

Fasting, Faith and Flexibility: Supporting Muslim students and staff during Ramadan in higher education

By Dr Shames Maskeen

Foreword

My own experience of working with numerous UK Universities over the past twenty years or so, is that the senior executive leaders in these institutions are committed to developing and evolving a mission that fosters diversity, inclusivity, respect and well-being among a diverse group of students and staff.

One specific key area of diversity that UK Higher Education (HE) providers need to thoroughly engage with is the observance of different religious practices, including (the focus of this resource) Ramadan, which is a sacred month observed by Muslims worldwide. Ramadan is a time of fasting, reflection, prayer and community. It is not only a spiritual journey but also an opportunity for individuals to strengthen their connection with faith, family and culture.

But what I have found during my own work with the sector is that how Universities engage with different religious practice is not without its challenges. Higher education providers attempt to navigate and articulate the complex sets of issues around religious practices. There can sometimes be an understandable institutional “nervousness” when non-Muslim staff talk about the needs of Muslim students and staff with a fear of getting things wrong or causing unintended offence.

That is why this resource, produced by Dr Shames Maskeen, is so important and timely for the sector. Dr Maskeen has co-designed a compellingly short, accessible and digestible resource that is designed to demystify Ramadan in HE.

Written primarily for non-Muslim staff who are working in UK HE, this guide skilfully unpacks the complexities of supporting Muslim students and staff during Ramadan, providing guidance on how to ensure they feel respected, valued and empowered to engage fully in both their academic and professional lives. This guide provides practical, inclusive strategies that universities can implement to promote understanding and create a supportive environment for all.

I truly hope that all Universities in the UK will engage with this important guide and ask themselves the question: **“What can we do better to support staff and students during Ramadan?”**.

Professor Malcolm J. Todd
Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor
University College of Estate Management

Preface

This guide is a practical resource for higher education (HE) institutions to support Muslim students and staff during Ramadan. While most Muslims will not require any specific adjustments, some may appreciate small but meaningful changes to create more equitable experiences in HE. It is the little things that make the big difference. This guide is not designed to be prescriptive, nor does it claim to speak on the behalf of all Muslims. There are after all two billion Muslims worldwide with varying cultural beliefs and religious practices. Therefore, HE institutions should apply this guide to their own context and listen to the needs of their own Muslim students and staff.

For many years I have had well-intentioned colleagues and peers who have sought to be inclusive of my religious beliefs but have lacked the knowledge or resources to do so effectively. Many are curious but often hesitant, afraid of saying the wrong thing or causing offence. Some genuinely want to support Muslim students and staff but often do not know where to start. At the same time, colleagues and students have shared their frustrations with microaggressions (everyday racism) which significantly increase during Ramadan including against those perceived to be Muslim, alongside a broader lack of institutional understanding.

However, I have also been inspired by the work of colleagues, students and institutions that have taken meaningful steps to support their Muslim community. Here I would like to acknowledge the work of the Leeds Trinity Students' Union Islamic Society, Bradford College, University of Huddersfield and the Go Higher West Yorkshire Race Equity Network that have helped developed the thinking behind this guide. I have personally experienced colleagues, line management and students who have been proactive in accommodating my needs during Ramadan, offering flexibility and small thoughtful gestures that have made a real difference.

This guide which is grounded in lived experience has been co-designed with Muslims and non-Muslims across the higher education sector to share best practice.

Ramadan Mubarak (blessed Ramadan),
Dr Shames Maskeen

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Glossary

Many of the terms below are frequently used when discussing fasting, prayer and religious observance. Whether you are a university staff member, colleague or student looking to learn more, this section serves as a helpful reference for key concepts related to Islam, Ramadan and Eid.

Asr [as-ser] – The afternoon prayer

As-salamu alaykum [as-sa-lah-mu ah-lay-kum] – “Peace be upon you”

Duah [Doo-ah] – Supplication prayer made to Allah

Dhuhur [Duh-her] – The midday prayer

Eid al-Adha [Eed al-ad-ha] – Celebration marking the culmination of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca

Eid al-Fitr [Eed al-Fit-er] – Celebration marking the end of Ramadan, observed with communal prayers, festive meals and charity

Eid Mubarak [Eed Moo-baa-rak] – A common greeting during Eid celebrations, meaning “Blessed Eid”

Fajr [Fah-jr] – The dawn prayer

Five Pillars of Islam – The core tenets of Islamic faith: **Shahadah** (Faith), **Salah** (Prayer), **Zakat** (Charity), **Sawm** (Fasting) and **Hajj** (Pilgrimage)

Hajj [Haj] – The pilgrimage to Mecca, required once in a lifetime for those who are financially and physically able

Halal [Ha-lah] – Permissible according to Islamic laws

Haram [Ha-ram] – Forbidden or prohibited in Islam

Iftar [If-tar] – The meal to break the fast at sunset

Inshallah [In-shaa-Allah] – Meaning "If Allah wills," used to express hope for future events

Isha [Ee-sha] – The night prayer

Laylat al-Qadr [Lay-lat al-Ka-dr] – The Night of Power, one of the holiest nights in Ramadan

Lunar calendar – The Islamic calendar, which follows moon cycles, causing Ramadan to shift approximately 10-11 days earlier each year

Maghrib [Mag-rib] – The sunset prayer, performed at Iftar

Mashallah [Ma-shaa-Allah] – An expression of appreciation, meaning "What Allah has willed"

Glossary continued

Qur'an [Kur-aan] – The holy book of Islam, the word of Allah as revealed to Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him)

Ramadan [Ra-ma-dan] – The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, observed by fasting from dawn to sunset

Ramadan Kareem [Ra-ma-dan Ka-reem] – A greeting meaning “Generous Ramadan”, often used interchangeably with Ramadan Mubarak

Ramadan Mubarak [Ra-ma-dan Moo-baa-rak] – A greeting meaning “Blessed Ramadan”, used to wish someone well during the holy month

Salah [Sa-laah] – The five daily prayers observed by Muslims

Sawm [Saw-m] – The act of fasting from dawn to sunset during Ramadan, abstaining from food, drink and other physical needs

Shahadah [Sha-haa-dah] – The Islamic declaration of faith: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger

Suhoor [Su-hoor] – The pre-dawn meal before beginning the fast

Taraweeh [Ta-ra-wee-h] – Special nightly prayers performed during Ramadan, typically in congregation

Zakat [Za-kaat] – Obligatory charity, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, requiring Muslims to give a portion of their wealth to those in need

Zakat al-Fitr [Za-kaat al-Fit-er] – A charitable donation given before Eid al-Fitr to ensure those in need can partake in the celebrations

Oh, you who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, [so] that you may learn piety and righteousness - (Surat Baqarah, 2:183).

Introduction to Ramadan

What is Ramadan?

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, one of the five pillars of Islam and is considered the holiest month in Islam. It is during this month that the first verses of the Qur'an (Holy book) were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him).

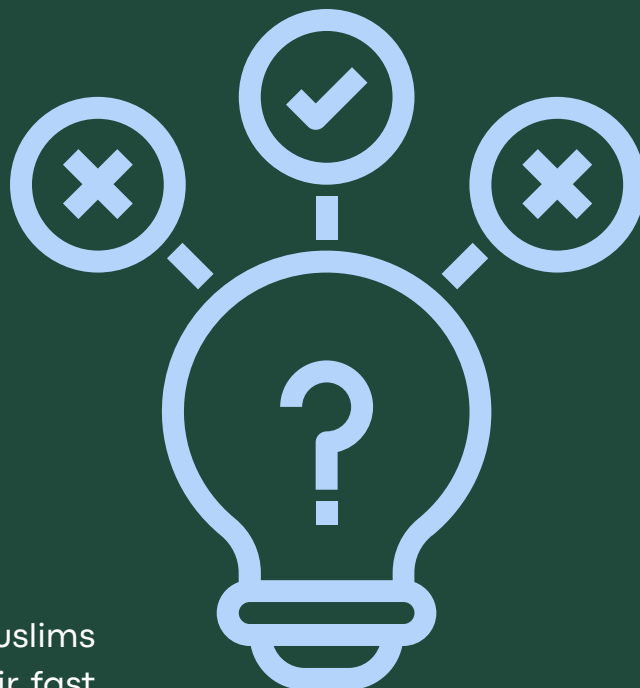
The Five Pillars of Islam are the fundamental principles that form the foundation of a Muslim's faith and practice:

- 1 Shahadah (**Faith**) – The declaration of faith: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger"
- 2 Salah (**Prayer**) – Performing five daily prayers at designated times: **Fajr** (dawn), **Dhuhr** (midday), **Asr** (afternoon), **Maghrib** (sunset) and **Isha** (night)
- 3 Zakat (**Charity**) – Giving a portion of one's wealth (usually 2.5% of savings) to those in need
- 4 Sawm (**Fasting**) – Observing fasting during the month of Ramadan
- 5 Hajj (**Pilgrimage**) – Performing the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime if financially and physically able

Who observes Ramadan and key practices

- An estimated two billion Muslims worldwide refrain from food, drink, smoking and other physical needs from **dawn to sunset** as an act of worship and self-discipline
- Fasting also entails spiritual discipline, avoiding negative behaviours such as gossiping, lying and anger
- It is a time for self-reflection, prayer and increased devotion
- Ramadan lasts for approximately **29–30 days**, culminating in Eid al-Fitr, a major celebration marking the end of fasting
- Muslims during this month tend to pray in congregation and open their fast with family and friends
- The following are exempt: prepubertal children, the elderly, women who are menstruating, pregnant or breastfeeding, those travelling long distances and people experiencing mental and physical health problems

Common assumptions and misconceptions about Ramadan



“Muslims fast all day and night”

- Fasting is only from dawn to sunset Muslims eat before dawn (Suhoor) and break their fast at sunset (Iftar)

“Fasting is only about food and drink”

- While abstaining from food and drink is a key aspect, fasting also includes refraining from negative behaviours like gossiping, arguing or being impatient as well as smoking and vaping

“Muslims can drink water while fasting”

- No food or drink is consumed at all (yes, not even water) from dawn (Suhoor) to sunset (Iftar)

“Muslims will be too tired to work or study”

- While energy levels fluctuate, most Muslims adapt to fasting and continue with their daily tasks
- Flexibility and small adjustments in schedules can help but productivity does not necessarily decline

“Fasting is unhealthy”

- Some assume fasting is harmful but research shows health benefits like improved metabolism, detoxification and insulin regulation
- Many continue exercising, though they may adjust their schedule

“All Muslims must fast”

- Prepubertal children, the elderly, women who are menstruating, pregnant or breastfeeding, those travelling long distances and people experiencing mental and physical health problems are exempt

“Ramadan is the same date every year”

- The Islamic calendar follows the lunar cycle, so Ramadan shifts approximately 10-11 days earlier each year

HEALTH

By giving the digestive system a break, fasting can support gut health and regulate digestion

Fasting improves insulin sensitivity, helping to maintain balanced blood sugar levels

The body enters a self-cleansing mode, eliminating toxins and decreasing inflammation

The body burns stored fat for energy, thus aiding weight loss

Healthline (2023)

SOCIAL

Shared meals at Suhoor and Iftar strengthen relationships and creates a sense of connectedness

Experiencing hunger increases empathy for those in need, leading to more charitable giving and acts of kindness

BENEFITS OF FASTING



MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The discipline required for fasting helps individuals gain control over cravings, reducing reliance on unhealthy foods, smoking or excessive screen time

With structured mealtimes and reduced distractions, many find they can organise their day more effectively leading to improved time management and productivity

The focus on spirituality and self-reflection allows individuals to reconnect with their goals and values

SPIRITUAL

Increased prayer, recitation of the Quran and reflection bring a deeper sense of spirituality

Fasting encourages self-control, patience and gratitude, leading to inner growth

Ramadan month serves as a reminder to seek forgiveness, show kindness and appreciate blessings

A day in the life of a Muslim Student/Staff during Ramadan



Understanding what a typical day looks like for fasting students and staff can help universities, colleagues and peers provide better support. This section explores the key moments in a fasting person's day, highlighting how energy levels fluctuate, when prayers take place and how institutions can accommodate these needs. Prayer times change daily throughout Ramadan based on the shifting sunrise and sunset times and it is important to also account for the hour change when daylight saving time begins.

Dawn

- Wake up before dawn (often around 4-5 AM) for **Suhoor** (meal eaten before dawn)
- Perform **Fajr (dawn) prayer** before beginning the fast
- May choose to go back to sleep or start the working day



Morning

- Attend lectures, seminars or work
- Maintain concentration despite fasting with energy levels often stable in the morning
- **Dhuhr (midday) prayer** and may leave lectures to pray either on campus (if facilities provided) or at a local mosque



Afternoon

- Energy levels may start to decline in the afternoon
- **Asr (afternoon) prayer**
- May choose to take a power nap



A day in the life of a Muslim Student/Staff during Ramadan



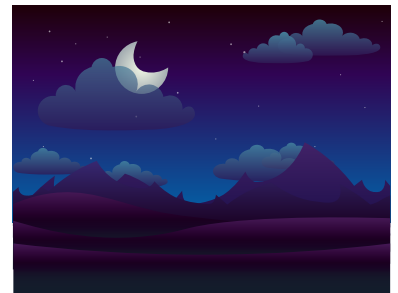
Evening

- Just before sunset, prepare for **Iftar** (break fast) with **Maghrib (sunset) prayer**
- Traditional foods like dates and water are usually consumed first, followed by a more substantial meal
- May gather for communal Iftar events on campus or in local mosques
- *With sunset around 5:40-6pm in early March 2025, consider finishing sessions earlier to support those breaking their fast*



Night

- **Isha (night) prayer** follows the evening meal
- Many participate in **Taraweeh**, an extended nightly prayer during Ramadan
- Some may take advantage of the night time hours to complete assignments, study or work duties
- Others prioritise rest, knowing they will wake up early for Suhoor



“Ramadan is my favourite time of the year. It’s a time to break old habits, create new ones, get closer to your religion, and create memorable experiences with friends and family. During Ramadan, I have a closer bond to Allah and feel as though I am more disciplined. My favourite part of Ramadan is the feeling of togetherness between the community, and how we all collaborate to better ourselves” – Staff Member, Huddersfield Students’ Union

Recommendations for universities to support Muslim students during Ramadan

The following recommendations can help universities, university staff members, colleagues or students accommodate fasting students while increasing a sense of connectedness and wellbeing.

1. Raising awareness leading to and during Ramadan

- Publish an announcement about Ramadan on the intranet page and include a PowerPoint slide for use in lectures and digital displays to raise awareness and outline the support available for students observing Ramadan
- Email academic staff with prayer timetables and infographics about Ramadan
- Ensure that Ramadan is recognised in institutional calendars
- Universities can run awareness campaigns, organise training sessions and invite Muslim scholars to discuss Ramadan including practices, how to support those fasting and how to make events more inclusive
- Recognise that not all Muslim staff will be fasting due to personal or health-related reasons
- Run initiatives such as asking 'What does Ramadan mean to you?', setting up educational displays and showcasing books by Muslim authors in the library



2. Inclusive events and wellbeing

- Provide dates (fruit) at open days and university events for attendees to take away
- Provide hotel accommodation for student ambassadors the night before events to minimise long travel on the day
- Organise alternative activities during lunch breaks like games
- Avoid major university events if possible, networking receptions or food-centric gatherings during Ramadan to ensure fasting students can participate fully
- Universities can host Iftar gatherings and wellness initiatives during Ramadan
- Greater collaboration between Universities and Student Unions to actively support Islamic societies initiatives
- Signpost students to wellbeing services and personal tutor support for extension and mitigating circumstances
- Be respectfully curious by having conversations with your Muslim students about their needs during this month



Recommendations for universities to support Muslim students during Ramadan

3. Access to food and facilities

- Ensure University cafeterias and food outlets remain open later to accommodate Iftar and open early enough for Suhoor
- Students living on campus should have access to facilities for preparing pre-dawn and evening meals at their accommodations
- Offer subsidised or free Suhoor and Iftar halal meals in light of the cost-of-living crisis
- Promote food banks and hardship funds
- Host Suhoor and Iftar events on campus
- Extend access hours for key spaces such as libraries, study spaces and prayer rooms, to support fasting students who may prefer to study or pray late in the evening
- Plan ahead for bank holidays and term breaks to ensure that essential services such as food provision, prayer rooms and study spaces remain accessible where possible or communicate any planned closures well in advance



4. Learning, teaching and assessment considerations

- Schedule exams with fasting in mind
- Offer all students the option to choose how they will be assessed during Ramadan
- Consider offering flexible assessment deadlines and extensions to be accepted automatically
- Announce at the start of teaching that students can step out of lectures for prayer, ensuring they are not penalised for religious observance
- If possible, accommodate lecture breaks to coincide with prayer times
- Providing lecture recordings can help students who may struggle with fatigue
- Encourage staff to be understanding of students who may require small adjustments
- Authorised absences for Muslim students celebrating Eid so attendance record not adversely affected
- Develop religious and belief policies inclusive of student and staff



Recommendations for universities to support Muslim staff during Ramadan

This section provides practical recommendations on how universities, line managers and colleagues can support Muslim staff during Ramadan.

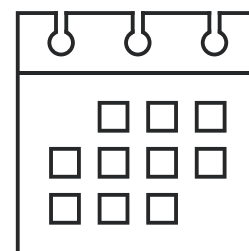
1. Flexible working arrangements

- Offer flexible start and finish times to accommodate altered sleep patterns and daily routines
- Allow staff to work remotely or adjust break times where possible to help manage fasting and energy levels
- Be open to temporary workload adjustments if needed, particularly for physically demanding roles



2. Considerate meetings and events

- Avoid scheduling long or intensive meetings, training sessions or workshops
- Ensure that meetings are not scheduled during prayer times. As prayer times vary, staff can refer to local prayer timetables
- Offer recorded sessions or flexible deadlines where possible for those who may need adjustments
- Be understanding if staff need to step away briefly for prayers during meetings
- Avoid organising work events or socials that are heavily food-focussed during fasting hours
- If food is provided in meetings, be mindful that fasting staff may prefer to take food away for later

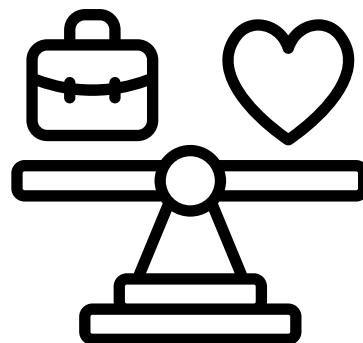


“Ramadan to me is a time of reflection. Every year I look forward to this holy month as an opportunity to develop self-discipline and gratitude during this month. This month also brings a sense of harmony and togetherness within all Muslims around us as we rejoice in this blessed month and offer our prayers and fast together. It’s a great time for me as I live far from home, and it makes me feel closer to my community” – Student Staff Member, Huddersfield Students’ Union

Recommendations for universities to support Muslim staff during Ramadan

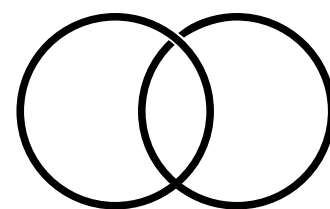
3. Supporting wellbeing and work-life balance

- Acknowledge that fasting, altered sleep and increased religious commitments may affect concentration and stamina
- Encourage staff to take regular breaks and utilise annual leave if they need additional rest
- Allow staff who have accrued time off in lieu to use this during Ramadan
- Offer mental health and wellbeing support, ensuring that resources are accessible and inclusive
- Recognise that not all Muslim staff will be fasting due to personal or health-related reasons
- Be respectfully curious by having conversations with your Muslim staff about their needs during this month and educate yourself on Ramadan practices
- Consider offering subsidised or free Iftar halal meals or access to kitchen facilities for Muslim staff if working late



4. Embedding religious equity

- Raise awareness about Ramadan through internal communications, workshops, events and team meetings
- Establish male and female Muslim pastoral advisors
- Acknowledge Eid al-Fitr as an important celebration by sending out a message of recognition or allowing flexibility in leave requests
- Support requests for time off around Eid al-Fitr, an important celebration marking the end of Ramadan
- Offer an additional two days of annual leave for all staff which Muslim staff can use to take off Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adah



Celebrating Eid

What is Eid?

Eid is a significant Islamic celebration that marks the end of key religious observances. There are two main Eid festivals in Islam:

1. **Eid al-Fitr (Festival of Breaking the Fast)** is celebrated at the end of Ramadan, marking the completion of a month of fasting and lasts for three days
2. **Eid al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifice)** approximately 69-70 days after Eid al-Fitr coincides with the completion of Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca and is observed for four days



* The exact date of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha is determined by the sighting of the moon and religious practices. Thus, it is important to acknowledge that Muslims may celebrate Eid on different days.

Key Practices

- Eid al-Fitr begins with a visit to the mosque in the morning on the first day of Eid
- Muslims give Zakat al-Fitr (charitable donation) before the Eid prayer to ensure that the less fortunate can also celebrate
- Traditional greeting includes "Eid Mubarak" (Blessed Eid)
- Muslims wear new or their best clothes
- Festive meals are enjoyed with traditional sweets and dishes varying across cultures
- Eid is a time of forgiveness, strengthening bonds and spreading joy through visiting family/friends, exchanging gifts or Eidi (money)

How can universities celebrate Eid?

For many students living on campus, especially international students, celebrating Eid can feel isolating as they are away from their families and familiar traditions. Some staff may be working on Eid. Therefore, here are some recommendations for universities to celebrate Eid:

- Organise a free or subsidised Eid meal on campus and invite all students and staff to join Eid celebrations
- Consider two day celebrations to accommodate Muslims celebrating Eid on different days
- Provide traditional Eid sweets and treats like baklava, dates and samosas
- Display Eid themed decorations such as banners and balloons and feature 'Eid Mubarak' messages on digital screens
- Organise a games night, quiz or storytelling session to bring students and staff together

Resources

This section includes a selection of resources to support universities in creating a more inclusive environment during Ramadan.

General information on Ramadan

- Ramadan guidance – [University of Leeds](#)
- What is Ramadan and When is Ramadan 2025? – [Islamic Relief UK](#)
- Ramadan Timetable 2025 – [Islamic Relief UK](#)
- A beginner’s guide to Ramadan infographic - [Cultural Mixology](#)
- The Big Iftar - [Bradford College](#)

University policies and guidance

- Religion and Belief Policy and Guidance – [University of Huddersfield](#)
- Learning, teaching and assessment - [University College London](#)
- Ramadan: Communications Toolkit - [Bradford District and Craven](#)
- Ramadan | A Guide to Religious Observances – [Brandeis University](#)

Supporting Muslim students and staff in higher education generally

- Mahmud, A., & Islam, M. (Eds.) (2025). Uncovering Islamophobia in Higher Education: Supporting the Success of Muslim Students and Staff. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-65253-0>
- Maskeen, S., Matthews, J., Smith, D. M., Stain, H. J., & Webster, Lisa. A. D. (2021). Higher education as the pathway to personal and community success for Pakistani and Bangladeshi people: A systematic review. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 27(6), 853–874. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2021.1997976>

Help us improve this guide and share best practices

If you have any resources, policies, case studies, or feedback, please take a few moments to [complete this form](#). Your insights will help us create a more inclusive and supportive environment in higher education.

We appreciate your contributions and value your expertise!



About the author

Dr Shames Maskeen is the Associate Director of The Race Institute and Senior Lecturer in Psychology specialising in widening participation, intersectionality and cultural change. He was the driving force in Leeds Trinity University becoming the first University in Yorkshire to achieve the Race Equality Charter Bronze award and the establishment of The Race Institute. His research focusses on tackling racial inequities and the intersections of class, culture, religion and gender experienced by racialised minorities in Higher Education and beyond. Dedicated to anti-racist leadership, he focusses on turning theory into action to create an equitable future for young people.



Shames is a member of the Born in Bradford's Centre for Applied Education Research group, Co-Chairs the Race Equity Network at Go Higher West Yorkshire, is an Associate for Race Equality at Advance HE and member of the Secure Date Environment Group. More recently, he has led on the development of a joint webinar series "The call for transformational, courageous anti-racist leadership in higher education" with Universities UK.

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