

Report of meeting on European Muslim take-up of youth exchange opportunities

London, December 2009

On December 10, 2009, the British Council brought together around twenty people involved in exchange programmes, local government, academics and a wide range of Muslim organisations to help the British Council to explore whether Muslim take-up in youth exchanges is lower than it should be; if so, what the reasons are; and how possible obstacles might be removed. The purpose of the meeting was not to resolve these issues but to design a research programme that might identify solutions across Europe. Participants were mainly British, but included representatives from Belgium and the Netherlands.

Martin Rose, Director of Our Shared Europe, introduced the subject. He said the project had been set up over the last two years. Based in Western Europe, it was an attempt to address the growing sense of distance between Muslims and non-Muslims across Europe. He indicated two things that the project was not. It was not a counter-terrorist or security project. Neither was it a faith project. It was a project about culture and it started from the view that no healthy society should tolerate the kind of divisions we had seen, and the activity that those divisions brought. The project's objective was to demonstrate over its five-year life that Muslims are an integral part of Europe's past, present and future.

There was a research project taking place with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue which was looking at the way in which Muslims consume media across Europe. Work was being carried out in education and the arts – the cinema in particular. The current meeting was concerned with youth mobility and youth exchange. This was because if we look at the experience of Europe in the 20th century, probably the single most effective piece of cultural relations work had been the enormous movement of young people. It was about familiarity and knowledge. If we were going to do anything serious about the misunderstandings and the gaps in our understanding of ourselves as European people, then we are going to have to encourage movement in that area.

The project started with the presumption that there is an under take-up in some communities in youth exchange work; that it may be that Muslim communities have particular reasons for a low involvement in some of the programmes, though much may be going on below the more official. The project aimed to test whether there is an under-involvement. Once that was established, it would then be useful to look at why that might be and what an appropriate organisation or coalition might do to remove some of those obstacles.

One participant feared that if the project is pursued as “cultural” rather than “religious”, then Muslims were being asked to discard the religious component of their identity. Martin Rose clarified his remarks, saying that the British Council did not run “faith projects” as such; but, equally, it never imposed secularity on its projects. It worked well with faith groups and recognised the crucial importance of trust relationships, many of which are within faith contexts.

Gordon Blakely, policy advisor, British Council, said that the British Council wanted to address is the appropriateness of what is available to young people. The aim was to find out if:

- there are groups of young people who are not participating when an opportunity is being created which is open to all
- there are specific reasons for their non-participation
- there are other reasons about the opportunity that is being offered to young people that perhaps have not been examined fully and explored with the young people themselves
- there are gatekeepers/barriers, between the young people’s participation and the communities in which they live.

Following these introductory statements, participants discussed a series of questions.

1. Is it true that Muslim youth is under-represented? If so, why – and does it matter?

The discussion elicited a number of points:

- There was widespread agreement that Muslim youth was under-represented in exchange programmes, and that this did matter. Nobody at the meeting challenged these points.
- One participant argued that girls tended to take part in such programmes even less than boys. Family pressures may be at work: young Muslim women took part in good numbers in exchange programmes *within* the Muslim community, but not programmes that brought them into contact with non-Muslims.
- Another participant endorsed this analysis and felt that some parents were reluctant to support daughters, in particular, taking part in such programmes unless they could be convinced of the exchanges’ educational value.
- Other participants considered experiences in other countries. One said the under-representation of Muslims did not apply in Belgium, where Muslim youth are more involved in such programmes than Belgian youth.
- The overall pattern in Holland was reported to be more like the UK than Belgium, but the reason lay less with whether youngsters were Muslim *per se*, than

whether they came from a poor, low education background. The real issues were class and language more than religion or ethnicity, although the limitations of many immigrant families' social networks also contribute to the problem. In the Netherlands the one exchange-programme organisation able to reach successfully into the Muslim community was Islamic Relief

- The UK might have a specific problem. Exchange programmes here tend to be restricted to 18-25 year-olds. Countries that admit older people, say up to 30, tend to have more success in attracting Muslim participants. Egypt, Indonesia and Pakistan were cited as countries with significant numbers of Muslim participants.
- The under-representation of UK Muslims in exchange programmes reflected a wider issue, with too few Muslims taking part in many activities that affect society at large, such as climate change.
- One source of the problem might be the nature of the exchange programmes themselves. When one group was taken to look at the history of Islam in Spain, Muslim youngsters were well represented.
- Parents' attitudes are vital. They need to be persuaded that an exchange programme will help their son or daughter. Sometimes the approach should be made not by their child's teacher but by another young person. Some parents need persuading that an exchange visit to another European country will not corrupt their child's values.
- Perceptions of the institution organising exchanges matter. Institutions are more likely to succeed in attracting young Muslims if they have worked to establish a positive reputation with Muslim communities.
- It is important to avoid a patronising approach that is seen to distinguish between "good" Muslims and "bad" Muslims, or "moderate" and "militant" Muslims.
- Islam has distinctive values, for example concerning family life, that need to be understood. It also has specific traditions, including religious traditions, that should be respected, and not regarded as outmoded. Part of the problem is a failure by non-Muslims to appreciate this, with the result that many parents are reluctant to entrust their child to the care of a non-Muslim organisation. Exchange organisations need to get the basics right – such as making sure that halal food and prayer facilities are available. At the same time, it should be recognised that the Muslim world itself is diverse; it should not be regarded as monolithic.
- Exchange organisations should work through local communities that local Muslim families respect. If national organisations simply parachute in, they risk being distrusted. Such distrust should not be confused with an unwillingness among Muslim parents to allow their children to mix with non-Muslims. In the right conditions (including information about the financial costs/support involved) this need not be a significant issue.

2. What are the barriers to overcoming participation?

Gordon Blakely referred to the European Commission's use of the term 'intermediaries'. Should their role be reconsidered?

In the ensuing discussion the following points were made:

- Local Muslim opinion-formers could be important intermediaries. These were the individuals whom parents would turn to if their child came home asking if they can take part in a particular project. They should be the starting point.
- If an exchange programme is perceived as having under-participation from specific groups, it must be sold like a product. To do that, you have to understand your market. The "product" must be sold on the basis of trust. If trust can be established, non-Muslims can reach into Muslim communities: Muslim intermediaries are not always needed
- We must not make "trust" sound too easy. Building trust is a long-term process that involves careful relationship-building.
- The British Council ought to be trusted, but can suffer in some eyes because it works with governments that are not democratic. This provokes suspicion in some quarters about the Council's true motives.
- One lesson from Belgium is that a more open discussion is needed about engaging Muslims from different backgrounds in action programmes at different levels; specific discussions about exchange programmes should be set in a far wider context of involvement in changing society.
- One reason for the success of Islamic Relief is that it does much of its work in Palestine.
- We should not underestimate the hostile political climate that Muslims generally face in Britain today. Relationships across communities are often very fragile – and that applies across Europe, not just to the UK.

3. What can be done to overcome the barriers?

Participants were invited to complete the sentence: Wouldn't it be nice if...? These were some of the responses:

Wouldn't it be nice...

... if more information was out there to target and reach Muslim people.

... if there was a lack of interest in Muslim youth, in a positive way, for much of the attention these days is negative.

... if more resources went into targeting recruitment at young Muslim people but also at other young disadvantaged people in the UK

... if anybody who is wants to involve Muslims around Europe really meets their needs with a passion

... if the key Muslim imams were involved, to design the programme and ask the mosques and others, where 60% of young Muslims frequently visit, to assist in recruiting and retaining and sustaining them.

... if all young people could feel respected and valued, and adults feel less frightened of young people, as many do today.

The role of imams and mosques provoked disagreement among participants. A supporter of their involvement noted how young Muslims in East London took part in a campaign on climate change as a result of encouragement by a local imam. Such imams can be vital, and constructive, intermediaries. At a practical level, mosques have places to meet; many youth clubs are now using them.

Other participants disagreed, on the grounds that imams will generally have their own theology, philosophy and agenda, which will not be the same as the British Council's. Alternative routes should be found into local communities. On the other hand, the British Council had an advantage in that it is a world-wide organisation, not confined to Britain.

It is important that the exchange organisations enjoyed a positive “brand” image in the communities where participants were sought. VSO was one such organisation.

Participants generally agreed that an informal map of Muslim youth activity, organisation, connections and networks was evolving; this needed to be understood better if more Muslims were to be involved in exchange programmes.

Participants gave various answers to the question, is there a single “we” covering the peoples of Europe? Fears were expressed that, while a single “we” was in principle a good idea, it would do more harm than good if it were defined in white/Christian terms – such as when the Swiss voted in a referendum to ban minarets. A more constructive, single “we” would have to embrace diversity.

One speaker argued that, even there is not a single European “we”, we should behave as if there is, in order to avoid fragmentation. This is because the only future that will work is a future that we consciously share.

4. How should a research programme be developed?

Joanna de Jong-Keogh stressed that one of the reasons for holding the meeting today is that she has felt unable to draw up a research group without input from people who have more insight into Muslim communities, particularly youth – young adults, looking at people from 18 onwards.

The following points were made in the discussion:

- Although everyone at the meeting agreed that Muslims were under-represented in exchange programme, we needed to go beyond anecdotal evidence and gather robust quantitative evidence.

- One way of doing the research might be to get the young people to do that research themselves, if at all possible. This is already planned for one programme shortly to take place.
- A number of participants suggested that much information was already available and that desk research should be able to track this down. There was a danger of “research exhaustion” among Muslims, who had been subject to a wide range of studies. Possible sources included Platform 21 and the Princes’ Trust. Other organisations, such as JobCentrePlus, and the Learning and Skills Council, Salvation Army, Working Links, Faith Regan Foundation, also have a significant knowledge base.
- However, one problem is that some existing research – including that funded by the EU – does not ask questions about ethnicity or religion. Such data is vital in order to assess the scale, and causes, of the problem.
- Although desk research might be able to demonstrate that there is a problem of Muslim under-representation, fresh research would be needed to establish how far this was
 - a religious/cultural/ethnic problem within the Muslim communities
 - a failure of exchange programmes to plan their programmes with sufficient sensitivity to Muslim participants
 - a consequence of a failure of exchange organisations to “sell” exchanges into the Muslim communities
 - a reflection other issues, to do with social class, parents’ language and income
- Fresh research should include schools and local colleges, which already have data that could be useful and which also tend to reach a broader spectrum of Muslim youngsters than, say, Mosques. Teachers often know who had been asked to go on exchange programmes and who had refused.
- Different research methods may be needed for different countries.
- Quantitative research was necessary to demonstrate the scale, and some of the causes, of the problem of Muslim under-representation, but qualitative, focus-group-style research would be needed to drill down into the underlying causes.
- One key group to question in depth was young Muslims who had been invited onto exchange programmes but had declined to take part. Their responses could be contrasted with those of Muslims who *had* taken part – and also with those of other disadvantaged, under-represented groups.
- It might help to broaden the inquiry to look at young-Muslim under-participation in society more generally; however some fears were expressed that too wide a research project might end up being too shallow to be of real use.

- It is important to tap into existing networks and existing institutions, especially faith-sensitive (as distinct from faith-based) groups.
- Once again, there was strong disagreement on whether Imams should be closely involved in the research project – in particular whether they could be useful allies in helping to reach a wide range of young Muslims, or whether they would seek to control the research process so closely as to invalidate the data gathered.
- There was some debate on whether the age-range to be studied should be 18-25, as the British Council proposed. Some participants felt that the age range should be 13-30, in line with European Union practice. In particular, by extending the research beyond 25 might help to reach Muslim women who were more likely to take part in exchange programmes in their late-twenties. Some participants felt that the starting age should remain at 18, because below that age different issues arose, to do with a duty-of-care to minors.
- Much of the research would have to be qualitative; but there had to be a sufficient quantitative element to allow the research to be replicated in five or ten years' time, to measure the direction and degree of any change.
- Research should include questioning intermediaries as well as participants (and non-participants) themselves. Detailed questioning of, say, a dozen teachers could help to inform the questions that should be put to young Muslims.

Peter Kellner, President of YouGov