Breeding Ground: Analyzing Higher Education in the United Kingdom and the Allure of Islamic Extremism

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Abstract

The purpose of this analysis is to discuss current trends, benefits, risks, and opportunities in the United Kingdom higher education system with respect to the Muslim student population. The results of this report will provide insight to intelligence communities, governments, institutions of higher education, and other groups invested in combating violent, Islamic extremism. Sources from UK institutions of higher education, news articles, pieces from the international higher education academic community, and statistical reports were used to investigate factors in a Muslim student's higher education experience in the UK that may lead to their susceptibility to and joining with radical, Islamic groups.

Keywords: Islamic extremism, higher education

1.Introduction

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In August 2014, the world watched as US journalist James Foley was beheaded by a member of the terrorist organization known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The militant, who became known as 'Jihadi John' in the media, went on to behead dozens more in a rampage against the Western world. That same year, the FBI identified 'Jihadi John' as Mohammad Emwazi, a Kuwati-born citizen of the United Kingdom (UK). It was revealed that Emwazi had completed a degree in Computer Science at the University of Westminster in 2009, after which he traveled between the UK and Kuwait until 2013, when he disappeared. Emwazi re-appeared in the mass media as Islamic extremist and global celebrity, 'Jihadi John' (Casciani, 2015).

According to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation in London, UK, Britain has the second largest number of foreign fighters in Syria of any country in the European Union. Shiraz Maher of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation identified the typical face of the British, foreign fighter in Syria as male, in its twenties, of South-Asian origin, and with recent connections to both international contacts and, most important to the purposes of this analysis, with recent connections to higher education (HE) (Maher, 2013). Prime Minister of the UK, David Cameron (2015), provided four reasons why young men and women are attracted to radical, Islamic movements. Firstly, extreme doctrines are exciting to youth. The media shows images of ISIS members as if they were celebrities. Second, while violence is profuse in the extremist community, it is not necessarily the element that first attracts young people to the movement. More often, youth are coerced by non-violent, extremist ideologies and figures and only later engage in violence. Third, the extremist voice is dictating the conversation. It is hard for young people to hear the voices of moderate and pacifist Muslims when ISIS is dominating the debate. And finally, collectives offer an identity and a sense of belonging. For youth, whose identities are still developing, a group such as ISIS provides those two things. This is especially true of young Muslims in the UK who strongly identify with the Ummah- the worldwide, Muslim community- and to a lesser degree, the wider, UK community.

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If young Muslims are leaving their higher education institutes (HEIs) in the UK and joining extremist groups like ISIS, we must ask ourselves what is driving them to do so and what can HEIs do to combat and prevent this reality. The purpose of this literature review and analysis is to discuss current trends, benefits, risks, and opportunities in the United Kingdom higher education system with special attention to the Muslim student population. The results of this report will provide insight to intelligence communities, governments, institutions of higher education, and other groups invested in combating violent, Islamic extremism. Sources from UK institutions of higher education, news articles, pieces from the international higher education academic community, and statistical reports were used to investigate factors in a Muslim student's higher education experience in the UK that may lead to their susceptibility to and joining with radical, Islamic groups.

Much of this report is based on Erik Erikson's theory of identity formation (1994), which asserts that identity is formed throughout an individual's life through a series of eight stages. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2013), the average age of a UK HE student was between the ages of 17-24 accounting for 65% of the total, student population at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels during the 2013-2014 academic year. Per Erikson's theory of identity formation, this places more than half of the student population at the stages of Fidelity: identity vs. role confusion (who am I? who can I be?) and Love: intimacy vs. isolation (can I love?) (Erikson, 1994). The significance of Erikson's theory to this report is that the majority of students, to include Muslim students, in the UK HE system are experiencing what Erikson calls an "identity crisis." Individuals between the ages of 17-24 are determining who they are and how they relate to others. Muslim students who experience issues such as Islamophobia, isolation and inequality within the UK HE community are more likely to welcome the company of those who provide them with a close-knit community and clear-cut purpose. Extremist groups use these conditions to lure young Muslims into their movements. They see UK HEIs as the breeding ground for their future members and leaders, like Jihadi John.

This literature review/analysis will focus on the following questions:

- What is the landscape of higher education in the UK?
- What internationalization strategies are employed by UK HEIs?
- How do HEIs in the UK engage with the Muslim, student population?
- What are the benefits, risks, and opportunities in the UK system of HE, with special attention to the Muslim, student population?

Overview of UK's Higher Education Landscape

According to a report on Internationalization of Higher Education coordinated by the European Parliament's Committee of Culture and Education and written by authors Steve Wood fields and Elspeth Jones (2015), there is one, single higher education system in the UK. Issues such as immigration and quality assurance are coordinated at the UK-level. Each of the four countries within the UK- England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland- and each of the HEIs within them do have some, separate policies for their HEIs (Shattock, 2009).

There are three, main types of HEIs in the UK: universities (HEIs awarded this title have passed a process controlled by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)), university colleges and colleges. Degrees awarded by these institutions include research degrees, master's degrees, bachelor's degrees, postgraduate diplomas/certificates, short-cycle qualifications (i.e. Foundation degrees, diplomas in HE, and Higher National Diplomas), and Certificates awarded by Pearson. Each institution varies according to factors such as mission, strategy, size, student profile and approach to internationalism. All HEIs in the UK are technically private, but many are government-funded. These institutions experience the highest rates of enrollments (Woodfield& Jones, 2015).

Per HESA (2015), there were approximately 2.3 million students registered at 162 HEIs in the UK during the 2012-2013 academic year. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2015) reported that the amount of students studying in the UK grew 9% between the 2003-2004 and 2012-2013 academic years, which, while positive in nature, lagged behind the 26% increase in the United States, 31% in Germany and 36% in Australia. Approximately a quarter of Muslims age 16 and over have earned an HE degree.

This percentage is just slightly less than the general population of the UK. Muslim students accounted for 10 percent of the HE student population and 13.3 percent of the entire population of the UK during the 2012-2013 academic year. In the past decade, the percentage of Muslims, both UK citizens and non-EU citizens, pursuing HE has risen by more than 10 percent (Sundas, 2015).

Internationalization in UK HE

While the general population of the UK is extremely diverse, the internationalization of HE has become a high priority in the UK HE community, especially in light of the recent global, financial crisis, which has caused the UK population to consider such issues as cost-effectiveness of HE and whether HE degrees lead to better job prospects. The UK government listed international education as one of the 13 key sectors "identified as drivers of economic growth" in the Coalition Government's industrial strategy (International education strategy, 2013), which indicates that the UK government sees international education as a means to compete and increase trade on a global scale. There are many international education policies and strategies at the national, institution, and departmental levels.

One aspect of internationalisation in the UK relates to the international student population. During the 2012-2013 academic year, the five most popular destinations for outgoing UK students included France, Spain, the United States, Germany, and Italy. Just over 14,600 UK students studied abroad through the ERASMUS program, the largest, student exchange program in the EU. The majority of outbound, UK students studied abroad for a full, academic year during their undergraduate experience because doing so enabled them to receive full government financial support (HESA, 2015).

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2014) reported that the UK currently ranks second in the global market of international students. With 13 percent of the total international students around the globe, the UK is a formidable, HE force. HESA (2015) demonstrated that the UK has seen growth of EU and non-EU, incoming students in the past decade- the largest increase being in the population of students from the Middle East.

One strength of internationalisation efforts of HEIs in the UK relates to quality assurance, which is maintained at the national level. The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, an umbrella organization created by the European Higher Education Area of the Bologna Process to oversee quality assurance of higher education institutes in Bologna signatory countries, lists the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as one of its full members (ENQA agencies, n.d.). The private, UK company regularly conducts in-depth assessments of HEIs in the UK and provides guidance to these institutes on how to improve and maintain quality of education. Among their many projects, the QAA maintains the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. In order to receive public or student loan funding, each HEI must meet all 19 of the expectations in the Code. There are three main sections to the Code. Section A includes expectations related to "Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards; Section B, "Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality"; and Section C, "Information about Higher Education Provision" (Quality assurance agency, n.d.). The QAA ensures the quality of all HEIs in the UK by controlling which institutes receive funding. Philip Altbach, Liz Reisberg, and Lara Rumbley (2010a) assert that quality assurance agencies like the QAA provide an essential service by providing quality assurance and information transparency, which is vital for inbound students who rely on such schemes in nations wherein they wish to study. In the sections that follow, more benefits, risks, challenges, and opportunities within the UK HE system are reviewed.

Benefits of UK HE

In additional to a strong system of quality assurance, the UK boasts strong, HE rankings as the location for eight of the top fifty HEIs in the world, to include University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, Imperial College London, University College London, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, King's College London, and University of Manchester (World university rankings, 2015). Alan Ruby investigated the usefulness of higher education rankings. He asked the following question: "Why should reputation and rankings matter to international educators" (Ruby, 2012, p. 1). Ruby asserts that reputation and rankings should matter to international educators because those two factors influence students where to study. This applies to international students who are seeking a degree outside of their home country and to students looking to study abroad as a part of their higher education experience.

Rankings provide a systematic analysis of institutes of higher education in a convenient rank order chart that helps students decide where they want to spend their time and money. Based on the rankings of the HEIs in the UK, it is no surprise that so many students choose to study there. UK HEIs and the nation at large are both highly multicultural. OECD's (2014) reporting that the UK currently ranks second in the global market of international students with 13 percent of the total international students around the world demonstrates how diverse HE campuses are the UK. According to the Office of National Statistics (2011), the larger population of UK residents who were not born in the UK included approximately 13% of the total population. Of that percentage, 9% were born in non-EU countries. 92% of UK residents speak English, but nearly 140,000 individuals do not speak English at all. The top five languages other than English include Polish (1%), Punjabi (0.5%), Urdu (0.5%), Bengali (0.4%), and Gujarati (0.4%). This benefits students in UK HE because they are able to study in a diverse and multicultural community just by walking out their front door.

Studying in the UK also offers the opportunity to perfect English-language skills. The English Effect, a report published by the British Council, calls English the "dominant international language of the 21st century" (British Council, 2013). The report claims that 1.75 billion people worldwide use spoken English at some level, which could be considered evidence of a unified code of language or common tongue that allows persons from different linguistic backgrounds to communicate ideas, research global issues, and conduct business with one another. Many consider English to be the lingua franca of the global business and academic markets. It behooves international students to learn English, and where better than the UK, a nation with a thriving English-speaking community. The British Counsel (n.d.) confronts students' concerns about the global, economic crisis by assuring that attending a UK HEI will lead to increased employability in the global market. They posit that employers are looking for graduates with multilingual and multicultural backgrounds, so studying in the multicultural UK and/or UK students studying abroad will lead to better chances of obtaining a job after graduation. Studying in another country can also result in creating a network of international businesses with which to intern and/or work.

Risks and Challenges in UK HE

Although the UK system of HE is strong in many areas, there are substantial risks and challenges throughout. Stephen Heyneman (2013) lists ethical grey spots and corrupt activities in HE, such as financial fraud, degree mills, cross border educational programmes, academic integrity, and sources of funding. According to the Global Corruption Report developed by Transparency International (2013), 18 percent of people in the UK see the HE system as corrupt. The report focuses on two, unethical practices that are prevalent in UK HE: money laundering and bribery. The former "takes the form of an individual using corruptly obtained funds to pay the fees of family members at private schools or universities in the United Kingdom" (Transparency International, 2013, p. 149). The latter "takes the form of a third party (e.g. a company or an intermediary on behalf of a company) paying for school or university fees as part of inducements for obtaining contracts from the ministers or public officials concerned" (Transparency International, 2013, p. 150). These and other unethical practices found the UK HE sector can lead to disillusionment on the part of students attending UK HEIs. Parveen Akhtar (2005) asserted that extremist groups are grasping to the disenchantment of politically active, young Muslims by insisting that extremism is the only option that enables them to make a difference in the world.

According to the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FOSIS, 2005) the freedom to practice Islam is often the most challenging aspect of UK HE for Muslim students. Christine Asmar (2006) listed an assortment of issues faced by Muslim students throughout their educational careers. Of the many issues that may influence their experience, Asmar included access to designated prayer spaces, the need to perform prayers throughout the day, access to and availability of halal foods on campus, flexibility of faculty and staff in relation to religious needs such as time off for religious holidays, proximity to members of the opposite gender, and proximity to alcohol and pork during social functions. When HEIs neglect to provide accommodations for religious customs, students are likely to feel neglected by their HEIs and isolated from their peers (FOSIS, 2005). Inequality is experienced by many minorities in the UK. Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley state that "providing higher education to all sectors of a nation's population means confronting social inequalities deeply rooted in history, culture, and economic structure that affect an individual's ability to compete" (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2010b, p. 43).

Dr. Sophie Gilliat-Ray (2010) relates this issue to religion, arguing that the UK HE system was built on religious grounds and that Christianity played and continues to play a central role in the university. This protects an inequitable status quo, asserts Tariq Modood (2005), between Christians and non-Christians. The needs of Muslims will continue to be ignored as long as this unequal dynamic exists. Yet another issue faced by minority students in the UK is prejudice. Islamophobia is experienced by many Muslim students in UK HEIS, despite the fact that university environments tend to be more open-minded than the general population. Stereotypes create a sense of fear towards Islam and its followers, especially when images of hatred, extremism and terrorism are equated with the religion (FOSIS, 2005). Isolation and, at times, verbal and even physical abuse are experienced by Muslim students from their non-Muslim peers due to ignorance and fear. Unfortunately, as PM Cameron explained, the extremist voice is dictating the conversation and fanning the fires of prejudice and islamophobia (Cameron, 2015).

In addition to misguiding the non-Muslim community, extremist voices in the Islamic community can mislead Muslim students. According to interviews of Muslim students by Michael Appleton (2005), young, Muslims are more likely to be politically active than their non-Muslim classmates. Munira Mirza, Abi Senthilkumaran, and Zein Ja'Far (2007) suggest that the political mindsets and associated actions on the part of these young, politically active, Muslim students are based on emotional response as opposed to knowledge around domestic politics and foreign policy issues. The emotional messages put forth by extremist, Islamic groups appeal to young Muslims who are invested in politics, but less invested in knowledge. Each of these issues- corruption, lack of freedom to practice religion, inequality, and islamophobia/prejudice- can lead to feelings isolation, confusion, "identity crisis," and, for many, susceptibility to the message of radical Islam.

Opportunities

While the UK system of HE has many risky attributes, HEIs can combat these issues by confronting them head-on. In order to tackle unethical behaviors such as money laundering and bribery, Transparency International (2013) suggests a three-pronged mechanism for curbing corruption. First, citizens should be informed about their rights and acts of misconduct in the HE sector. Heyneman (2013) suggests that allowing public access to information establishes a system of accountability achieved through transparency. In addition to curbing unethical behaviors, Heyneman asserts that students are more likely to attend HEIs where corruption is minor than those wherein corruption is profuse, so it behooves HEIs to make their information as transparent as possible. Second, economic inequality must be curbed. Transparency International (2013) suggests that the expansion of free HE has decreased economic disparity in the last century, which in turn also decreased unethical behaviors. This, again, relates to both money laundering and bribery. Finally, Transparency International (2013) suggests that countries reinforce social trust in their HE sector, so that those behaviors are mirrored by others. A good way to reinforce social trust is through monitoring and auditing HEIs for unethical behavior and enforcing existing legislation that combats such behavior. People are less likely to engage in corrupt activities if they think they will be caught. By making these three changes, Muslim students are less likely to be discontented with the ethics of their HEIs.

As stated before, the foremost issue faced by Muslim students in the UK is the lack of freedom to practice their religion. The UK HE system has the opportunity to resolve this issue by responding to and meeting the needs of Muslim students. According to a poll taken by FOSIS (2005), Muslim students felt that UK HEIs could improve by providing more and/or larger prayer and Wudu (ritual washing) facilities, ensuring availability of Halal food on campus, holding more alcohol-free events, creating more single-sex, living situations, accommodating religious holidays and daily prayers, and increasing sensitivity in the HE community. By incorporating these suggestions into their policies and practices, HEIs can ensure that Muslim students are free to practice their religion freely during their formative years.

As long as social inequality exists in the UK community, Muslim students will continue to feel alienated. Modood (2005) suggests a movement away from 'radical secularism' and towards practices of 'moderate multiculturalism.' An extreme movement towards secularism ignores the needs of minority, religious groups. HEIs need to transform their campuses into areas wherein people from a variety of cultures can engage with one another without fear of prejudice. Darla Deardorff and Elspeth Jones suggest that this type of arena can be created by encouraging intercultural competence, which they define as "the process of learning to understand cultural otherness [that] leads to enhanced self-understanding which supports greater understanding of cultural others" (Deardorff & Jones, 2012, p. 285).

They discuss strategies for developing this mindset, to include using materials from varied, cultural perspectives, creating safe environments and events wherein international and domestic students from multicultural backgrounds can interact with one another outside of the classroom, and creating opportunities for students to interact with groups in the local community, such as the immigrant population. By utilizing these strategies and encouraging intercultural competence, UK HEIs can create and reinforce equality in theirs and the wider, UK community.

In addition to combatting inequality, UK HEIs should combat islamophobia and the role that it plays in the lives of Muslim students. Arthur Welch's (2015) piece on Islamic extremism in Southwest Asian HE discusses the conditions of the HE system that have led to many university students volunteering as Mujahideen warriors in extremist movements. One HE condition he investigates is islamophobia. He suggests that the main weapon against islamophobia is education. Welch appropriately defines universities as the source of ideas. He suggests harnessing this attribute in order to "promulgate a moderate Muslim message of peace and understanding, and promote a more inclusive form of democracy—which can undoubted weaken the appeal of extremism, to impressionable young university students" (Welch, 2015, p. 8). He provides a variety of means of spreading this moderate, Muslim message to both Muslim and non-Muslim students. Prominent, Muslim clerics and student associations are an excellent means of educating HE student populations through presentations, discussions, and activities. To discount the extremist voice, Welch encourages HEIs to invite survivor groups to share their stories with students.

Government prevention programs, he asserts, can also serve the purpose of undermining the reach of Islamic extremism. In response to terrorist threats, the UK government created the Prevent Strategy. The UK Prevent Strategy was coordinated with three objectives in mind: 1. "Challenge the ideology that supports terrorism and those who promote it"; 2. "Protecting vulnerable people"; 3. "Supporting sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation" (HM government, 2011, p. 4-6). In order to challenge extremist ideologies, the Prevent Strategy strongly suggests creation and implementation of more education projects. When propagandists and apologists break the law in order to promote terrorism, the Prevent Strategy encourages stronger law enforcement and action. The second objective relates to vulnerable people who are drawn into extremist movements. The Prevent Strategy aims to extend existing agencies and programmes which identify and support people who may be targeted by extremist groups. The third objective points to specific sectors such as faith, education, criminal justice and the internet in order to engage with and resolve issues within Muslim communities. By informing students about government initiatives such as the Prevent Strategy, both Muslim and non-Muslim students will develop a better understanding about the difference between a moderate, Islamic message and an extremist agenda.

Conclusion

By taking the opportunity to amend risky behaviors and activities in their HE sector, the UK will be able to curb the influence of Islamic extremists. In this report, current trends within the UK HE system were discussed. Benefits such as a strong system of quality assurance, location of seven of the top fifty HEIs in world, a multicultural community, the opportunity to perfect English-language skills, and increased employability in the global market were examined. And risks such as bribery and money laundering, limited freedom to practice Islam, inequality, and Islamophobia were analyzed. Special attention was given to how Muslim students engage with and perceive their UK HE experiences. Sources and reports were used to investigate factors in a Muslim student's higher education experience in the UK that may lead to their susceptibility to and joining with radical, Islamic groups. The results of this report will provide insight to groups invested in combating violent, Islamic extremism.

The UK HE sector, especially, must use reports like this in order to resist the ever-growing radical, Islamic movement. Extremist groups like ISIS offer an identity and sense of belonging to young Muslims who are often alienated by HEIs during their formative years. It is up to the UK government, the private sector, HEIs, and the larger, UK community to reform the HE sector into one that is accessible and equitable. In doing so, the world will see less of Jihadi John and more of the peaceful and tolerant religion that Islam is at heart.

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