

UWS Latest News

UWS Muslim student forum to urge greater tolerance

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A leading expert is calling on Australian universities to adopt a uniform approach to the way they address the specific challenges facing our Muslim student populations.

Former Australian Human Rights Commissioner and now Director of Equity and Diversity at the University of Western Sydney, Dr Sev Ozdowski, is convenor of the nation's first-ever Muslim student conference being held in Parramatta today and tomorrow.

Called "Access, Inclusion and Success: Muslim students at Australian universities", the conference explores what Australian educational institutions can do to support Muslim students so they can get the most out of their university studies.

The conference is bringing together over 150 representatives from across government, universities, the Muslim community, TAFE and high schools, students groups and support services as well as overseas educational providers and agencies.

"University is the great social equaliser - it's our best instrument for ensuring upward mobility and social integration in our communities," says Dr Ozdowski.

"It's important that all people, including those from Muslim backgrounds, have the ability to fully participate in higher education so they can gain good employment and strengthen their place in society.

"Just like many Australian students, some Muslim students may come from poor backgrounds and they may be the first person in their family to attend university.

"These students may face specific challenges or concerns, like new technologies or gaps in their education, and it's important that our universities and education providers are able to support them in a practical and balanced way."

Dr Ozdowski says UWS is best-placed to provide leadership on the issue, as it has the largest number of Muslim students of any Australian university, and is situated in Greater Western Sydney - one of the nation's fastest-growing and culturally-diverse regions.

"Currently there's no one model or blueprint to guide Australia's universities on how they can best address the varied cultural, ethnic and religious needs of their diverse student populations," says Dr Ozdowski.

"By bringing together scholars, students, politicians, and members of the

community, we are beginning this important discussion about the unique issues facing Muslim students and creating national standards that all universities can follow.

"We need to ensure access and inclusiveness in our tertiary institutions; strengthen policies to combat discrimination and prejudice; develop young Muslim leaders; and make our universities the catalyst for positive change in the wider Australian population.

"We also need to address the practical realities that Muslim students face every day - such as providing prayer space and cafeteria food that is halal - to ensure university campuses are welcoming of all cultures and faiths."

Dr Ozdowski believes the higher education sector's approach to these challenges is key to ensuring a positive way forward for the wider Australian community.

"It is in the long-term interest of Australia to keep access to education open to all groups in society, including young people from families with no prior university experience and those who experience disadvantage or ethnic or religious minority status," he says.

"I see this as a good first step in laying the foundation for a pathway towards greater intercultural tolerance and understanding."

Just some of the speakers at the conference include:

Senator Marise Payne, Liberal Senator for New South Wales

Mr Laurie Ferguson MP, Federal Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs

Senator Andrew Bartlett, Democrat Senator for Queensland

Patrick Dodson, former Chair, Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation

Professor Gary Bouma, UNESCO Chair in Inter-religious and Intercultural relations - Asia Pacific, Monash University

Dr Mohamad Abdalla, Founding Director, Griffith Islamic Research Unit, Griffith University, and Co-Director of the Australian National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies

Ms Silma Ihram, Secretary General, The Australian Council for Islamic Education in Schools

Where: Crowne Plaza Hotel, Parramatta

When: Monday, September 3 - Tuesday, September 4

Time: Begins at 9am

Download conference program: www.uws.edu.au/muslimconference

Ends

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