

## £1m pledge for Islamic studies in UK

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Prime Minister Tony Blair has announced £1 million pounds in funding to back Islam and Islamic studies at British universities.

The government hopes the funding will lead to a major shift of the focus of Islamic studies from an Arab and Middle Eastern perspective to that of the plural society in Britain.

Blair told imams, scholars and clerics at a two-day conference in London that British Muslims "overwhelmingly" wanted to be "loyal citizens," despite attention given to a small number of radicals.

"Around the world today there is a new and urgent impetus being given to promulgating the true voices of Islam," Blair said.

The money is to be used to support recommendations of a report by Islamic scholar Ataullah Siddiqui that was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills.

Universities UK, an organisation of vice chancellors at Britain's universities, immediately criticised the fund, denouncing it as meddling on the part of the government. The academics said they should decide on any changes to their own courses.

"All academic programs, including Islamic studies, are carefully developed and constructed as part of higher education institutions' quality procedures," Drummond Bone, president of the organisation, said in a statement.

In his last tour of Britain, Blair's speech is the latest effort to prevent violent extremism in the name of Islam and to improve community cohesion among Britain's 2 million Muslims.