



YOUNG MUSLIMS AND
YOUTH EXCHANGE
OPPORTUNITIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UK Youth Research Project

Our Shared Europe
British Council
June 2010

Supported by



CALOUSTE
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Introduction

The *Our Shared Europe*¹ project is a new British Council initiative that aims to develop mutual trust and understanding between Muslim and other communities within Europe. It also seeks to counter the rise in negative representations of Muslims that can thrive on a lack of understanding and knowledge. One of the activities of the project to meet these aims and objectives is a youth exchange² programme that will bring young Muslims together with other young people from the UK, Europe and worldwide. In collaboration with the *Global Xchange*³ programme, the aim is to deliver an equally accessible and inclusive multilateral youth exchange programme that will nurture international youth potential as well as mutual understanding between Muslim and other communities worldwide. This research was carried out between December 2009 and May 2010 in order to identify the barriers which may prevent young Muslims participating in youth exchange programmes and to consult with them about how to encourage their participation. The key findings are below. A detailed and comprehensive account of this research is provided by the full report.

Key results

- **Gender differentiation** - There are generally more obstacles for young Muslim women in terms of additional requirements, but young Muslim men are more affected by external issues such as the impact of terrorism.
- **Inclusion of parents** - Young Muslims are under parental care to an older age than youths of many other communities, so it important that their issues and anxieties are listened to and discussed face-to-face with the organisers in order to reassure them and gain their trust.

1 For more information, see the *Our Shared Europe* website: www.oursharedeurope.org. See also: Ehsan Masood (2008) *Our Shared Europe: Swapping Treasures, Sharing Losses, Celebrating Futures*. (British Council).

2 For the purpose of this research, the term 'youth exchange' refers to national or international activities which involve taking young people out of their own geographical area to meet with groups of young people from different backgrounds. For example, a group of young Muslim people participating in a joint voluntary activity with young non-Muslims in a different part of the UK or in a different country would be relevant. The research project defines 'youth' as all people between 18-25 years of age.

3 For more information on *Global Xchange*, see: www.globalxchange.org.uk

- **Trusted intermediaries** - The participation of young Muslims and the necessary consent of their parents can be best achieved by involving trusted intermediaries, including well-known figures of the local community, mosques, local youth groups and Muslim organisations. Such intermediaries are also very important for disseminating information to the most marginalised.
- **Islam and international travel** - Islam encourages the pursuit of knowledge, charity and the understanding of other faiths, so the participation of young Muslims and the agreement of their parents are more likely for programmes which reflect and clearly indicate such pursuits.

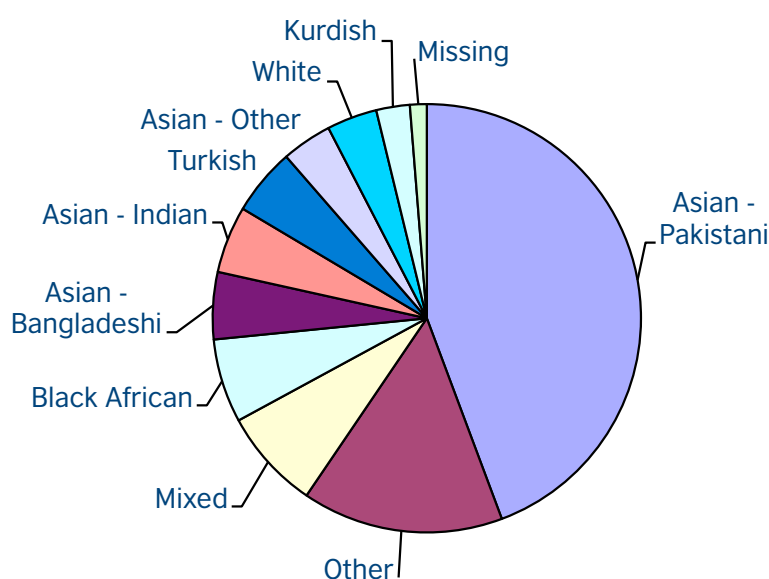
Methodology

The above aims and objectives were initially addressed through consultation with a group of experienced practitioners in December 2009. An additional objective was to develop a research methodology that could also be applied to other locations. The intention is for this research project to be applied across Europe after this initial UK-wide study.

It was decided to carry out focus groups with young Muslims facilitated by trusted, respected and well-known members of local Muslim communities. Focus groups were held in Muslim communities across the UK: Belfast, Bradford, Cardiff, Glasgow and London.

A total of 79⁴ young Muslims from these five cities participated in the study. Two cities in England were selected in order to draw from the north and the south of the country. The participants included young people in the age range 15 - 27, with the largest numbers being between 18 - 20 years old. There were approximately equal numbers of females and males, and they were selected from a broad range of ethnic groups, as illustrated below:

Figure 1 Ethnic origin of participants



⁴ An additional 9 overseas university students in Belfast participated in the discussion. Their details have been omitted from the quantitative data as they are likely to return to their countries of origin after their studies, however they made several comments which supported the main study and these have been drawn on in the qualitative section of the report.

Of the twelve participants who indicated the 'other' ethnic origin, 7 indicated Arab, or a mix of Arab with another ethnicity.

The majority of participants, 54 (68%), were either students at school, college or university. An additional 19 (24%) were employed and 3 (approximately 4%) were seeking work. Those employed were in a range of occupations including youth work, the health sector and community development.

Educational background to date included those with undergraduate degrees, higher 'A' levels or high secondary school certification. A small number were still studying for GCSEs or had no formal educational qualification. Other qualifications mentioned include a PGCE and a mentoring qualification.

Approximately a third, (27 people, 34%) had participated in a national youth exchange programme before, and 14 (under 20%) had previously participated in an international youth exchange.

Participants were asked to respond to a series of written questions, which then formed the basis of a discussion, before going into small discussion groups to discuss the issues in more detail.

Barriers

The key issues raised in the groups were:

- All focus groups confirmed that there were difficulties in accessing information, particularly *useful* information for young Muslims and their parents. The general consensus was that there was a lack of awareness of youth exchange programmes due to insufficient publicity. They argued that information was not reaching the most marginalised members of their community, and some participants had not even heard of such opportunities.
- Youth exchange programmes failed to include (or clearly communicate the inclusion of) the common requirements of young Muslims, including segregated sleeping and washing facilities for men and women, accommodation of prayer time, and halal or vegetarian food. Their participation would also be affected if programmes clashed with dates of religious significance such as Ramadan.
- It was generally agreed that there are many more obstacles for the participation of young Muslim women. Some of these issues are practical, rather than directly religious or cultural. These could refer to the activities involved, such as those which involve 'immodest' dress. If staying with another family, many women would also want to know how many males there were in the household and whether they would have their own personal space.
- Travelling on their own was problematic for many women, and some required a mahram.⁵ However, this varied from family to family, and most women said they

⁵ A mahram is a close male relative, such as a husband, father, brother, or son.

would be able to travel in youth exchange groups.

- Obstacles faced by young Muslim men related more to the impact of terrorism and the consequent public perceptions of them as security threats. Young Muslim men felt they were perceived as 'radical' if they had an 'Islamic' appearance or wore 'Islamic' clothing.
- Parental consent was a major issue raised by all groups. It was explained that young Muslims are under parental care to a much older age than many other communities, and parents were more likely to have traditional and conservative beliefs that would affect the participation of their children in youth exchanges. There was seen to be a cultural divide between Muslim parents and the 'British Asian culture' of many young Muslims.
- It was felt that some Muslim parents would not understand the benefits of youth exchanges, compared with conventional study, and would fail to appreciate the educational benefits of them. Exchanges that did not have a clear educational or charitable focus would not be seen as a valuable use of their time or money.
- It was also observed that university students were more likely to be able to participate, since they had already overcome some parental concerns and anxieties as a result of moving away from home to study.
- Some countries were perceived to be more problematic than others. In previous exchanges in some countries, men had tried to touch some of the young women. There are also parts of the world where it may be more dangerous for Muslims to visit, where they would be a vulnerable minority. In addition, exchanges may involve a country that has laws that conflict with the fundamental values of Muslims, and it was observed that certain countries in Europe were passing laws against Muslim dress, which made them feel they would be unwelcome there.
- Non-participation in certain activities, for example, the over-emphasis on 'going to the pub' amongst Western groups, was a further social burden, leading to an awkwardness, where they had to continually explain their faith, as well as a sense of guilt about being 'anti-social' and making the exchange a 'bit boring' for others.
- Cost and personal expense would be an obstacle for some individuals. It was viewed that exchanges were more likely to attract and include middle-class Muslims.

Suggestions to encourage participation

- Young Muslims are more likely to participate if the youth exchange has a clear educational or charitable focus, which reflects the teachings of Islam. Parents are therefore more likely to consent to such activities.
- Organisers of an exchange will need to make sure that participants have the opportunity and facilities to pray, and are reminded to do so at the right times. However, much flexibility was expressed about accommodating prayer and they said they did not want this to be made into a major issue.
- There needs to be facilities to wash before praying, although again, there was much flexibility. In locations without running water, the dust on the ground could be used instead of water.
- Although halal food was mentioned as a requirement, vegetarian food would be acceptable.
- Sleeping and washing facilities for young men and women should be completely separate. In general, on different floors or in different corridors would be acceptable, but separate buildings was a requirement of some. Other suggested solutions to the issue of male and female segregation were single-sex groups, or female-led and male-led sections of a larger group, however views differed, with most considering that a mixed group was better.
- Both parents and youth should be actively involved in the programme design, preferably identifying areas of interest, and then shaping the programme around them. Direct interaction with parents was needed so that they could put a face to the organisation or programme and ask any questions and discuss any anxieties or concerns.
- In terms of organisation, from the outset it helps if participants and parents have the opportunity to meet each other and get to know the staff members involved.
- Mechanisms of communication between parents and young people on the programme were important. Contact by e-mail or phone would aid 'a sense of security'.
- It was considered important to provide a clear programme structure and itinerary at an early stage of promoting the exchange.
- Youth exchange programmes should have "proper evidence, accreditation" and "something that you could really put solidly on you CV, to say that: 'I have participated in this programme'".
- It was suggested that there could be exchanges with Muslim countries, including, for example, visits to Mecca or Medina, not specifically for Hajj.⁶ However, others argued that exchanges should explore different cultures and faiths, as encouraged by Islam.

⁶ The Hajj is the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have emerged from analysis of the research findings.

- Collection of information about individual requirements as part of the application process.
- Information about youth exchanges must be clear about aims and objectives, the inclusion of the common requirements of young Muslims (as outlined above), as well as the financial costs involved. Educational and charitable aspects of the youth exchange should be emphasised.
- Development of a coherent and planned strategy for the promotion and dissemination of information material about youth exchanges, using intermediaries and social networking sites.
- Timing of youth exchange programmes to avoid clashing with major religious dates.
- Parents' events where parents could receive more information about the exchange face to face with the organisers as well as meet other parents and youths involved. Such activities could include presentations from previous participants on exchanges; exploration of Islam and international travel; as well as information about the aim, objectives and programme content.
- Inclusion of intermediaries in the organisation of exchanges and dissemination of information about them, through well known and respected figures and organisations of the local community, youth groups and Muslim organisations. These help build trust between parents and the organiser and provide a reassuring 'stamp' of approval of the exchange programme.
- Provision of an official and signed letter on headed paper to all participants, including their photo, for them to show to airport security in order to confirm the reason for their travel.
- Monitoring data on religion or belief categories in application, evaluation and scorecard processes. Benchmarking data to be sought.

Suggestions for further research

The following recommendations have emerged from analysis of the research findings.

- Examine the views and anxieties of the older generation of parents, and the interests of a younger group (up to age of 18).
- Explore the possibility of historical visits that would contribute to giving young Muslims and non-Muslims a sense of the contribution Muslims have made to European society.
- Study evaluation feedback from UK-based Muslim participants of OSE youth

exchanges to collect feedback on any barriers experienced and how to avoid them in the future.

- Research on class, culture and Islam.
- Examine the inclusion of other faiths and ethnic groups in youth exchange programmes.
- Draw on lessons learnt from the UK study for the comparative research in other European countries.

Spin-off

This research project has had the spin-off benefit of helping us to develop strong relations with marginalised Muslim communities across the UK. The participants appreciated that we had developed a research project specifically to help include them in our programmes and that we had taken the time and effort to come and see them, and listen to their opinions, in their own community. Such engagement also meant that this research actively addressed some of the barriers identified in the focus groups. These local communities are now more aware of exchange programme opportunities, as well as how the British Council is actively seeking to listen to them, respond to their individual interests, and incorporate their cultural and religious values.

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