

# How Muslim Students Perceive Australia and Australians

## A National Survey

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### Abstract

Outlined below are selected results of a 5 year long national survey which Dr Abe Ata was commissioned to carry out in Australia. The survey investigated the knowledge, values and attitudes of 430 Year 11 and 12 Muslim students in 10 Muslim High schools towards the mainstream Australian society. The percentage of female participant students (57%) was slightly higher than male students (43%). Almost the entire sample (93%) declared themselves to be Muslim. The findings reflect a wide spectrum of responses with a strong implication that much work is needed to bring about an appropriate degree of adjustment. Providing awareness sessions to students and parents which address critical social, religious and cultural issues including: stereotyping and inclusivity. Another is to explore how Muslim schools promote intercultural understanding. The survey found that students were equally divided on statements that their school teaches them.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural communication; inter-ethnic relations; Muslim students; inter-religious education; cross cultural attitudes; stereotyping*

### Introduction and Background Notes

Islam is the third largest religion in Australia, after the Christian denominations and Buddhism; and the Muslim community is one of the fastest growing, having nearly doubled in size between 1996 to 2001. [1] Many are school students, and of these, many are at Islamic schools. This is fortunate for the purposes of the study. It affords us ready access to respondents (it would be invidious to seek out only Muslim students in a religiously mixed setting); and it presents both a challenge and an opportunity for reaching a target audience.

Muslim schools in Australia are newcomers on the national scene, most having been in existence for only the last 15 years. In Victoria alone they employ about 400 teachers, serve 5000 students, obtain \$32 million a year from state and federal governments. But Irene Clyne of Melbourne University found that although they may promote a moral outlook, cultural identity, retention of the mother tongue, and religious practice, many parents expressed concern that they might not be a wholesome alternative to secular education.

The Age (July 31, 2005) found that education departments have little knowledge of the curriculum content in Muslim schools for junior grades, the quality of education on offer, or religious views propagated:

*... there are concerns among former teachers and members of Melbourne's Islamic community about the overall quality of education the 600-plus students receive.... Muslim extremists were posing a problem for "vulnerable and impressionable youth".... [A prominent Muslim leader says that] the proliferation of Islamic schools is causing concern in the Muslim community... They are accountable to nobody but themselves.*

In a recent survey, *The Great Divide: How Westerners And Muslims View Each Other*, the Pew Research Centre reported that opinions held by the two communities vary markedly by country; a comparison with their report would be of great interest locally and internationally. Muslims were more positive than the general public in their adopted country about the way things are going for them and their future, but many worried about the future of Muslims in their country of origin. Their greatest concern was unemployment. Islamic extremism emerged as the number two concern. The majority do not regard most non-Muslims as hostile towards Muslims. (Ata, 2014;2009)

There is little published research examining the extent to which false facts relate to attitudes of Muslims towards Australia. Much less is reported on what may constitute negative attitudes towards Australia that could be predicted from the scale of our knowledge, fashionable or well worn. It is held that many of the false beliefs play a crucial role in perpetuating negative attitudes, legitimising social distance and justifying blatant and subtle prejudice (Pederson 2005, Eagly,1992). In other words, they interlink with generalizable attributes and stereotyping, extending portrayal and the like.

Results from studies on anti-prejudice education showed that participants believed that factual information about out-groups is crucial in challenging negative feelings, and improve positivity towards them (Pedersen 2005; Dunn, 2005).

Several researchers from Europe and Australia found that that low and high-prejudiced people share the same knowledge of cultural and ethnic stereotypes of minority, thus signifying that the level of knowledge and depth of prejudice are independent of one another (Gordijn et al 2001; Augustinos, Ahrens, and Innes 1994; Lepore and Brown 1997). This could, however, relate to the validity of the test itself. Gordijn (2001, p 157) argues that the measuring instrument may be insensitive enough to detect finer "differences in the knowledge of cultural stereotypes as a function of level of prejudice when the free response method".

This paper analyses the attitudes state of knowledge of Muslim Australian students and their views on the contribution of their schools. *Extracted below are selected results of a 5 year long national survey aimed at investigating the knowledge, values and attitudes of 430 Year 11 and 12 Muslim students in 10 Muslim High schools towards the mainstream Australian society.* The current study drew its survey sample from Muslim denominational schools, it included few if any non-Muslims; it can therefore fairly be said to represent how the overwhelmingly Muslim student community views mainstream Australian society. A number of theoretical orientations supporting the study are discussed before the presentation of results.

The current study follows a previous national survey on attitudes of Australian students see Islam and Muslims—hereafter referred to as *The Companion Study*. The two studies are largely complementary in the sense that both explore how one community perceives the other.

## Survey method and sample characteristics

The survey unit was the high-school student. Over 430 completed questionnaires were obtained from students at eight schools (six high schools and two community schools) in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia. South Australia, NT, ACU and Tasmania did not take part for logistical reasons. Two schools catered mainly for students of Turkish background.

Schools were requested to survey year 11 students, these being considered mature enough to give informed answers, yet unencumbered by year-12 exams in each selected school. The survey was administered to eligible students present on the day of the survey. Even so four of the schools chose to administer the survey to Years 10 and 12.

Many school principals and school agencies were supportive. They suggested that the survey was in the best interest of all Australians. Most of them however declined to consider participating in the survey prior to meeting with the chief researcher and assessing his credentials. One of the community principals, an imam, insisted that the researcher meet with him at his home.

Only one principal of European background sent his approval to conduct the survey promptly by email. He indicated that the survey was relevant to Year 11 students of Religious Education, and that they should be encouraged to explore the beliefs of other religions whenever that was possible.

The survey was refined in the light of the pilot after which 431 students were administered the full survey form. The percentage of female participant students (57%) was slightly higher than male students (43%). Almost the entire sample (93%) declared themselves to be Muslim. We do not know the circumstances of those who gave 'Other' (i.e., not Muslim) as their religion. It is possible that some were children of interreligious marriages, and others just rebellious. There were more students born in Australia (61%) than overseas (39%). However, the percentage of fathers (3%) and mothers (9%) born in Australia was significantly lower.

Over 66% indicated that their friends were mostly Muslim and 3% indicated that they were mostly non-Muslim; the remainder were 'half and half'.

Most students (93%) spoke 'other languages' at home. This accords with the finding that most parents were born overseas. In *The Companion Study* only 19% non-Muslim Australian students spoke 'other languages' at home.

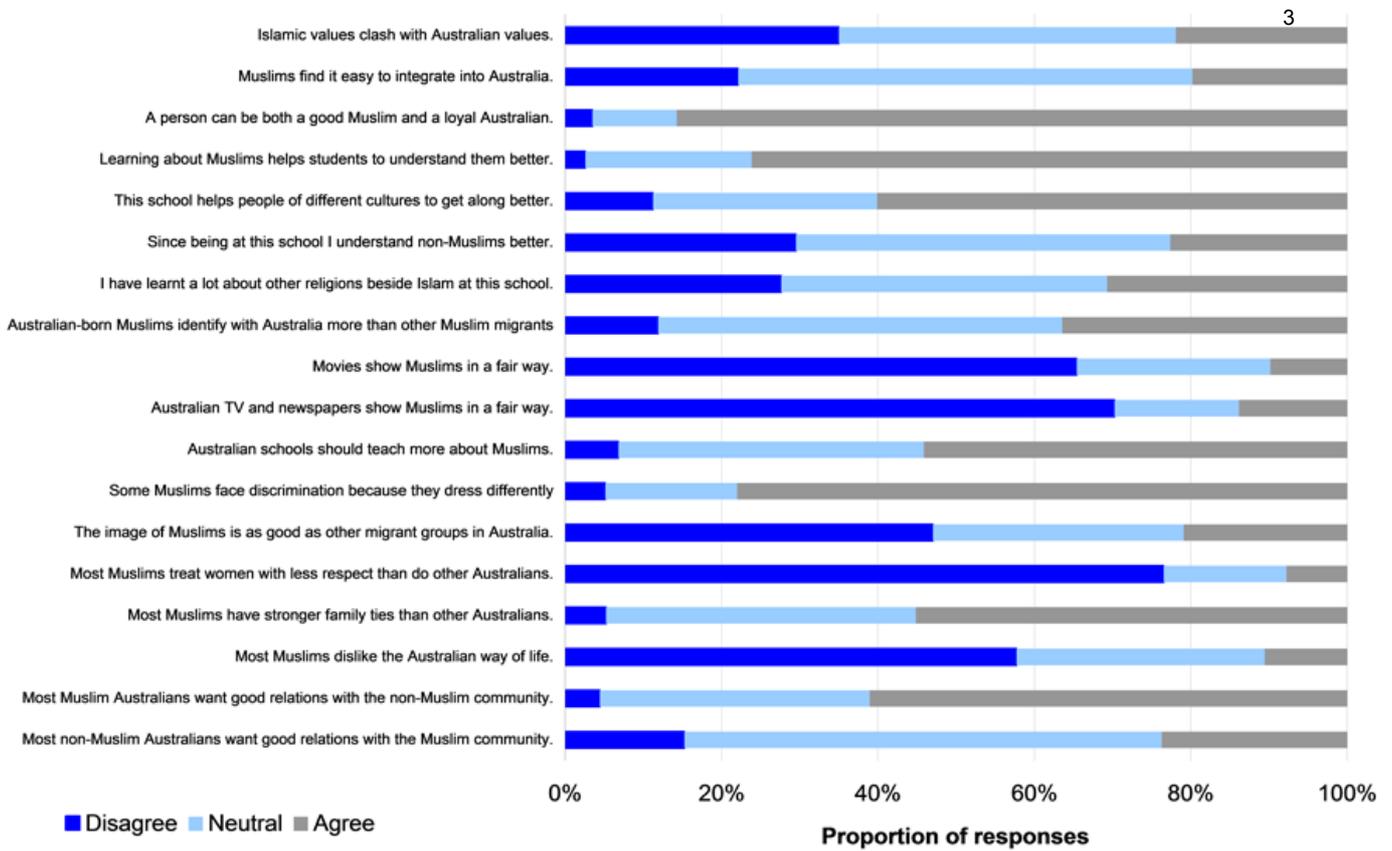
Respondents were presented with 18 statements concerning subjective attitudes towards Islam and Muslims and asked to rate their agreement on a three-point scale of 'Agree' through 'Neutral' to 'Disagree'.

On many questions between a third and a half of the sample was neutral, indicating that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (*figure 1*). This could signify honest ignorance of the issues or alternatively lack of motivation.

This contrasts with *The Companion Study*, which found that a considerably higher proportion of neutral responses given by non-Muslim students to comparable (and in some cases identical) questions concerning Islam and Muslims. This suggests that Muslim students are either more informed about, or more motivated to comment on the position of Muslims in Australia than are non-Muslims—understandably so, as they are commenting on their own community, not someone else's.

## Findings and discussion

**Figure 1:** Proportion of responses to attitude questions



In the Table above we have explored the attitudes of the sample as a whole. But does this mask differences within the sample? For instance, do boys differ systematically from girls in their attitudes towards Islam and Muslims? To answer this and similar questions, we used statistical techniques to determine if there were significant differences in the mean attitudes of all the demographic groups measured in the survey.

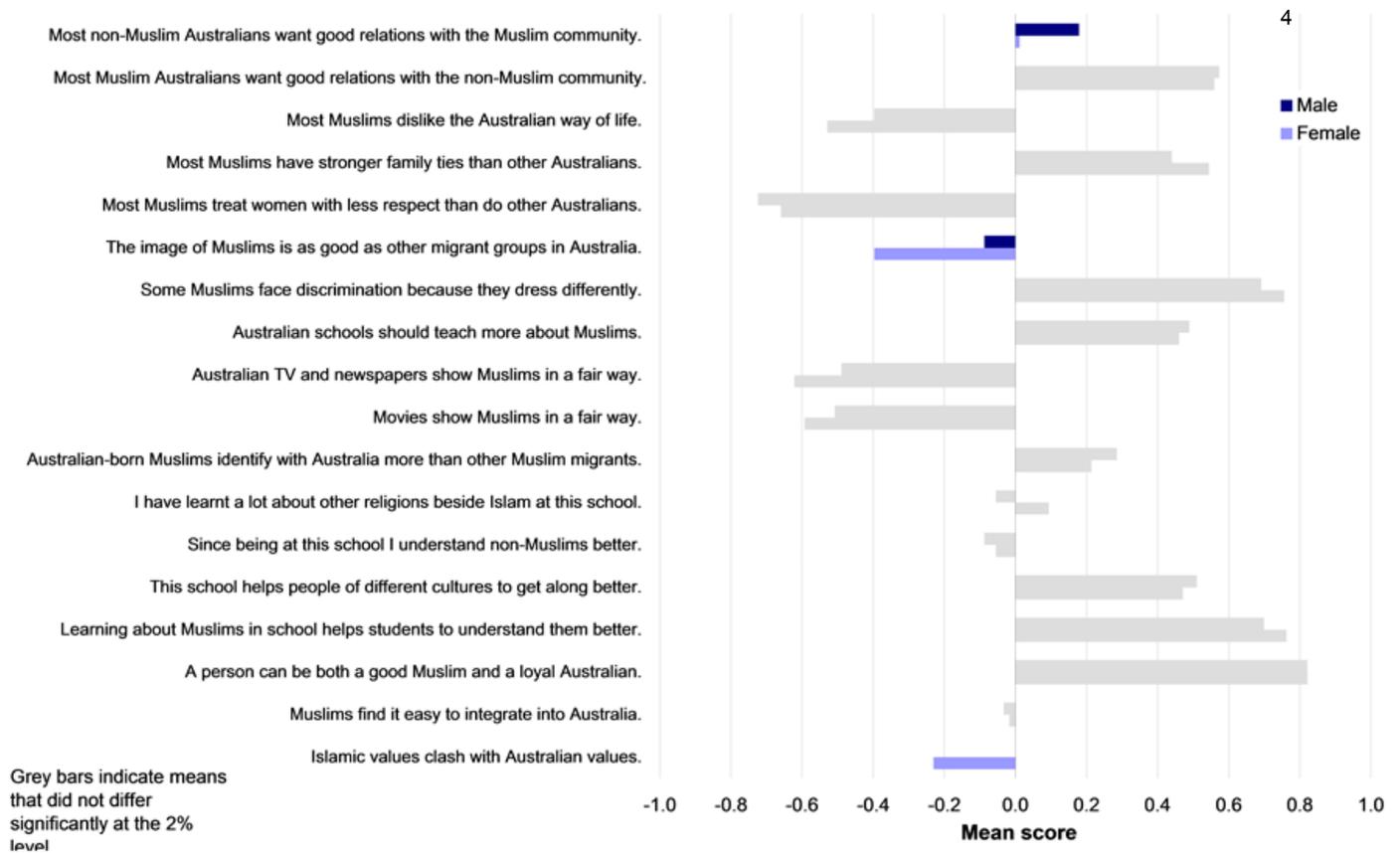
### Gender differences

Boys and girls differed significantly on three out of 18 statements (*figure 2*). This contrasts with *The Companion Study*, which found that non-Muslim students boys and girls differed significantly on 16 out of 23 questions.

Boys agreed significantly more than girls with the proposition *Most non-Muslim Australians want good relations with the Muslim community*; and disagreed less with *The image of Muslims is as good as other migrant groups in Australia*. Unlike girls, who disagreed, boys were neutral on the proposition *Islamic values clash with Australian values*.

Boys agreed more, or disagreed less, than girls	Girls agreed more, or disagreed less, than boys
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most non-Muslim Australians want good relations with the Muslim community</li> <li>• The image of Muslims is as good as other migrant groups in Australia</li> <li>• Islamic values clash with Australian values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (None)</li> </ul>

**Figure 2:** Mean attitude scores, by sex



## The role of religion

Students who stated their religion as ‘Muslim’ differed significantly from those who stated ‘Other religion’ on seven out of 18 statements (figure.2). The ‘Other’ group appear to on the whole unsympathetic and critical of Muslims. For example, they thought Muslims were portrayed fairly in the media; the ‘Muslim’ group did not. And they disagreed with proposition *Most Muslim Australians want good relations with the non-Muslim community*.

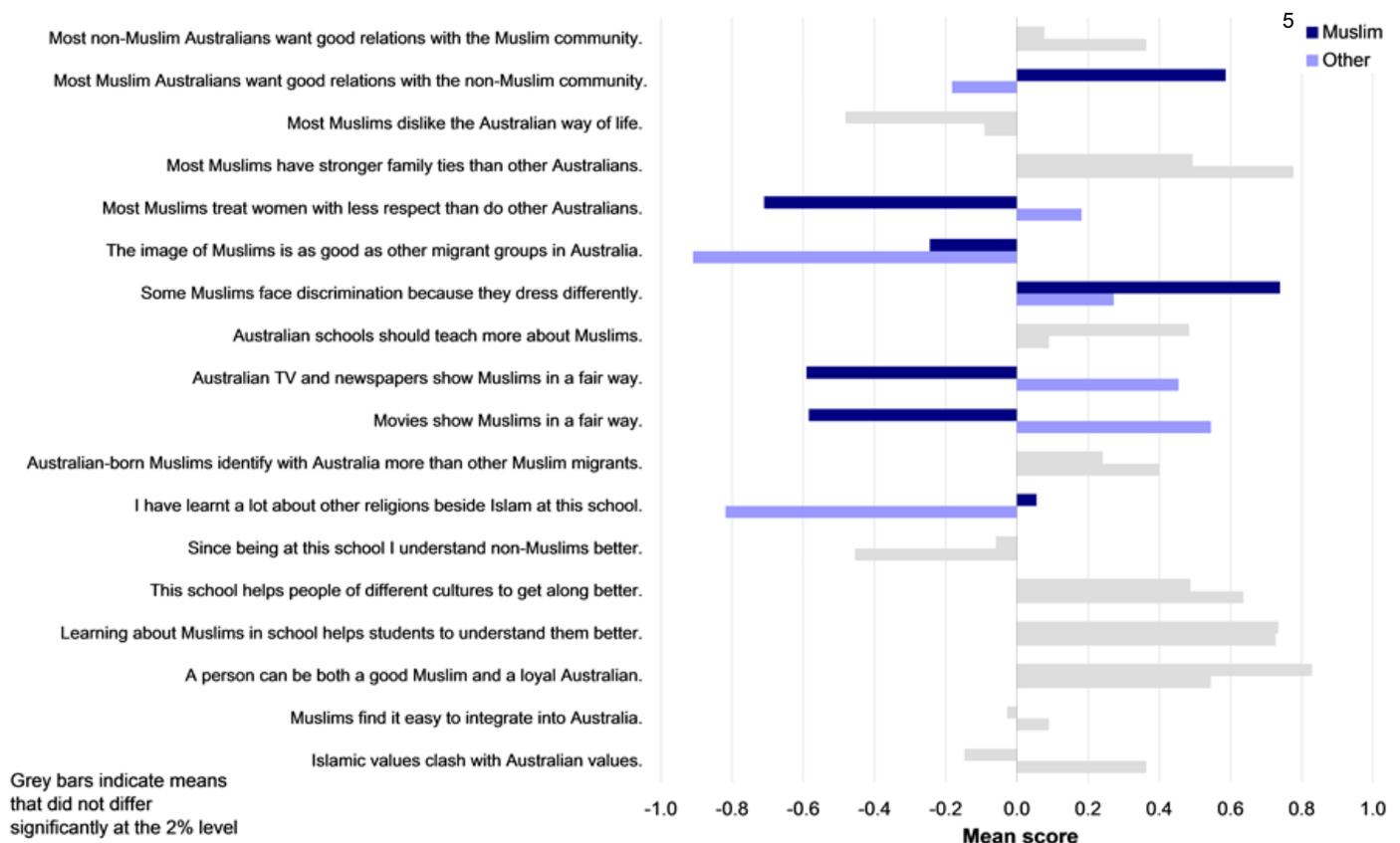
Although significant in a statistical sense, it should be noted that the differences are based on a very small sample of students claiming ‘Other’ religion (11 persons). The findings must therefore be interpreted with caution. Moreover, they come from respondents in quite unusual circumstances: a religious (or non-religious) minority at overtly religious schools. It might be that all their responses, including their claim to a religion other than Islam, are motivated by another factor altogether—a pervading rebelliousness to authority, perhaps.

‘Muslims’ agreed more, or disagreed less, than the ‘Other’ group	The ‘Other’ group agreed more, or disagreed less, than Muslims
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most Muslim Australians want good relations with the non-Muslim community</li> <li>• The image of Muslims is as good as other migrant groups in Australia</li> <li>• Some Muslims face discrimination because they dress differently</li> <li>• I have learnt a lot about other religions beside Islam at this school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most Muslims treat women with less respect than do other Australians</li> <li>• Australian TV and newspapers show Muslims in a fair way</li> <li>• Movies show Muslims in a fair way</li> </ul>

Respondents were presented with 18 statements concerning subjective attitudes towards Islam and Muslims and asked to rate their agreement on a three-point scale of ‘Agree’ through ‘Neutral’ to ‘Disagree’.

On many questions between a third and a half of the sample was neutral, indicating that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (figure 1). This could signify honest ignorance of the issues or alternatively lack of motivation. Interestingly, the proportion of neutral responses was less than that of non-Muslims to comparable (and in some cases identical) questions concerning Islam and Muslims (‘the companion study of non-Muslims’). This suggests that Muslim students are either more informed about, or more motivated to comment on the position of Muslims in Australia than are non-Muslims—understandably so, as they are commenting on their own community, not someone else’s.

**Figure 3:** Mean attitude scores, by religion



### Does the religion of one’s friends make a difference?

Those with mostly Muslim friends differed significantly from those with mostly non-Muslim friends (though not significantly from those with a balance from both communities) on four out of 18 statements.

Not surprisingly, those with mostly Muslim friends held more empathetic attitudes towards Muslims than did those with mostly non-Muslim friends (though we are naturally not in a position distinguish cause and effect on this evidence alone). Most noticeable is the divergence of views on how Muslims are portrayed by the media: those with mostly non-Muslim friends say fairly; those with mostly Muslim friends demur.

Those with mostly Muslim friends agreed more, or disagreed less, than others	Those with mostly non-Muslim friends agreed more, or disagreed less, than others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some Muslims face discrimination because they dress differently</li> <li>I have learnt a lot about other religions beside Islam at this school</li> <li>Since being at this school I understand non-Muslims better</li> <li>A person can be both a good Muslim and a loyal Australian</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most Muslims treat women with less respect than do other Australians</li> <li>Australian TV and newspapers show Muslims in a fair way</li> <li>Movies show Muslims in a fair way</li> </ul>

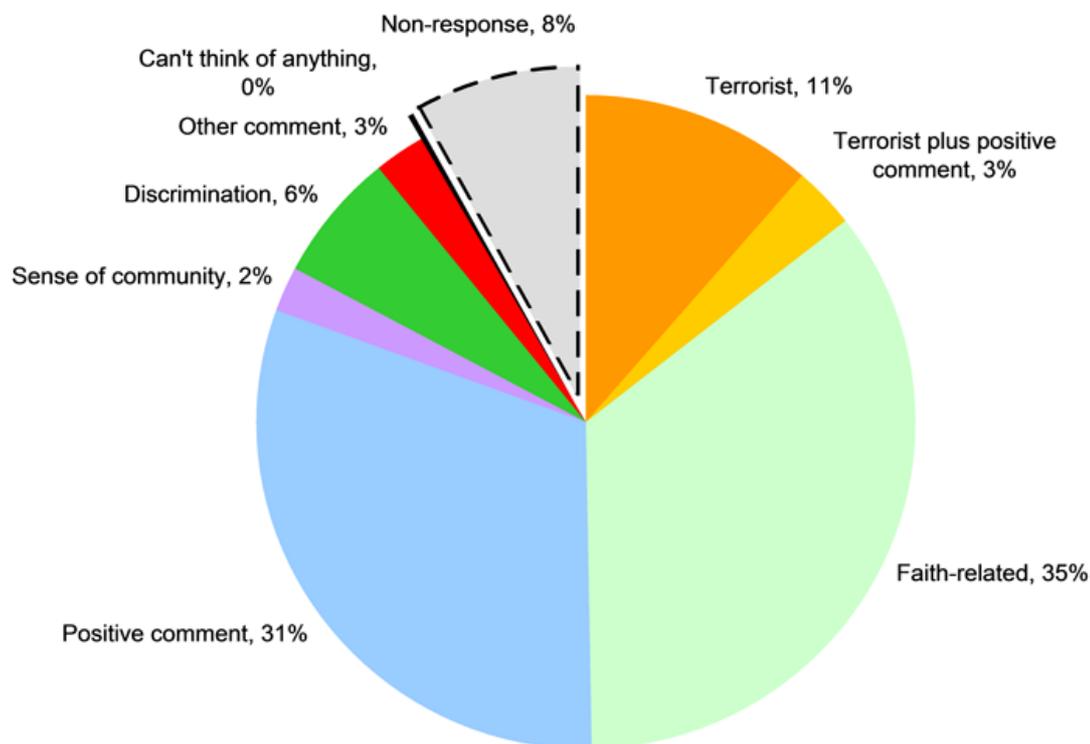
### Open-ended questions concerning Muslims

Two open-ended questions were put to respondents and the answers coded into a manageable number of categories as shown below. Naturally this entailed a degree of subjective judgment.

#### What are the first words that come to your mind ... when you hear the word ‘Muslim’?

When asked for the first words that come {to} mind when the word Muslim is mentioned, roughly a third of the respondents (35%) offered comments that were faith-related including ‘religious’, ‘pious to Allah’, ‘Prophet Muhammad’ and “Islam”. Another 31% offered positive comments alluding to being trustworthy, reliable, defending their religion without any fear, and being true to their tradition and community. Words indicating ‘terrorism’, ‘terrorizing’ and ‘terrorist’ comprised 11% of the response; and these in combination with another positive comment including ‘being dedicated to their cause’ registered 3% of the responses. Only 6% mentioned discrimination, and 3% gave comments of little or no relevance including ‘apathy of the media and everyone’; 8% gave no response.

Figure 4: Words associated with the mention of the word ‘Muslim’



Response to *What are the first words that come to your mind when you hear the word 'Muslim'?*

**Note:** Apparent errors in addition are due to rounding

*N* = 431 (inc. non-response)

**Selected responses to *What are the first words that come to your mind when you hear the word 'Muslim'?***

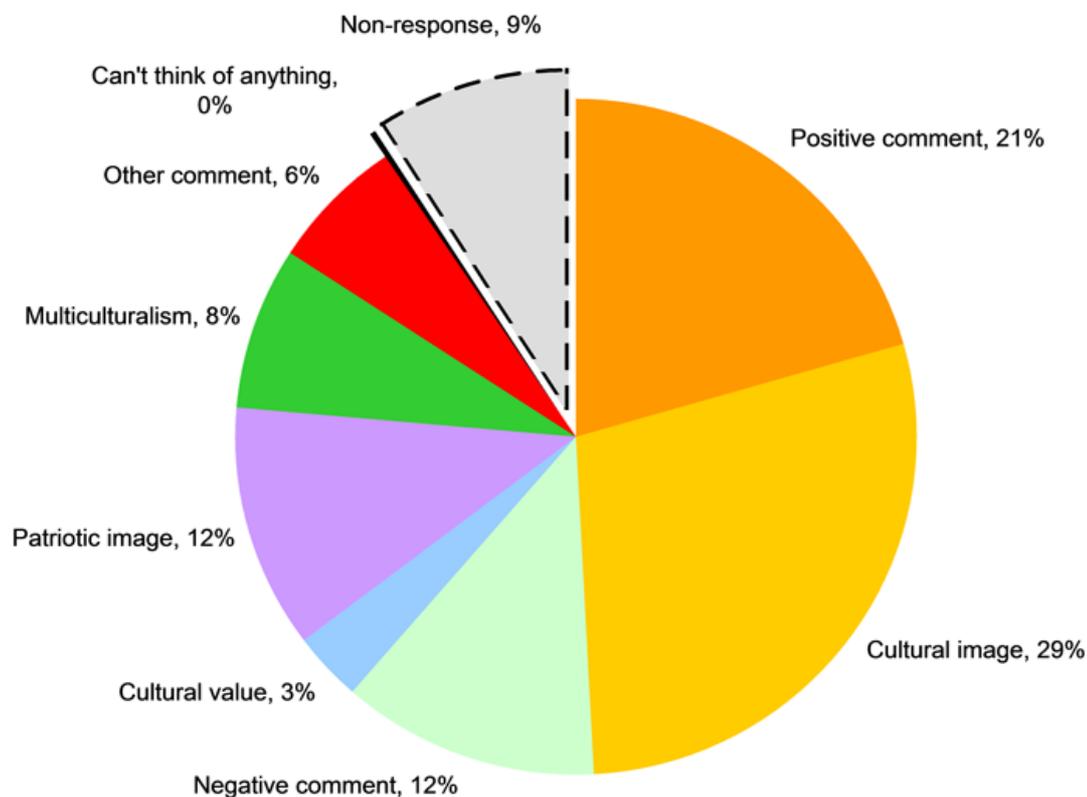
*I know it is wrong to say but terrorist on newspapers – articles, there has been signs of saying No to them.*

**Note:** All quotes are verbatim

**What are the first words that come to your mind... when you hear the word 'Australian'?**

When asked for the first words that come {to} mind when the word Australian is mentioned, just under one third (29%) offered neutral or negative comments specifically relating to cultural images or symbols including the words *Cronulla, bogan, boogan, beer, drugs, the bush, Howard, Christian, blonds, fags, pussies, gay, cricket, Freckles, BBQ and thongs*. About 21% offered positive qualities including *peaceful, cultured, nice, easy going, O. K people and freedom*. A smaller group (8%) referred to multiculturalism; 12% referred to patriotic qualities including *Australia my country, I am born in Australia*; 3% referred to culture based values including *a fair go and mateship*. One in ten (!2%) offered generalized negative comments including *being lost, confused, dickheads, rednecks, hostile, arrogant, greedy, , non-believers and racist*. About one respondent in eleven (9%) offered no response.

**Figure 5:** Words associated with the mention of the word 'Australian'



Response to *What are the first words that come to your mind when you hear the word 'Australian'?*

**Note:** Apparent errors in addition are due to rounding  $N = 431$  (inc. non-response)

**Selected responses to 'What are the first words that come to your mind when you hear the word Australian?'**

*People that try to make a better community and people who just laze around with a VB can in their hand.*

*I seriously think of alcohol...but I also think of hard working people and kind people.*

*Homeland, Australian flag?*

*People with beers in their hand watching footy*

*Dirty people and drinking and drugs*

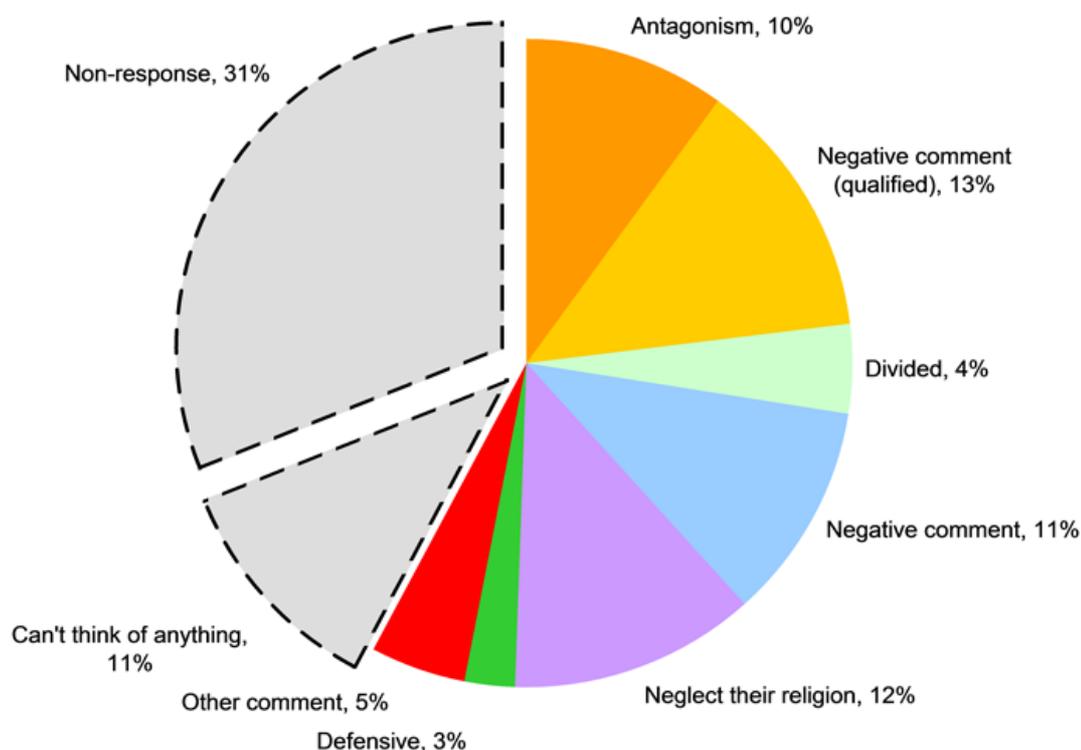
*Fear, because I have the fear of being Abused for being a muslim.*

*Australian's are European people who think of Jesus to be son of God which is impossible, and are fairly good people.*

**Note:** All quotes are verbatim

**What do you like most about non-Muslim Australians?**

**Figure 6:** Features most liked about Australia and Australians



Response to *What do you like most about non-Muslim Australians?*

**Note:** Apparent errors in addition are due to rounding

*N* = 431 (inc. non-response)

#### **Selected responses to *What do you like most about non-Muslim Australians?***

*Their curiosity to always try and learn about others.*

*Their struggle in asking a question to muslims about religion.*

*I like hoe its not obvious what religion non-Muslims came from.*

*How they seem so interested about Islam.. and how they are fascinated when they discover the truth.*

*They are underestimating most of them and are good to get advice from.*

*Some of them are nice but other judge muslims Australians by what they see in the media.*

*They want to live in a country that is multi-cultural and everyone is treated the same*

*The general non-Muslim Australian community are extremely gentle and understand that Muslims are not 'terrorists' and its just a "media story".*

*Some are friendly – They know how to have fun without getting into trouble.*

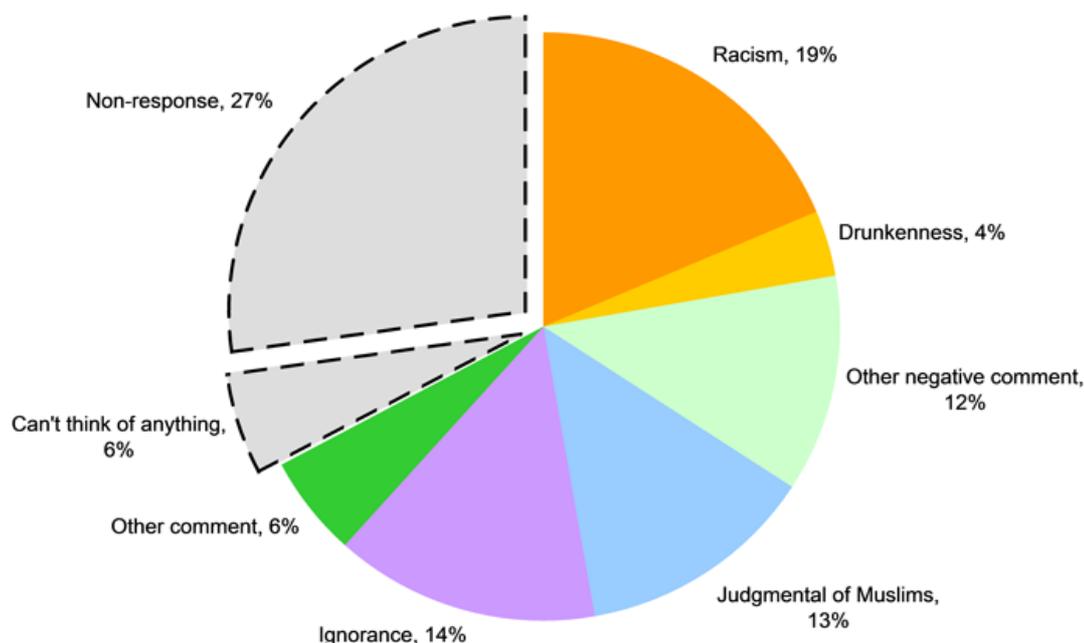
*They want to know the truth but they do not have the initiative to seek the truth.*

**Note:** All quotes are verbatim

#### **What are the first words that come to your mind ... when you hear the word non-Muslim Australians?**

When asked about what they like least about non Muslim Australians roughly 1 out of 3 (27%) gave a no response; whilst 6% could not think of anything – a significantly smaller percentage than that in the previous finding. Racism drew the next highest response (19%); 'other negative comment' including meaningless life, disrespectful, selfish too relaxed, overreact, denigrating our clothes, and abusive consisted 12%; being judgmental of Muslims drew 13%; and ignorance 14%; other comment including they don't drive good cars like us in Lebanon, freedom of women, complain a lot, because they are pigs drew only 6%.

**Figure 7:** Features least liked about Australia and Australians



### Response to *What do you like least about non-Muslim Australians?*

**Note:** Apparent errors in addition are due to rounding  
*N = 431 (inc. non-response)*

#### Selected responses to *What do you like least about non-Muslim Australians?*

*They can underestimate us.*

*They are racist and have a grudge inside them against Muslims some of them show it while others force it inside.*

*Sometimes they can be very hostile to muslims..*

*I don't like non-Muslim Australians because they think that Australia is only for Aussie.*

*How they are rude and do not care who is next to them and use course language.*

*It takes ages to break the ice.*

*Some of them drink too much*

*Disrespect for muslim, isolate muslim, call muslim girls weird names because of the scarf. Harrase Muslims.*

*Their treatment of women*

*They don't go out of their way to learn about Muslims*

*I like to learn more about all Moslims + non Muslim. To love each other not dislike each other.*

*The way they eat is funny with the knife and forks. Its weird.*

*Their judgemental nature towards muslims even though they have never seen/spoke to a muslim before.*

*They are ignorant, this causes stereotyping and prejudice.*

*They think they're free and liberated but are too blind to see that they're still controlled by society.*

*They generally do not have a clear and valid understanding and education about Islam. Media plays a large roll in brain washing Australian public into unnecessary fears of the 'unknown'. Eg – the boogy man, Usama bin ladin. By the way Americans still proved it was him who was the mind behind Sep.11.*

## Conclusions

This, and an earlier survey of non Muslim schools ‘The Companion study’ , show that many students have little or no knowledge about the historical roots of clash, contradictions and dialogue between faiths, or about avenues towards cooperation and integration between members of the various religious communities. The casual links between knowledge of, and attitudes towards Christianity and mainstream Australia. Is there a casual link, and if so, which way does it rub? The survey found considerable lack of knowledge of Christianity; almost half of the students recorded a ‘don’t know’ response of all questions; and, for example, only 17% correctly disagreed with the statement “Jesus wrote the Bible”. Indeed, a significant percentage of students from the two DIAC funded national surveys in Muslim and non Muslim schools believed that their image of ‘the other’ was greatly influenced by what they read and hear in the media. Content analysis of a random sample of both the Muslim and Australia press revealed the extent and influence of stereotyping on the perception of students.

There are clearly grounds for this belief. Because in most Islamic countries the mass media is controlled, the question of why Australian television does not help change the negative image and dispense with some honest remains a moot one. The perception that local television is market oriented and is not a free medium to educate the public but is dedicated to the perpetuation of social structure remains strong

When asked what they liked most about non-Muslim Australians roughly half (46%) offered positive comments (compared with 31% regarding Muslim Australians). These include phrases such as ‘*solidarity and uniqueness*’, *smile back, relaxed life, caring, even handed, not judgmental, enjoy life, don’t act mean, down to earth and kind*. (Noteworthy none of these comments were offered to Muslim Australians possibly because of difference in the hierarchy of values). Some 17% gave mixed comments including: “*Some are nice but other judge Muslims Australians by what they see in the media*”; ‘*some are friendly – they know how to have fun without getting into trouble*’. Another 5% offered ‘other comment’ including *look nice; Sheilas, their accent, world soccer, care for nature, their food, and dressing well*.

When asked about what they like least about Muslim Australians roughly 2 out of 5 (42%) gave a no response (31%) or could not think of anything (11%). Some 10% alluded to antagonism offering comments including: *they live on the government; they don’t mix, don’t give Aussies a chance; give Australia a bad name, don’t blend; and feel superior*. Another 11% offered negative comments including *violent; narrow minded, quarrelsome, give a bad image, make mistakes, don’t obey the law, greedy, arrogant in public, opportunistic, and, their attitude*. In contrast 13% gave “qualified” negative comments including *some are sexist, many are not modest, a few are religious, a few are lazy*. The response relating to ‘*defensive*’ drew 3%, and ‘*neglecting their religion*’ 12%.

Clearly much work is needed to bring about a remedy. Providing awareness sessions to students and parents which address critical social, religious and cultural issues including: stereotyping and inclusivity; freedom of expression and the media; sexual permissiveness and conservativeness; secular and religious identity; individual and community basic rights; social justice and foreign policy is one of several measures to take.

Another is to explore how Muslim schools promote intercultural understanding. The survey found that students were equally divided on statements that their school teaches them.

Exploring the casual link between social distance from, and attitudes towards, Islam and Muslims is another step to take. It was found that at the level of ‘close friend’ the non-Muslims were more accepting of non-Muslims than were the non-Muslims of Muslims; but at the level of ‘marry’ the situation was reversed. This is a significant discovery and warrants further investigation.

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Abe W. Ata was born in Bethlehem. He graduated in social psychology at the American University of Beirut and was soon nominated as a delegate to the United Nations' World Youth Assembly in New York . He gained his doctorate at the University of Melbourne in 1980 and has since been teaching and researching at several Australian, American, Palestinian and Danish universities.. His publications span 115 journal articles and 17 books including *The West Bank Palestinian Family* (London 1996); *Education Integration Challenges: the case of Australian Muslims* (Jan.2013); *Us and Them* (Australian Academic Press 2010) which was nominated for the Prime Minister Book Awards in 2009. He was nominated as Australian of the Year in 2015 and 2011.

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[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra, 2001.