot drink alcohol and do not like to be around people who drink as well.'* (Focus Group 1)

*'I was walking to my home and heard that some people saying things like "bomb". I think they are saying we are terrorists.'* (Focus Group 2)

*'I felt I was discriminated because of my hijab. One of my lecturers constantly gave me poor grades and refused to explain or give me feedback as to why I'm getting poor marks. I've tried to contact her a few times but the response has been no discussion.'* (Focus Group 2)

#### Limited halal food availability

Participants stated that there should be more information on the "halal certification" at eating outlets, as many food outlets do not indicate whether they have halal or non-pork/ham.

*'Last time I went to a shop to buy food I asked if that food is Halal and the person in the shop said yes it is, but unfortunately when I ate I found that it had pork in it... I was upset because I ate something that I am not meant to eat.'* (Focus Group 1)

*'When I asked the shop owner if the food is halal, I wasn't sure if the owner understood what halal means.'* (Focus Group 1)

#### Feeling of social marginalisation

Participants mentioned that they have lack of social networks and difficulties in socializing with non-Muslims.

*'I don't know other Muslims doing a PhD. The issue is I don't have any interaction with other Muslim students. I would like to know and meet with them but I don't know what is out there for Muslim students other than general advertised events.'* (Focus Group 1)

*'It is hard to mingle with other students (non-Muslim background). There are barriers to social interaction including that we need to pray, only eat halal food and because we cannot join other students to go to pubs or clubs when Australians or non-Muslims invited us.'* (Focus Group 2)

#### Lack of facilities to fulfil religious obligation

Participants reported that while QUT has a prayer room that enables Muslim students to meet their religious needs, washing places for women need to be improved.

*'In KG prayer room, the wash room is shared space for males and females. It is difficult at times for us to do Wudu' when men are already present. I feel nervous in case a male Muslim may enter while I'm performing Wudu.'* (Focus Group 3)

*'There is not enough shower or wash up areas for Muslim women and it can become difficult particularly if we have to be on campus the whole day and also need to pray.'* (Focus Group 1)

### **Difficulties in interacting with male counterpart**

Participants stated that Muslim women experience difficulties in working together with male counterparts.

*'When I meet with my supervisor (male) I did not know how to act or what to say and I did not know the boundaries/ expectations in relation to supervisor and student relationship, particularly if you are a female Muslim student.'* (Focus Group 1)

*'It is hard to interact with Australian people because we are not sure how to talk to them. Especially shaking hands with men was an issue. Some female students will refuse to shake the hand of opposite sex and then they feel bad.'* (Focus Group 2)

*'Mixed sex group work can be challenging for female Muslim students. When I was put into group work with male students, a boy asked me for coffee at 10pm for doing project with him but I didn't know what to say and how to respond to that.'* (Focus Group 1)

### **Insufficient support for women raising children**

Participants stressed that many international Muslim students consider child care as the main concern for them.

*'Child care is very expensive in Brisbane. It is hard to find babysitters on campus for us because both of us are studying... We were rejected when we applied for the kindergarten because of not enough space.'* (Focus Group 2)

*'I have no support, I can't think to have another kid because there will be no support.'* (Focus Group 3)

### **Language barrier and high living expenses**

Participants mentioned that language barriers and high living cost are issues when adjusting to a new life in Australia.

*'Language was the biggest barrier. I felt that because of my limited English, it was pretty challenging to adjust to a new environment here.'* (Focus Group 3)

*'Because of my language difficulty, I felt it is more difficult for me to ask my lecturer to get my assignments reassessed.'* (Focus Group 2)

*'Cost of living is a very big concern especially when we are on a very limited budget and relying on families for support.'* (Focus Group 3)

*'It's very difficult and expensive. Many students share a room to budget on their cost of living in Brisbane. We usually have to be careful with shopping particularly for food. We always look for cheaper places to buy basic groceries / food. What we do is that we buy food in bulk, and make sure it will last us for a month.'* (Focus Group 1)

### **Suggestions to provide adequate support for Muslim women at QUT**

Suggestions to adequately support female Muslim international students and female spouses included (1) establishing a Muslim women's support group, (2) delivering education on how to handle mixed group work situations, (3) arranging social activities, (4) providing information on halal outlets, cheaper grocery shops and prayer places, (5) publishing a booklet containing information on general Muslim beliefs and culture, (6) conducting employment workshops.

#### **(1) Establishing a Muslim women's support group**

Participants suggested that forming a Muslim women's support group would give an opportunity for Muslim women to share their concerns and also support each other.

*'It would be nice if we meet regularly at a set venue as social get-together... Malaysians and Indonesians students get together and talk about different needs around religion... Having peers and friends from their own country does help.'* (Focus Group 2)

*'Senior students are very helpful. They can show new students where to buy halal meat and food. They often have a get-together where they prepare and eat food together... It would be great to have a venue where Muslims can meet once fortnight or a month.'* (Focus Group 1)

**(2) Delivering education on how to handle mixed group work situation**

Participants suggested that female Muslim students need to be educated on how to deal with mixed group work situation.

*'It would be useful to have a guide for both, Muslim females and also for academics in terms of the supervision relationship that accounts for sensitivity of religious and cultural beliefs of students and what the general expectations and rules are within a supervision context for Muslim students.'* (Focus Group 2)

**(3) Arranging social activities**

Participants proposed that social activities particularly tailored for Muslim women need to be organised.

*'There needs to be more social events for Muslim women rather than the some big events already on campus.'* (Focus Group 2)

**(4) Providing information on locating cheaper groceries, and halal food and prayer places**

Participants suggested that information on halal food, prayer places and cheaper grocery markets should be offered.

*'It is important to provide students a handbook which contains all the important information and services... especially, it would be useful for new arriving students to have information on facilities for Muslim students on campus such as where to pray and where to get halal food, halal food outlets on campus, etc.'* (Focus Group 1)

**(5) Publishing a booklet containing information of general Muslim beliefs and culture**

Participants noted a booklet providing information on Muslim beliefs and culture needs to be published to reduce misconceptions.

*'Perhaps it would be useful if there are specific information about cultural and common Muslim/ Islamic beliefs and expectations for students and staff within the university. For instance, why many Muslim women are not comfortable shaking hands with males or what are some expectations for research female students who have male supervisors and vice versa.'* (Focus Group 2)

**(6) Conducting employment workshops**

Participants suggested in order for Muslim women to have more work opportunities, workshops conveying information on employment should be conducted.

*'Many of us have professional backgrounds and were working before we came to Brisbane. We would like to know more about employment opportunities and what's involved in terms of regulations/ requirements such as having a blue card.'* (Focus Group 3)

## Discussion

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006), more than half of the Muslim population (58.6%) in Australia are under the age of 30. Similar to this trend, the participants of this study were relatively young as more than two-third of the participants (70.1%) were under 30 years.

More than 70% of participants came from Asian countries including Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, while there were few participants from a different region (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Jordan).

While the majority of respondents (68%) reported that their religious needs are met at QUT, participants expressed their priority of having washing places only for women in order for them to fulfill the religious practices as there are inconveniences in sharing washing places with male Muslims. This is consistent with the findings from the focus group which is discussed later.

In identifying Muslim women's challenges, food (halal), making new friends, English language issues, adapting to different studying methods were selected by more than 35% of participants. These challenges have also been recognised as issues faced by Muslim students in various studies (Cole & Ahmadi 2003; Saggie & Sanford 2010; McDermott-Levy 2011; Gresham & Walsh 2010; Asmar, Prude & Inge 2004; Haynes 1998; Mallinckrodt & Leong 1992).

The study noted that participants prefer to seek help from religious figures and family members rather than consult friends or staff at QUT. This could be explained by Asmar's research findings (2001) that Muslim students believe that many non-Muslims would not understand the concerns they have and therefore it is not preferred for them to consult with a non-Muslim adviser.

Studies demonstrate that misconceptions and prejudices on Muslim culture and religious practice contribute to Muslim students' experience of being misunderstood and discriminated (Asmar 2001; Asmar, Proude & Inge 2004; Cole & Ahmadi 2003; McCue 2008; Rane et al. 2010; Seggie et al 2010). The findings of this study were consistent with this argument. In the focus group, participants mentioned that they experienced assaults and discrimination due to lack of understanding of their culture by non-Muslims. They alleged that misconceptions imposed on women wearing hijabs and biased media disclosure exacerbate misreading beliefs in Islam.

Through the focus group it is identified that access to certified halal food is one of the major concerns of the participants. The importance of halal food was discussed in several studies (Asmar 2001; Collins et al 2011; Haynes; 1998; McCue 2008; Schlein & Chan 2010) as there are specified lawful and unlawful foods in Islam beliefs (Haynes 1998). Therefore, access to halal food is part of daily religious practices that is essential.

According to Asmar, Proude and Inge (2004) only one-third Muslim students reported that they feel belonging to the university community and particularly women with hijabs experienced alienation from the community (Cole and Ahmadi, 2003). In line with the findings, the focus group participants mentioned about the issues with socialising with non-muslim students. This is often caused by their lack of social networks and difficulties in blending into non-Muslim culture such as consumption of alcohol and close interaction with the opposite gender at activities. These findings support the argument by Asmar (2001) and Cole & Ahmadi (2003) that Muslim students tend to withdraw from mingling with non-Muslim students when they are subjected to the circumstances that contradict their religious beliefs.

Focus group participants revealed that they experienced difficulties in working with male counterparts because they are unsure of the boundaries and expectation regarding the interaction with the opposite gender. This issue could be understood based on the general Islam principle that Muslim men and women are not supposed to be involved in mixed-sex activities (Haynes, 1998).

The study found that cost of living is a big concern especially for self-sponsored students who are relying on family for support. Participants confided that many students share a house to save the cost of living and they always look for cheaper places to buy basic groceries and food. In this study, 68% of participants were with their husband and about 30% of them were raising children. In addition, it was emphasised that finding affordable childcare is a great concern for them and raising children becomes more challenging if both parents are studying. This issue could be aggravated as international students generally do not have as much support as they are used to in their home countries, while living in a foreign country (Cherry, Thomas & Chui 2010).

As previous research has suggested, language barriers are one of the main issues among some international students (Baker & Hawkins 2006; Dowson & Gifford 2004; Mallinckrodt & Leong 1992; Poljski 2011). Speck (1997) argued that Muslim students' life could be more challenging if they had limited English language ability and they were unable to defend themselves in relation to their culture and religious practices.

When discussing the services and resources for meeting Muslim women's needs, participants proposed that a support group and social activities especially tailored for Muslim women needs to be arranged. This is consistent with the results of a study (Seggie 2010) that Muslim students prefer to socialise with Muslim groups as they feel at ease to make friends and share common interests in life. In the focus group, most participants want to know how to enter the workforce in Australia as many of them have higher education qualification or professional backgrounds. Participants also noted that providing information on halal food, inexpensive grocery shops and prayer places is important for newly arrived Muslim students to assist them in adjusting to a new life in Brisbane.

Attitudes and perceptions of peers and staff at university are important factors affecting students' experiences (Heikinheimo & Shute 1986). Therefore, academic staff are required to be trained to be more sensitive to the needs of Muslim students in order to improve the campus climate to combat Muslim students being marginalised (Speck 1997). The findings of this study support this argument. Most participants acknowledged the difficulties of Muslim students working with an opposite or mixed gender group and they emphasised that Muslim women need to learn how to do so while maintaining their religious principles. In order to create an understanding environment on campus, participants also suggested to publish a booklet providing information on Muslim culture and religious practices so non-Muslim students and staff can understand Muslim students better by reducing misconceptions (Seggie & Stanford 2010).

## **Limitations of the study**

This research has several limitations. As only a limited number of students and spouses participated in this study, the findings of this study cannot be generalised. Muslim students are not an homogeneous group as they originate from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In addition, their own practice pertaining to religious beliefs may also vary depending on their educational level, length of stay overseas and cultural practices. Therefore, further research is necessary to explore how these variables may impact their experiences and perceptions.

## Conclusion

This study has been designed to assess international Muslim women's needs at QUT. The study conducted interviews with key stakeholders and developed a questionnaire and a focus group schedule. The analysis of data collected from the survey and focus group discussions resulted in seven key themes emerging. Their concerns include; being misunderstood by non-Muslim groups; difficulties in working together with male counterparts; limited access to halal food; social marginalization; inadequate facilities to meet their religious needs; insufficient support for women raising children; English language related difficulties and the high cost of living.

Recommendations to QUT have been made around these identified needs to support International Muslim women. Suggestions to meet these needs included forming a Muslim women's support group; educating women how to better deal with mixed group work situations; arrangement of social activities; provision of information on locating cheaper groceries, halal food and prayer rooms, and publication of a booklet containing information of general Muslim beliefs and culture and holding employment workshops.

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