



YOUNG MUSLIMS AND  
YOUTH EXCHANGE  
OPPORTUNITIES

UK Youth Research Project

Our Shared Europe  
British Council  
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*Supported by*



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# A comment on the research

This is a very important and worthwhile project. Muslims, deeply rooted in European histories (lest it be forgotten), are changing as they have done down the centuries. In so doing they are offering fresh syntheses for future social and cultural developments. This is illustrated vividly by the words of the young people from around the UK in this research. These 'home grown' young British Muslims from Belfast, Bradford, Cardiff, Glasgow and London are at the cutting edge of our ethnically and religiously plural society, and their comments offer striking insights into their dilemmas, hopes and expectations, as they talk about balancing the perceptions and guidance from their parents with the new opportunities offered to them in wider society. This research reflects the rich diversity of their experiences.

The British Council wants to develop 'mutual trust and understanding between Muslim communities and other communities both in Britain as well as across Europe'. Participation in the youth exchanges by these young Muslims and their peers, it is hoped, will contribute to the fruitful commingling of young people, their ideas and aspirations, and indeed the breaking down of barriers that is urgently required in order to achieve these praiseworthy goals.

There is a need in the UK and across Europe to establish social cohesion, to bring people closer to each other, to establish trust, to encourage the sharing and acceptance of core norms and values. The range of responses and views expressed by young Muslims on these important matters display the complexity of their lived experience - from those seeking commonalities on the basis of compatibility of their Muslim practice in the context of youth exchanges and international travel to those, often quite heavily influenced by their received traditions, who feel constrained in their desire to mix and travel.

How to embrace these contrasting needs and concerns in youth exchanges is undoubtedly challenging. On the one hand, there are ways in which these exchanges could and should develop which take genuine account of various forms of diversity. On the other, Muslims, for their part, in taking up the opportunities also need to consider and engage with different cultures and environments in a spirit of openness, tolerance and respect that enables the potential for mutual learning to flourish. It is this acceptance of mutuality that may go some way to developing the desired trust and understanding.

Professor Humayun Ansari, OBE  
*Professor of Islam and Cultural Diversity*

# 1. Introduction

The *Our Shared Europe*<sup>1</sup> 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. The key message of *Our Shared Europe* is that Muslims are an integral part of Europe's past, present and future (Rose, 2009). It thus seeks to develop more understanding and awareness of the many contributions that Muslims have made in European history and continue to make in present-day Europe and beyond. As such, *Our Shared Europe* is a project of intercultural dialogue and community cohesion, going to the very heart of the British Council's cultural relations mission.

One project activity to meet these aims and objectives is a youth exchange programme that will bring young Muslims together with other young people from the UK, Europe and worldwide.<sup>2</sup> In collaboration with the *Global Xchange*<sup>3</sup> programme, the aim is to deliver an equally accessible and inclusive multilateral youth exchange programme which will nurture international youth potential and mutual understanding between Muslim and other communities worldwide.

The first pilot exchange took place in 2009/10 and included 12 weeks in Sharkeya, Egypt and 12 weeks in Southwark, UK, and involved 24 young people from Bosnia, Egypt, Morocco, the Netherlands, Yemen and the UK. In order to maximise the impact of this pilot volunteer programme – on the participants themselves and on a wider audience – volunteers were provided with the skills and tools to produce powerful visual narratives. The intention is to link the visual narratives to the volunteers' personal learning journals, so that it becomes an integral part of their learning and development process. During their 6-month stay in Egypt and the UK, volunteers will submit their selected images and these will be shared with a wide audience by uploading them onto British Council in country, *Our Shared Europe* and *Global Xchange* websites.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.1 Research aims

This research project was designed to help implement the broader aims of the *Our Shared Europe* project, as outlined above and, in particular, to help inform the design and delivery of its multilateral youth exchange programme. The findings will also be valuable to other youth exchange programmes, both internal and external to the British Council, that seek to promote and improve inclusion and equal accessibility with regard to young Muslim participation.

Thus, the central objective of this research was to identify any issues that were faced by Muslim groups only. However, we also sought to design a

<sup>1</sup>For more information on *Our Shared Europe*, see: [www.oursharedeurope.org](http://www.oursharedeurope.org). See also: Masood, E. (2008) *Our Shared Europe: Swapping Treasures, Sharing Losses, Celebrating Futures*.

<sup>2</sup>For more information on this youth exchange programme, see: [www.oursharedeurope.org/global-xchange-2010](http://www.oursharedeurope.org/global-xchange-2010)

<sup>3</sup>For more information on Global Xchange, see: [www.globalxchange.org.uk](http://www.globalxchange.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup>Op. Cit.

research project that could be applied to other marginalised groups, and to youth in general. Indeed, we believe that the methodology, results and recommendations of this research have broader applications and implications.

An additional objective was to develop a research methodology that could also be applied to other locations and the intention is for this research project to be applied to other European countries after this initial UK-wide study.

## 1.2 Research context - why young Muslims?

During this research project, a question asked on several occasions - mostly by the young Muslim participants themselves - was “*why are you focussing only on young Muslims?*” The focus on *Muslims* reflects the broader aims of the *Our Shared Europe* project which, as explained above, is to develop mutual understanding between Muslims and other communities within Europe. It also seeks to address the continuing marginalisation of Muslims, for which there is much published evidence (Ansari, 2002; Modood et al, 1997, p.343). For example, Ansari observes in a report on the Muslim experience in Britain (Ansari, 2002, p.18) that:

Many British Muslims feel a mixture of resentment, anger and despair, and it is not surprising that a substantial number of them remain alienated from mainstream British society. Many of the circumstances that caused disaffection in the 1960s remain essentially unaltered.

We believe that the additional focus on *youth* can help us nurture a more shared future in Europe. This focus on youth is also justified when you consider the following:

- Over half of the 1.6 million Muslims in UK are under the age of 25 (Muslim Youth Helpline/National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, 2005, p. 4)
- Just under three-quarters of Bangladeshi and Pakistani children (73%) are living in households below the poverty line (60% of median income). This compares with under a third (31%) for children in all households (National Youth Agency)
- 31% of young British Muslims leave school with no qualifications compared to 15% of the total population (National Youth Agency)

There is substantial evidence of the socio-economic exclusion of Muslims.<sup>5</sup> There is also research published that identifies young Muslims as a marginalised and stigmatised group, and thus the aims of our project seek to address these concerns (Forward Thinking, 2008; Muslim Youth Helpline/National Council for Voluntary Youth Services). For example, the 2008 *Forward Thinking* UK report observed:

Muslim youth is often perceived as one of the most marginalised groups within society and the one most susceptible to radicalisation.<sup>6</sup> They have

<sup>5</sup>For UK Muslim community statistics, see for example the *National Youth Agency* website: [www.nya.org.uk/uk-muslim-community-statistics](http://www.nya.org.uk/uk-muslim-community-statistics)

<sup>6</sup>See ‘Research concerns’ below for a discussion of the ‘dual intention’ of helping Muslims and preventing terrorism which has led to much scepticism and criticism.

also been the group most deeply and directly affected by the increasing Islamophobia, and the least likely to be given a platform to express their views and concerns freely and openly. At the same time, it is important to encourage Muslim youth to come forward, join the ongoing debates and be given the chance to speak for themselves, respond to the accusations levelled against them, as well as be able to clarify contentious issues concerning their faith identity and religion. The failure to do so has already further marginalised and disenfranchised a large number of young people, and would significantly hinder efforts to build social cohesion. (Forward Thinking, 2008, p.7).

It is our view that a multilateral youth exchange programme would be a very effective way of including these marginalised young people in educational activities that would also provide them with an opportunity to interact with other local, national and international communities. This view is derived from the considerations of British Council staff, the participants of our initial research consultation meeting, as well as by the facilitators of our focus groups, who feel that the relatively low participation rate in youth exchanges is a reflection of this described marginalisation of young Muslims in our community. Thus, this research aims to help encourage their participation in youth exchanges by identifying the barriers that obstruct their involvement. In fact, by actively seeking to engage with them and listen to their views, we have already made an initial step towards this goal.

However, we acknowledge that the substantial evidence of the marginalisation of young Muslims does not *verify* the presumption that they are thus necessarily under-represented in youth exchange programmes. Although this perception is held by many involved in organising youth exchanges, both internal and external to the British Council, there is a lack of hard data to clearly substantiate this claim due to an absence of data collected on faith communities in project reports and evaluations, participant feedback evaluation forms and performance scorecards.

In a direct and positive attempt to extend the opportunities of participation on *International Youth Exchange* programmes to such socially excluded groups of young people, *Global Xchange* commissioned the Runnymede Trust to conduct research into engaging young people from socially excluded groups in international volunteering opportunities. The *Broader Horizons* report includes 'minority faith communities', more specifically 'Muslims', in addition to 'black and minority ethnic communities' and 'those not in education, employment or training' as initial focuses for their research. However, the broader aims of this research meant that the focus groups included a diverse range of young people, and it is not possible to isolate the barriers that relate to young Muslims exclusively. As for the other groups focused on in this research, it was considered that more research was required that specifically focused on the issues and barriers faced by young Muslims.

The recent evaluation report on the *EU Youth in Action Programme* in the UK (British Council, 2010) supports this view and the research focus of our project, observing a low participation of young Muslims in youth programmes:

... Concern has been expressed at the low level of uptake of the Programme particularly by Muslim groups. A small number of minority

groups have successfully applied for projects but it is not possible for us, from the data provided, to say whether they define themselves in terms of religion, ethnicity or culture. Not enough is known about the needs and interests of such groups, or how inclusive their own agendas are (this is bound to vary). Do the themes, priorities and policies of the Programme have any relevance to them, from their perspective? Are other funding sources more applicable to them, and easier to access? It is easy to make assumptions about these questions, but important not to do so.

... Further research is needed to understand the needs of minorities (e.g. ethnic or religious groups) and to find out if the Programme is relevant to them or whether other vehicles should be designed to meet their needs instead.

In the absence of hard data, verification of the necessity for such research was sought via an initial consultation meeting with experienced Muslim youth workers, youth exchange practitioners, academics, researchers and representatives from Muslim organisations. This consultation meeting is examined further below (see section 2.2).

We also acknowledge there is no current evidence that young Muslims participate less than other marginalised groups, and our concentration on young Muslims relates to the broader aims of the *Our Shared Europe* project and is thus a matter of focus, not of exclusivity.

### 1.3 Research concerns

As discussed in our research findings, the main reason why several of the participants frequently asked us “*why are you focussing only on young Muslims?*” reflected a common concern in the Muslim community that this research, as well as the *Our Shared Europe* project more broadly, may be linked to the ‘Prevent agenda’ of the UK Government.<sup>7</sup> Strategies to prevent the radicalisation of Muslims through community cohesion projects relating specifically to youth have led to much scepticism and criticism. These ‘dual intention’ strategies have been criticised for being counter-productive because they suggest a presumption that all Muslims are potential terrorists or radicals, and thereby serve to stigmatise and alienate them further. From the outset, we confirmed to the participants that this research related strictly to the longstanding British Council cultural relations mission.

Another consequence of such attention is a concern, raised both in the initial research consultation meeting and in the focus groups, that such unrequested attention would be counterproductive in terms of community cohesion because, first, it could lead to resentment from other marginalised groups, and second, because it tends to concentrate on what makes Muslims different to others. Furthermore, by asking Muslims questions on barriers and obstacles to their social inclusion, their responses are necessarily negative. Finally, the increased amount of social research *about them* rather than *by them* (i.e. about ‘what they do’ and ‘how they behave’,

described in the third person), could lead to a sense of being ‘ants under a microscope’ and thus, different to the rest of ‘us’. One participant asserted in the research consultation meeting that ‘[Muslims] are becoming tired of research. So many people have been going in asking questions ...’.

Another concern has been to avoid the common collapse of the very broad spectrum of individual differences into a homogenous category of ‘Muslim’. The research shows that the differences in values, interests and opinions amongst young Muslims is as wide as may be expected amongst any group of young people. They reflect diversity in religious belief from liberal to conservative, interpreting Islam and what it means to be a Muslim in their individual ways (Ansari, 2004, pp.392-394; Ramadan, 2010). By grouping individuals together as ‘Muslims’, there is a tendency to overlook the multiple identities of individuals. As such, there is a risk of ignoring other characteristics such as ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, age and geographical location. Muslims are not necessarily only interested in Islam, and by focussing on faith alone we reinforce the differences where they exist between them and other groups in the community. The *Youth Matters* report suggested that focussing on interfaith dialogue may have its limitations:

One participant suggested that the ‘reason why different [ethnic] groups don’t interact is because there is no need to, and it’s easier to hang out with people like you, who understand you and have no trouble relating to you’. When asked about how to overcome this, a number of people suggested that there should be activities for all ethnic and religious groups that were not specifically about inter-faith dialogue or stopping racism, but just about ‘treating people as equals and doing things together, as a community’ (Muslim Youth Helpline/ National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, 2005, p.7).

#### **1.4 What will be done with the research findings?**

As outlined below, the main aim of the research findings will be to inform the development of more accessible youth exchange programmes for the future. To this end, the recommendations of this research project will also inform the design of future research on this subject, both in the UK and across Europe.

#### **1.5 What do we mean by ‘youth exchange’?**

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.

## 1.6 What do we mean by ‘youth’?

In some programmes for young people, such as the British Council *International Climate Champions*<sup>8</sup>, the age group is between 11 and 35 years of age, and the 13-30 age group is common elsewhere in the European Union. However, in common with *Global Xchange*, *Youth in Action*<sup>9</sup>, *Youth for Development (YfD)*<sup>10</sup> and the *Our Shared Europe* youth exchanges, this research project defines ‘youth’ as all people between 18-25 years.

<sup>8</sup>For more information on *International Climate Change Champions*, see: [www.britishcouncil.org/usa-science-projects-climate-champions.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/usa-science-projects-climate-champions.htm)

<sup>9</sup>For more information on *Youth in Action*, see: [www.britishcouncil.org/youthinaction.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/youthinaction.htm)

<sup>10</sup>For more information on *Youth for Development (YfD)*, see: [www.vso.org.uk/volunteer/youth](http://www.vso.org.uk/volunteer/youth)

## 2. Research methodology

### 2.1 Aims

As discussed above, there is an assumption held by practitioners that young Muslims are under-represented in youth exchange programmes. However, there is an absence of hard data to substantiate this claim. Since evaluation processes tend not to collect data on the faith categories of their participants, or data that relates to religious or cultural differences, there is also a lack of data that identifies the existence of such barriers to participation. Thus, this research project was designed in order to address the following questions:

- To what extent is the common belief that Muslim communities are under-represented in youth exchanges true?
- If true, what barriers exist for Muslim participation?
- How best to remove those barriers to Muslim participation?

For the success and accessibility of future youth exchange programmes, such as those currently under development for the *Our Shared Europe* project, an additional objective was to ensure the values and interests of young Muslims were taken into consideration from the outset by including their contributions in the design of youth exchanges.

The above aims and objectives were initially addressed in considering how best to identify the most effective research methodology, and were then discussed and examined in consultation with a group of experienced practitioners.

### 2.2 Research consultation meeting

On 10th December 2009, a group of experienced Muslim youth workers, youth exchange practitioners, academics, researchers and representatives from Muslim organisations were brought together at the British Council headquarters in London. Participants were mainly from the UK, but also included representatives from Belgium, Egypt and the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup> The purpose of this meeting was to capture their opinions on these research questions and to consult with them about the design of the research programme.

Reflecting the aims of the research project, the following questions were discussed:

1. Is it true that Muslim youth is under-represented? If so, why – and does it matter?
2. What are the barriers to overcoming participation?
3. What can be done to overcome the barriers?
4. How should a research programme be developed?

The report from this meeting, written by the facilitator, Peter Kellner, provided a summary of the debate and listed the recommendations for the research design (Kellner, 2009). These recommendations and identified

<sup>11</sup>The full list of participants is given at the front of this report (p. iii).

themes then fed into the design of the research project and informed the development of a focus group guide for the facilitators (See Appendix 2).

The following themes were included in the questions put to focus group participants in the form of a questionnaire (See Appendix 1) and facilitated discussion:

### Topic Themes

- Trust
- Parental engagement
- Use of intermediaries
- Information and communication
- Gender issues
- Whether the programme is organised internally or externally to the local community
- Type of exchange
- Community knowledge and understanding of ethnic differences
- Financial barriers
- Understanding Islamic culture
- International political arena

In the research meeting, there was general agreement that young people with Muslim backgrounds, especially Muslim young women, are under-represented in youth exchanges.

There was much said about the importance of achieving trust – particularly from parents - and developing dialogue with the Muslim communities. It was imperative, therefore, from the outset that the dialogue with parents emphasised their concerns and respected their values, and that it was clearly communicated to them that these were to be incorporated in the design of our programmes.

In the absence of trust and long or close relationships, we were advised that we would need to use intermediaries and ‘opinion-informers’, such as Muslim organisations, community groups or youth workers, to facilitate focus groups and identify participants. There were differing opinions about whether imams and mosques should be used as intermediaries to help reach a wide range of young people, or whether this tactic would miss some young people who would not be attracted to a mosque-based activity.

The need to be aware of and engage with the evolving and informal map of Muslim youth activity, organisations, connections, and networks, was also emphasised.

It was deemed important to develop a good understanding of the diversity of ethnicities and cultures within Muslim communities in order to facilitate the identification of suitable types of exchanges and the rationales for such preferences.

There was a general consensus that in all communities, faith and culture combine with other categories of individual identity, such as class and gender, and all impact on participation levels.

It was stressed that information about youth exchange opportunities must be equally accessible to all young Muslims and other under-represented groups since targeting only Muslims could be divisive and counterproductive.

There was some debate on whether the age range to be studied should be 18-25, as the British Council proposed, or extended to 30 to help to reach Muslim women who were more likely to take part in exchange programmes in their late-twenties. Lowering the starting age below 18 raised issues concerning a duty-of-care to minors.

It was suggested that fresh research should include schools and local colleges, which tend to reach a broader spectrum of Muslim youngsters compared with mosques, and which already have useful data on previous participants and non-participants on exchange programmes.

The research consultation meeting informed the design of a research programme comprised of a series of focus groups with young Muslims across the UK. The location and facilitation for these focus groups would be identified both from local knowledge from contacts in our British Council regional offices, as well as members of this initial consultation meeting.

Rather than using British Council researchers as facilitators, it was agreed that more open responses would be achieved, and the views of the most marginalised groups would be captured, if the focus groups were arranged and facilitated by trusted, respected and well-known members of local Muslim communities.

## **2.3 Focus groups**

Focus groups of approximately two hours' duration were held with young Muslims across the UK: Belfast, Bradford, Cardiff, Glasgow and London. Facilitators were asked to select a group of 16 to 20 young Muslims between the ages of 18-25, and include those who had experience of youth exchanges as well as those who had not. They were also requested to provide representation in terms of gender, ethnic origin and social class, to give consideration to the inclusion of disabled people, and to select a venue that would bring the best results.

The lead researcher discussed the proposed questions and structure of the focus groups with the facilitators in advance, either face-to-face or by e-mail and on the telephone, to inform the production of the research design and the focus group topic guide.

Following the focus group research, all facilitators were given the opportunity to comment on the draft reports.

Reflecting the research objectives, the focus groups were structured into three sections:

- a) Ballot questions (the questionnaire): A series of questions on participants' backgrounds, and their experience and views of youth exchanges and their take-up.

- b) Group discussion: Obstacles or barriers  
*What do you think are the obstacles or barriers that prevent young Muslims participating in youth exchange programmes as much as other groups?*
  
- c) Group discussion: Suggestions for improvement  
*What could be done to improve the participation of young Muslim people?*

For the group discussions, the participants were split up into small groups (2 or 3 groups, depending on the overall size and mix of the large group) and were asked to nominate one member to be responsible for electronically recording the discussion and a second to report back to the full group. All discussions were transcribed in report format, with verbatim quotes from participants illustrating points made.

It was emphasised to participants from the outset that their contributions would be anonymised. Although the ballot papers were designed so that individual personal details on one side of the form could be linked by researchers to specific answers on the other side, they remained strictly anonymous. This provided the statistical data presented below.

# 3. Research findings

The results of the statistical data collected from the ballot questions are set out below. This is followed by the findings of the focus group discussions, which incorporates participants' comments from all five focus groups, and includes data collected from the discussions of the ballot questions, the points raised in the small groups, and also the points raised in the feedback session in the large group.

This section is thus structured in the following way:

- Ballot questions
- Barriers to participation
- Suggestions to encourage participation

## 3.1 Ballot questions

### The Sample

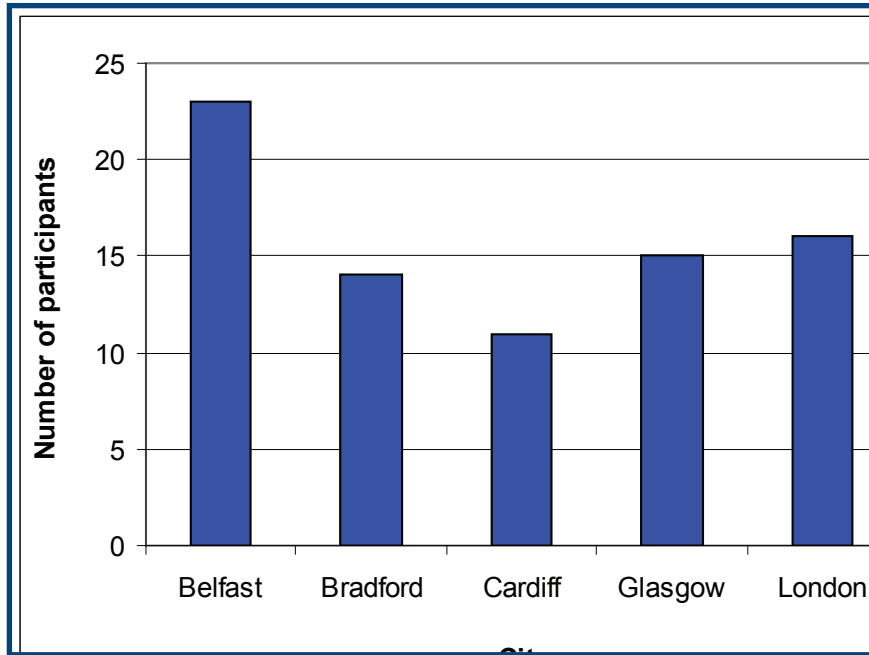
A total of 79<sup>12</sup> young Muslims from five cities across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales participated in the study. Two cities in England were selected in order to draw from the north and the south of the country.

The aim had been to achieve a sample of between 12 and 16 participants for each focus group, with approximately 20 being invited to allow for drop out rates. The relatively high turnout in Belfast was due to the inclusion of some young people resident in small towns outside the capital that responded to the invitation and travelled to Belfast to participate, possibly reflecting a relative under-researching of young Muslim people in Northern Ireland.

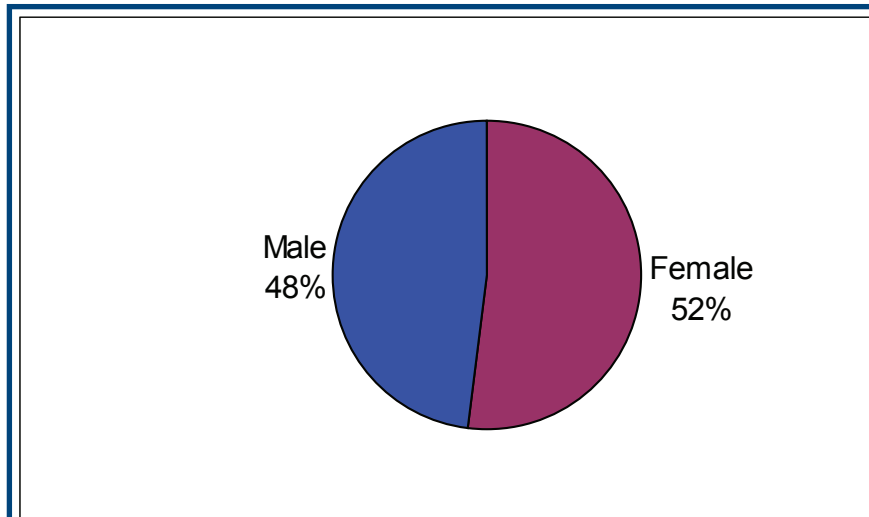
The participants included young people in the 15-27 age range, with the largest numbers being 18 and 19 years old. There were almost equal numbers of females and males, representing a wide range of ethnic origins, as illustrated below. Of the twelve participants who indicated 'other' ethnic origin, 7 indicated Arab or a mix of Arab with another ethnicity.

<sup>12</sup>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.

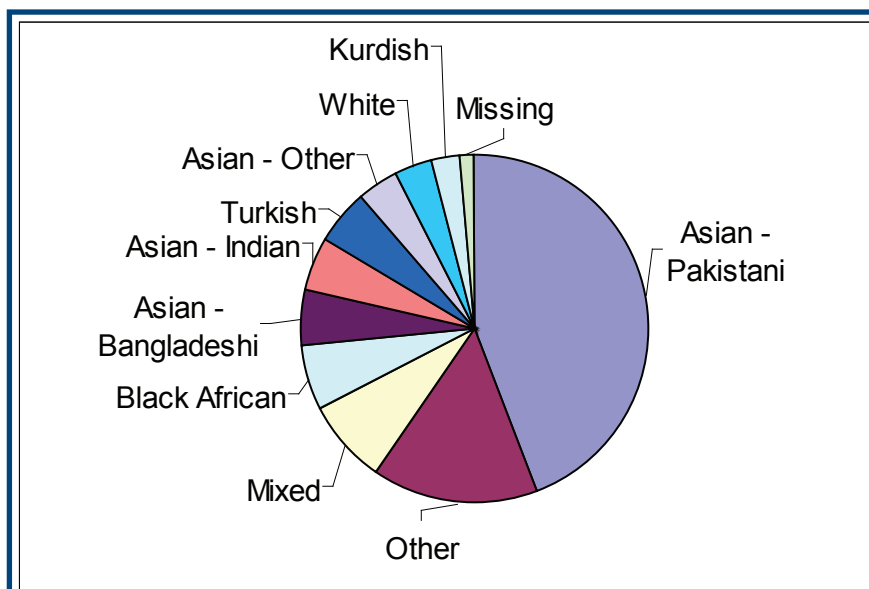
**Figure 1 Geographical location of sample**



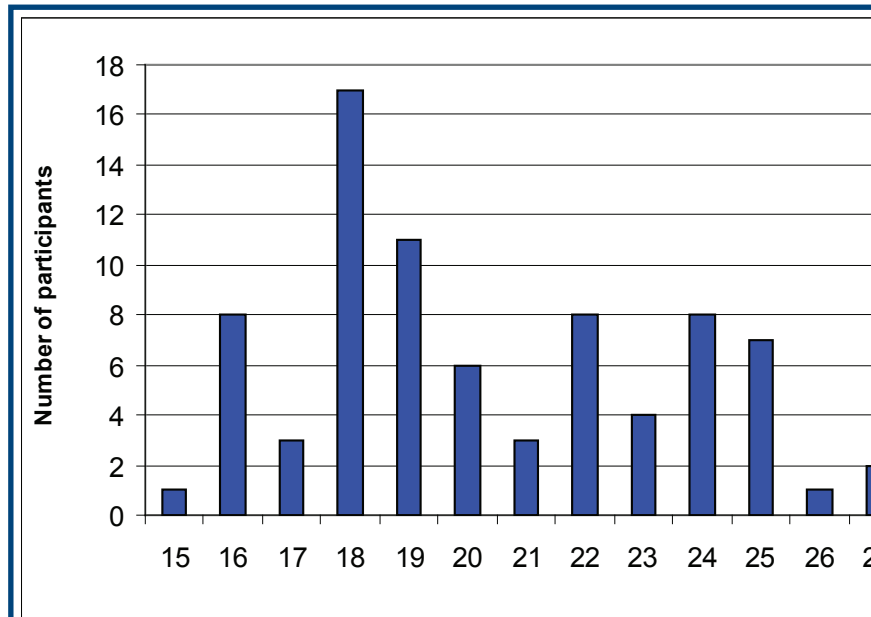
**Figure 2 Gender of participants**



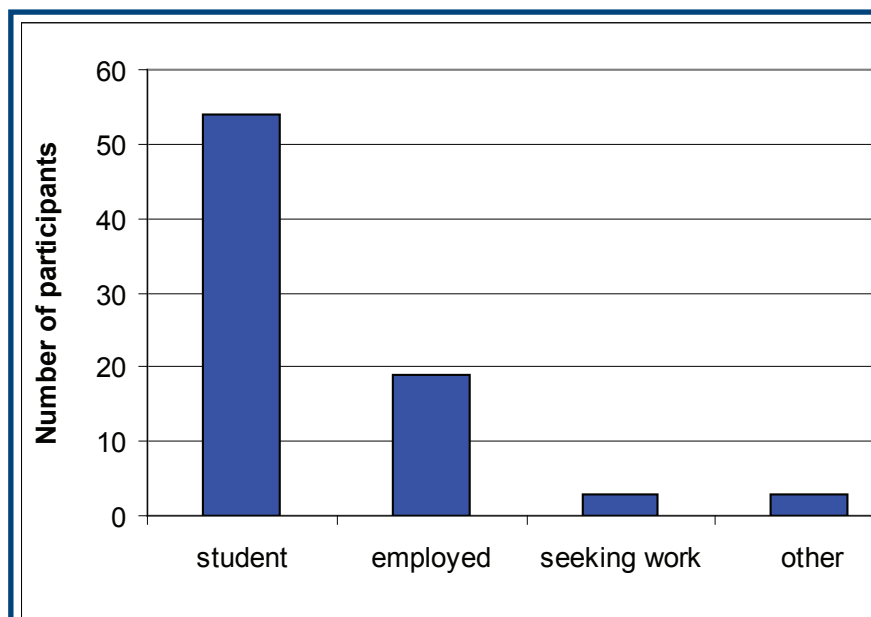
**Figure 3 Ethnic origin of participants**



**Figure 4 Age of participants**



**Figure 5 Occupation of participants**



The majority of participants, 54 (68%), were either students at school, college or university. An additional 19 (24%) were employed and 3 (around 4%) were seeking work. Those employed were in a range of occupations including youth work, the health sector and community development. The 3 (around 4%) who indicated 'other' included those who were unemployed, waiting to start a training programme and on sabbatical leave.

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.

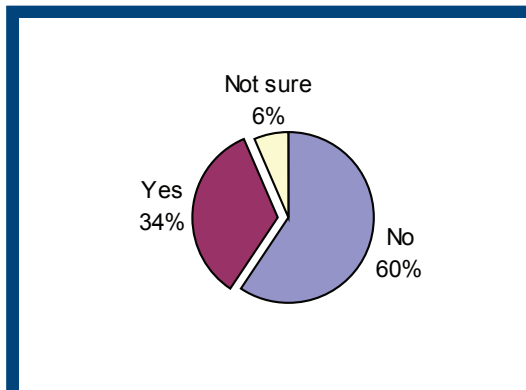
## Responses to questionnaire

Participants were asked to respond to a series of written questions. The responses are presented below.

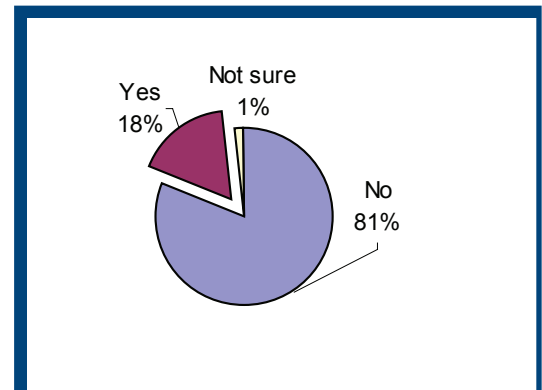
### 1. Previous participation in youth exchange programmes

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

**Figure 6 Have you participated in a national youth exchange programme?**



**Figure 7 Have you participated in an international youth exchange programme?**



Just under half of participants (37, 47%) had received information about youth exchange programmes before, but only 12 (15%) said their parents had received information about this type of programme.

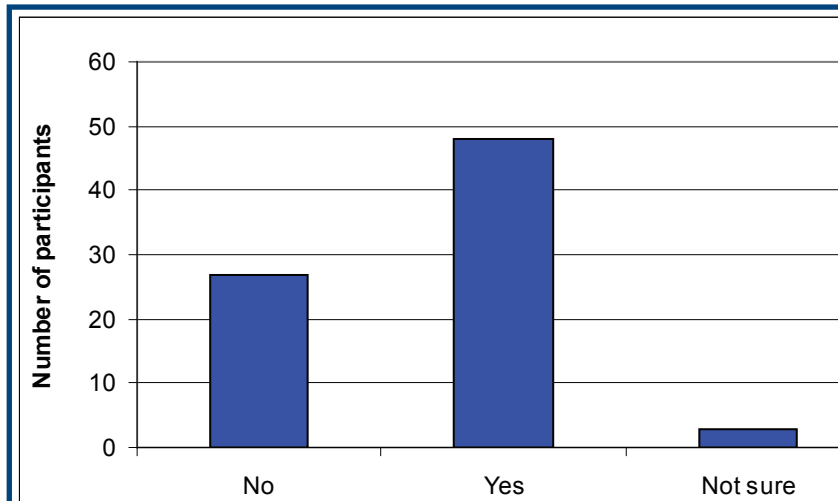
### 2. Experience of travelling abroad

This was a well-travelled group, with 72 (over 90%) having travelled abroad in the last ten years, due in part to holidays and visits to the countries of their parents' origin.

### 3. Need for parental agreement to go on a youth exchange scheme

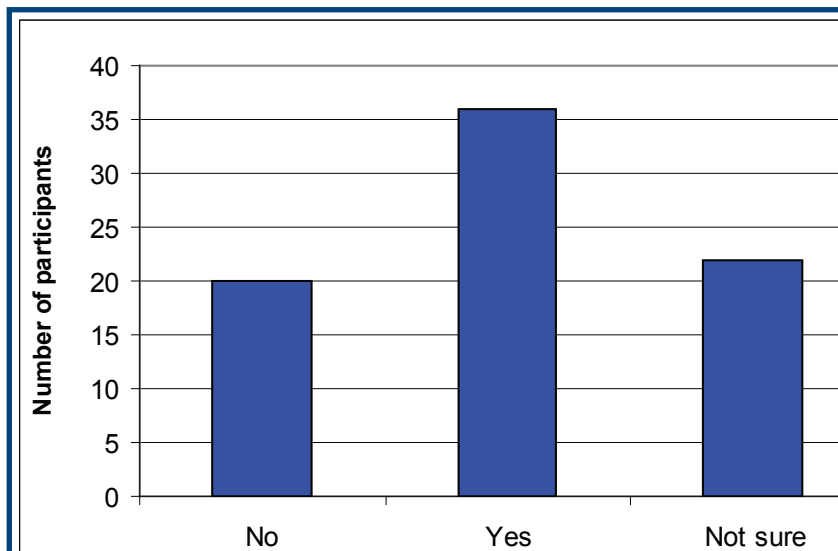
The majority, 48 (just over 60%), said that they would need parental agreement to go on a youth exchange scheme. An additional 3 (4%) said they were unsure if they would need such agreement.

**Figure 8 Do you think you would need your parent's permission to go on a youth exchange scheme?**

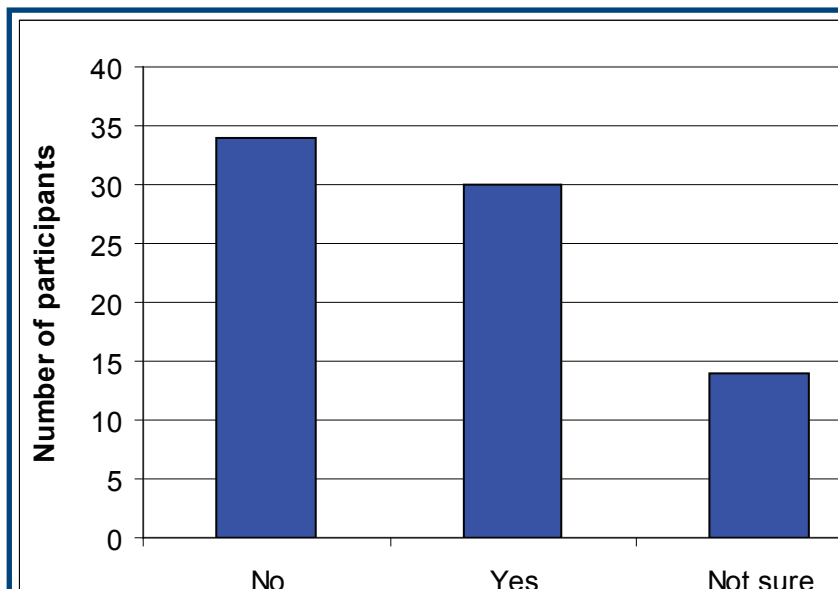


#### **4. Involvement of an intermediary organisation**

**Figure 9 Should an intermediary organisation get involved (i.e. one in your community that you/your parents are more familiar with?)**

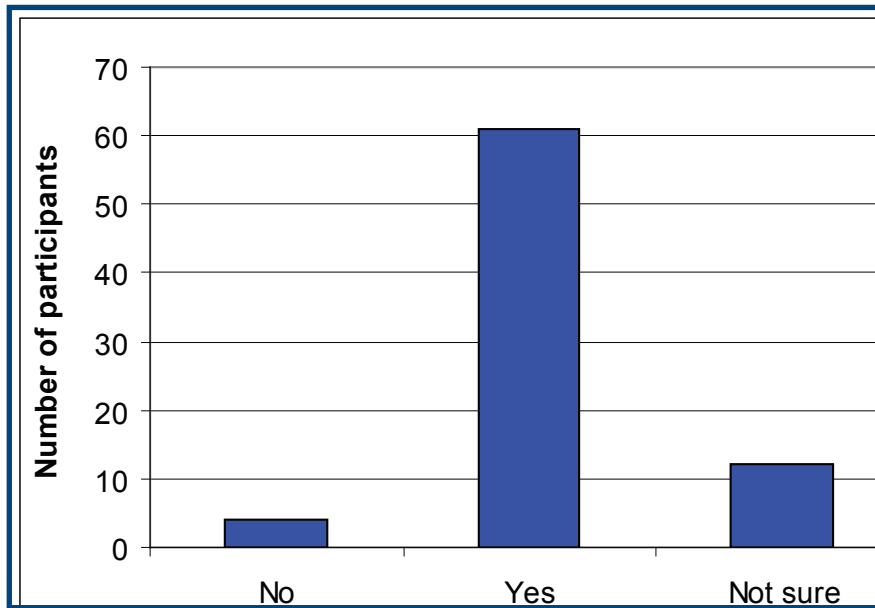


**Figure 10 Is participation affected by who the organisers are?**



## 5. Compatibility of Islam with youth exchanges

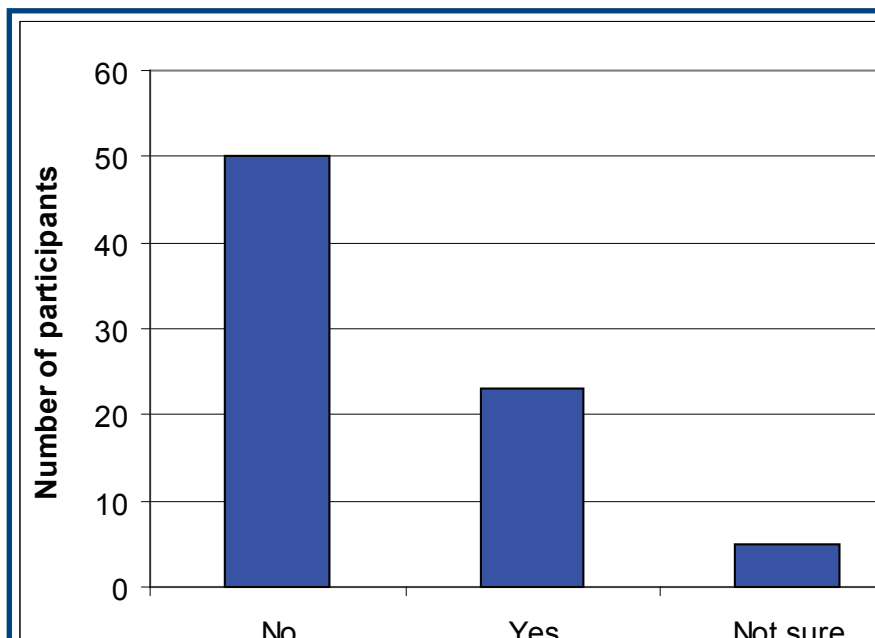
Figure 11 In your opinion, is Islam compatible with youth exchanges?



The majority, 61 (77%) stated that Islam is compatible with youth exchanges.

## 6. Gender and participation

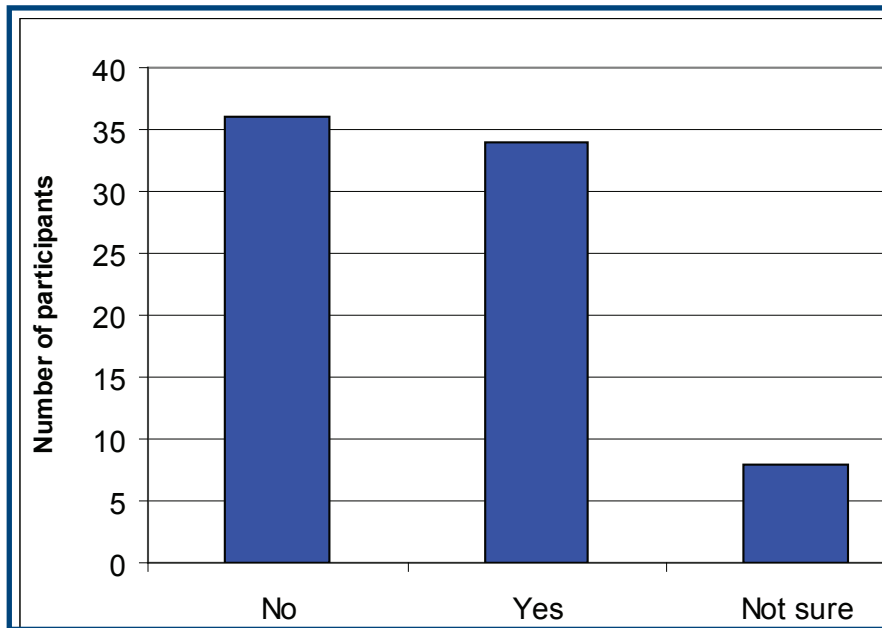
Figure 12 Are there any issues that relate to your gender that might affect your participation?



Although only 23 (30%) indicated that there were issues relating to their gender that might affect their participation, the majority of these were female (20, 50% of the female research participants).

## 7. Religion or culture and participation

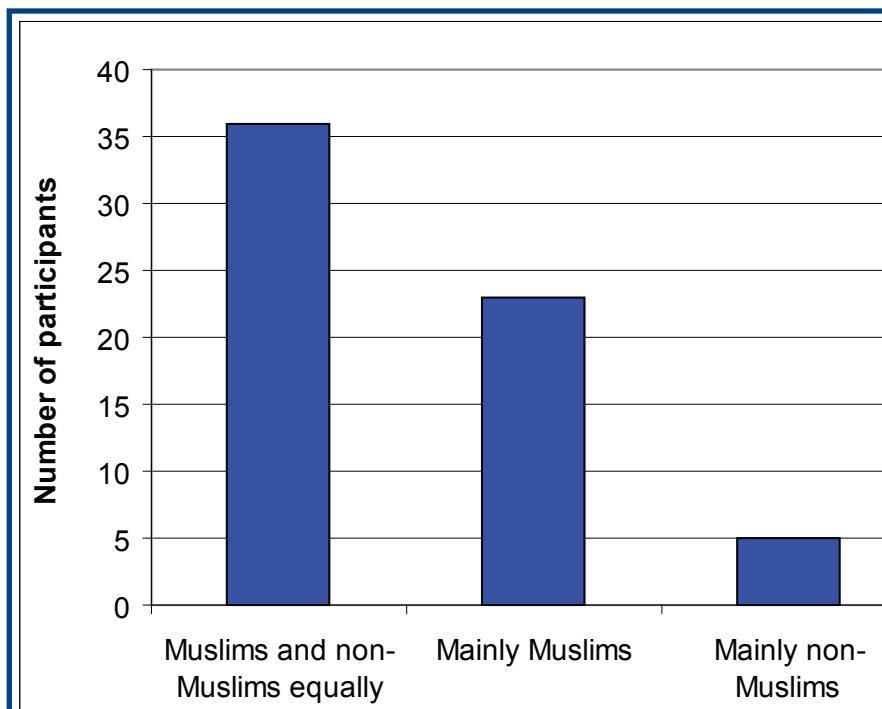
**Figure 13** Are there any issues that relate to your religion or culture that might affect your participation?



A higher number of participants indicated that there were issues relating to their religion or culture that might affect their participation, in comparison to the number that stated that gender may be an issue.

## 8. Social mixing

**Figure 14** Who do you mostly socialise with?



Over half<sup>13</sup> indicated that they socialised equally with Muslims and non-Muslims, with over one third mixing mainly with Muslims. Thus, a clear majority had substantial experience of non-Muslim socialising.

<sup>13</sup>i.e. 36 out of 64 who were asked the question. The first group, in Glasgow, were asked a series of questions related to mixing but advised us that that the questions were confusing and this area of questioning was subsequently re-worded.

## 9. Summary

The ballot responses did not indicate any serious impediment to exchanges or to contact by the group with non-Muslims, although some concern was expressed about parental consent and religious and cultural provision on the exchange – issues particularly affecting women.

### 3.2 Barriers to participation

#### Introduction

As examined below, there were many potential obstacles discussed by the participants, some of which were interrelated, for example issues relating to parental consent, gender and access to information. The identified barriers evinced varying degrees of agreement and flexibility. The obstacles concerning facility provision and organisation are first considered before exploring the more complex issues and themes of the discussions in the following order:

- General considerations
- Parental consent
- Perceptions in the local community
- Information
- Gender
- 'Feeling different' and Islamophobia
- The impact of terrorism and the media
- Location
- Type of exchange
- Mix of people in the exchange group
- Organisers
- Isolation
- Airport security

Participants in the focus groups were encouraged to identify and discuss any barriers that may exist for the participation of young Muslims in youth exchange programmes generally, rather than solely obstacles that they would face personally. Thus the identified barriers presented below are potential obstacles, not necessarily affecting the participation of all young Muslims, and with some only affecting a small minority. Indeed, some of the general considerations below would be common to all young people, and a majority of participants demonstrated much flexibility and offered many practical solutions to potential obstacles that specifically related to their faith or culture.

#### General considerations

##### Accommodation

Gender segregation in accommodation was considered to be a standard requirement, particularly by parents, rather than just a concern for Muslims.

Boarding with a non-Muslim family would be difficult for some:

Being a Muslim, do you know what family you are going to go to? And how are they going to accept you? It is really unlikely they are going to be Muslim. So, it is really hard to live with a non-Muslim family.

It would thus be preferred by some to be with a Muslim family:

...because they will know. They are not going to eat pork, they are not going to drink alcohol, and things like that, that obviously Muslims are forbidden to do. And it would be easier.

However, this was not a universal view:

I think we are old enough to be able to go and stay with someone who is non-Muslim without having to forget about our religion, because it is your responsibility to keep that up for yourself ... because you go to a Christian household it does not mean that you have to pray to Jesus.

The accommodation issue is examined again below in the section on gender.

#### Food and drink

The failure to provide *halal*<sup>14</sup> food could pose another obstacle. In some countries, alcohol is included in some food, which is therefore *haram*<sup>15</sup>. Parents would feel particularly uncomfortable about their children going to places where alcohol would be freely available.

#### Prayer

There would be concern, particularly from parents, if the event schedule failed to provide the opportunity to pray: "... just being able to freely practice your faith, if you need to pray or anything".

#### Timing and Duration

The timing and length of exchange visits and the pre-visit training – e.g. exam times for students; religious holidays; work vacation plans - were important and would need to bear certain commitments and availability in mind. Again, these concerns would be common to youths of any community. A month or longer would be hard to accommodate within their other commitments.

## Safety and Distance

Assured safety was a major concern – especially for parents:

A safe place – we would not want to go to China, a place where our family doesn't know. It's a distance where they wouldn't feel comfortable.

For some, the distance travelled would be an issue, with shorter distances being more acceptable. In contrast, some had been on visits to China and had benefited from the experience. However, many thought that the aim of the trip was the most important consideration, e.g. charity work in developing countries or learning about a different culture was felt to be beneficial and valuable.

## Individual or group

Travelling together in a group would be safer than travelling alone on an individual exchange.

## Financial cost

Cost and expense were considered important, and even if costs are covered by the organisation, there would still be some personal expense and that might be an obstacle for some individuals.

## **Parental consent**

The most commonly expressed barrier was parental consent. The ballot statistics reported that 60% of the participants said they thought that they would need their parents' permission to participate.

Parental consent was particularly important for young Muslims as they were considered to be under parental care to a much older age than youths from many other communities:

A lot of parents have not really let go of the children as early on as in non-Muslim communities. The community has a mindset of nurturing young people for a much longer period. We are still very much nurtured by our parents including food, safety, and all these things for a much lengthier period of time.... So, if you want to have our youth come onto this project you need to say if the food will be halal, if the dietary requirements will be met. That's the reality of our community ... that is why we have a lot of need for parental involvement, family involvement ... these communication channels, everything should be a lot more family orientated.

Many participants indicated that not only did they require parental consent to an older age, but their parents were generally less likely to provide approval than parents from other communities.

However, not everyone felt this was the case, with just under 30% saying that they would not need their parent's permission to participate in youth exchanges. As one

female participant commented, she would inform her parents, but would not need to ask for their approval. When asked by another participant what she would do if her parents said 'no', she responded: "my parents would support anything that would help with my education".

If Muslim parents were considered to be less likely to give their approval, this tended to be perceived as a generational issue. Parents represented a different culture and 'mindset', and tended to conflate issues relating to 'faith' and 'culture'.

Sometimes you ask your parents – can I go here? They say: no, you can't, it is against our faith'. When it clearly isn't and you go and prove to them that it is not, but they still go 'you can't go'. They are confusing themselves what is Islamic and what is cultural. So, there is a need to have awareness of this and how to ask parents for certain things, but it is also frustrating when they don't have that understanding.

It was explained that, in 'British Asian culture', young Muslims do not look at things in the same way as their parents or their grandparents do, and several participants argued that they would allow their children to participate in exchange programmes when they became parents themselves.

It's more to do with mindset. It will eventually die out. Because I wouldn't have any problems letting my kids go, if I knew the [organisation] and trusted it.

Both focus groups with majority Pakistani participants and with Turkish participants independently argued that, for cultural rather than religious reasons, parental consent was more of an issue for their parents compared with other Muslim groups.

Other obstacles were parents' emphasis on 'education', and what they perceived to be of educational value. Pressures put on them at home to study hard and get a good education to ensure a good career afterwards would prevent many young Muslims from participating in exchanges. It was generally thought that Muslim parents would not understand the benefits of youth exchanges, compared with conventional study, and would fail to appreciate any educational benefits of them:

The parents don't understand the positives of a global exchange. At times they can even question what is the purpose of doing them. Especially when you are at school or college, they tell you to focus on your education and to forget anything else. It's all about education and everything else is secondary. But there is a need to understand now, especially when there is this big push for people to be more rounded and they get a job because they have a more rounded personality, that's something they need to think about.

Although it was acknowledged that this was not just a problem for many young Muslims, there was a *perception* that Muslim parents were less likely to compromise on their approval. In addition, resistance from older siblings -

particularly those who had not been allowed previously to participate in exchanges and older brothers concerned about the participation of their sisters - was another barrier.

However, university students seemed more likely to participate, since they had already overcome some parental concerns and anxieties as a result of moving away from home to study. For young women in particular university provides that initial stepping stone to independence:

I think it was once I moved away from home. Because I was independent for a couple of years when I went to uni....you develop that relationship where they think, 'yes, she is independent, she can look after herself, she will be alright no matter what she does'. Before that, yes, there was a big issue about, if I wanted to do anything I had to ask them before...

### **Perceptions in the local community**

Parental consent was also perceived to be affected by peer and local community pressure:

Even if parents do give the go ahead, and are happy to let you go, there is the whole question of 'what will so and so think?' and the 'nosey auntie' who always wants to know what is going on, and answering to that and giving them a valid reason.

### **Information**

All focus groups confirmed that there were difficulties in accessing information, and *useful* information for young Muslims. The general consensus was that there was a lack of awareness of youth exchange programmes due to insufficient promotion. It was argued that information was not reaching the most marginalised members of the community, and some participants had not even heard of such opportunities. The ballot responses showed that only 47% of participants had received information about youth exchanges before:

I know a lot of Muslims out there who would probably be really interested in these kinds of things. And when you talk to them about it they are really interested, but ...there is nobody that is giving them this information. They are not being fed any of the information that there is a chance that they could do this.

I hadn't heard about this opportunity...it's not widely spread out there. It seems that there is a select amount of people that are already active in the community and they get to know about it, but generally it's not very well put out.

University participants seem to have more access to information about cultural and youth exchanges, but this is unevenly spread and possibly only certain groups in universities receive it:

In school I saw these a lot, but not now at university. Obviously Christian Union get their stuff because they get it as it happens, Red Cross and stuff is passed to them anyway...

The lack of access to information about such opportunities by parents restricted their awareness about them; around 80% of participants indicated that their parents had not received information about youth exchanges or they were unsure if they had. Given that parental consent was deemed so important, the lack of information that parents received *directly* would obviously be a significant obstacle to youth participation – especially for the parents of daughters.

This is a complex issue and one needs to take into account that parental permission may not be sought because of the *perception* that parents are bound to refuse. Parental ignorance of exchange opportunities therefore may be the result of a self-fulfilling prophecy by young people about the expected parental reaction: exchange opportunities and other information about the organisation delivering the exchange programme, which is crucial to confirm their credibility, reliability and ability to provide a secure environment and a well-organised and valuable experience, may not be clearly articulated at home or even passed on. Thus, parents may not be genuinely aware of the provisions that have been or could be made for their children's welfare and security such as concerns regarding prayer facilities, halal food, avoidance of alcohol, and the segregation of boys from girls.

## Gender

### Female

It was generally agreed that there are more barriers for women. There are many more issues they have to consider before getting involved. The more conservative or traditional interpretations of Islam would have more implications for women than for men, and this would be reflected in more difficulties in gaining parental consent.

Parents would also be more anxious about the safety of their daughters:

Parents would not be encouraging for women to go abroad, especially to a country where you don't know the place, you don't have any relatives.

Daughters would experience many more questions from their parents about the details of the exchange and about the facilities, provided that their parents would consider them going in the first place. In some cases, this issue would have been resolved by previous 'battles fought' by elder female siblings, or because of support from them. As is generally the case, parents are sometimes more likely to indulge the younger siblings, whereas they had been less relaxed as parents with their first children:

The sort of opportunity and things I have done, they didn't do. And even if the opportunity was there for them they would never have asked my parents because they just knew the answer would have been 'no'. And I don't know if they would have agreed or not... I know that my [older] sister, she wouldn't have even questioned, if an opportunity had come up she wouldn't have even bothered asking my dad, because she

would just have assumed the answer would have been no... you know, at high school, they take you to a country house for a couple of days, that was the first time for me. My sister if she had been in that situation, my age, the opportunity had it come, she would never have asked my parents, she would just have assumed the answer would have been no. And I think it would have been no.

There are some parents that are just set in their ways and no matter how much information, how many meetings you have for them, they will be hardcore and they will stick to it and they will still say no to letting their .... Maybe for sons it is different but for their daughters it's a no, and that's that.

Generally, fathers were the main source of the obstruction, as they were considered particularly protective of their daughters – a role sometimes taken on by older brothers too. Again, such protective tendencies could be expected to be the case within a number of cultures. However, such tendencies could only be verified through inter-cultural and inter-faith research.

Some of the obstacles experienced by women are practical, rather than directly religious or cultural, and often refer to dress. As one participant argued, the differences between the dress of Muslim women and non-Muslim women are generally greater than the differences between Muslim men and non-Muslim men. Although not directly religious or cultural, such practical issues relating to dress would of course depend on the number of Muslim women on the youth exchange who chose to wear more traditional 'Islamic' clothing. Such practical issues relating to female dress could affect their participation in certain activities:

If there is some sort of activity like rock climbing, or some other activity like snowboarding or skiing, we don't really have the right gear yet that is modest but also protective, because you have to wear certain headgear and stuff, so that can be another [obstacle].

Women may also want to uncover (i.e. remove their head covering) in their accommodation, and, for some, an exchange that did not take this into account would not be acceptable.

Although it was acknowledged that mixed accommodation would also be an issue for other women, there were again practical issues relating to dress that made it particularly difficult for Muslims. For example, Muslim women who wear the hijab will be discomforted if they are in the company of men who are not their relatives:

I guess if you wear hijab and you want to go out to the kitchen, and there is someone next door who is a guy, it would be hard, because you would want to put your hijab on. You would feel uncomfortable. You are at home, and you feel like taking your scarf off because you are at home and you want to feel relaxed, but there are guys next door, so I guess, for some people, they would feel uncomfortable.

The problem would be the same if staying in a host family home:

If a woman is going on an exchange in another house, there could be a man there and it means that the girl will have to cover up all the time. She wouldn't be allowed to be in a room with just the man and her.

If staying with another family, some women may want to know how many males there are in the household and whether they would have their own personal space. They may also be concerned about the amount of men on the exchange:

Personally I would feel uncomfortable if I was the only female and there were a lot of males around. Similarly, other people might have the same ideas.

I would happily go on any of these exchanges, or even if it is just a conference nationally, but it does go through my head the fact that I am Muslim, and I have to travel, and the fact that I am a female... all of these things go through my head. I do think about these things, they are issues for me. Despite the fact that I am able to go, and my parents have been happy for me to go, it is not as if these issues don't factor, I still consider them. I am still very, very aware.

Travelling itself could also raise concerns:

I think travelling would definitely be an issue for some Muslim females. If they had a relative, a brother, father, that would overcome the issue. But otherwise it might be the fact that they wouldn't go, because of that reason.

### Mahrams

A very small minority of the more conservative female participants, plus those with more conservative parents, would only go on an exchange if accompanied by a *mahram*<sup>16</sup>:

Some would say that women can't travel without a mahram if it is beyond a certain distance. Whereas for others it's ok. I think that plays a major influence. Culturally if you think about it as well, but the cultural mentality that tags along with it, you can't travel on your own, you should be on your own in a group with others that you can trust... from a female perspective I think it's a lot easier for guys.

It was noted, however, that this concern varied from family to family and that there were many examples of women travelling without family or chaperones:

I have seen a range of females travelling abroad on their own and in groups. From my perspective I have travelled on my own and in my group.

I have met a variety of sisters that come from all sorts of different families. I think in today's society the reality is that a lot of sisters are travelling about. Safety isn't really as big a concern as it was before...I don't necessarily see travelling as a major current issue.

It depends on how the child has been brought up. If they have been brought up with the mentality that you have rights for yourself, and you know what to do and you are responsible.

There was some discussion about whether the requirement of a mahram related to faith or culture, with the consensus on the side of culture:

Some really strict parents would say you have to take a man with you... but that's more culture than religion.

In the general debate on the barriers faced by women, some women emphasised that it was wrong to see their differences as 'obstacles' or as representing the suppression of young Muslim women by religion, culture or parents. For example, people would assume that they were forced to wear the hijab, rather than it being their individual choice. As a result of such perceptions, "Society has made us feel more vulnerable than we actually are".

#### Family obligations

Family obligations were viewed to be more of a barrier for women as they tended to have more responsibilities within the home and family. As a result, "Sometimes responsibility comes between them and travelling". However, there was some dispute on this issue, with some support for the view that both young women and men had family obligations.

#### Male

Young Muslim men were restricted in their travel by the impact of anti-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. For example, growing a beard prompted the remark: "are you doing the Osama bin Laden thing?"

People might be scared of us ... the way the world is now, we are looked upon as troublemakers and terrorists.

This being the case, concern was expressed about their likely treatment when travelling abroad on a youth exchange, and whether there would be any risks for their safety due to harassment abroad. This would obviously be a major concern for parents:

The media does tend to portray us as potential terrorists. So, I think that is a fairly major problem. Not so much in that people will think that you are a terrorist, in that they won't let you through or whatever, but your parents will think that people will think you are a young terrorist, and as such take action against you, take censure against you in some way.

Parents were also more likely to anticipate disciplinary problems for their sons rather than their daughters, as is common for any community. They might question 'what type of boys' would be going on the youth exchange, and be concerned about what groups they were from. The participation of perceived local trouble-makers on the exchange would be a major disincentive for parental consent.

### **'Feeling different' and Islamophobia**

Some anxiety was expressed about how they would be received in a different country and in a different culture, and how others would respond to their traditions and religion. Popular misconceptions of Muslims as 'being different', it was explained, has led to a Muslim 'fear of being feared' when they travel to other countries - "people could think we are going to blow them up or something" - and this could therefore pose a possible barrier to participation in voluntary exchanges:

If you are afraid of people perhaps in another community stereotyping you, not making you feel comfortable, and not letting you be yourself then that can stop you from going.

Negative perceptions of Muslims could lead to them being treated differently:

It's touch and go because you don't know how they are going to accept you ... because you have got that insecurity about each other. They are, 'hang on, can we trust these guys?' It's just that little bit of a barrier. But it could be absolutely nothing. Because once you get over and break the ice, which will literally take 10 minutes. It's the initial thing ... it's just the Muslim thing itself, where people think, 'what are these guys about, what are their intentions?' With all this home-grown terrorism, the media just show you Joe Average kind of people, who look just like us, that have done some terrorist act. So, terrorists don't come just with the full beard and stuff, if you are just young Muslims you are going to get perceived straight away, 'is there something dodgy about this guy? Are they like the guys who went down to London from Leeds, are they anything like the girls in Moscow?' The fear is: are they in other countries going to be as accepting, as warm?

As a Muslim you can really feel it. If you are not a Muslim you won't really feel it on the media, but every time it comes on it really will get hold of you, and you'll think, 'oh no, not something else to make us look even worse'.

There is also a general sense of unease and self-consciousness when you are sensed as different:

Sometimes you don't want to cause a reaction – you just want to walk down a road and think, I can walk down here perfectly well. Even when I went to Istanbul you can think, it's a semi-Muslim country, you'll be alright. People still look at you like, well, why are you wearing the *jilbab*<sup>17</sup>, why would you cover up?

When overseas, there is also the experience of ‘constantly having to explain yourself’, for example, if offered alcohol:

For some reason you have got to explain that you are Muslim, and go through the whole issue about what you might need.

In addition there is the awkwardness about being treated differently and having to ask for different requirements to the rest of the group:

You don’t want to impose yourself as being a Muslim. Because in the media there is that perception that we are different, we make ourselves to be different. So it goes back to, you don’t want to put that barrier up yourself, but you can’t change that because you are a Muslim and you are going to come with barriers and with restrictions. But we don’t want to impose that on other people.

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 guilt about making the exchange a ‘bit boring’ for seeming to be ‘anti-social’. Some confessed that they were embarrassed about their difference and even experienced feelings of inadequacy:

I think sometimes the barrier is ourselves, an inferiority complex. For instance, I know I have done this, I have been somewhere and I have just not plucked up the courage to say: ‘hang on a second, I need to nip out to pray’. I have said: ‘I am just nipping out for five minutes, I’ll be back. I haven’t had the confidence to say that I need to pray. Now that I have more confidence and I say I need to pray, I find people are so accommodating.

You are Muslim, you feel like for some reason, you are inferior. We have been made to feel like that, it is something that has evolved, second-class citizens, what our parents have been through. And I think it trickles down. Even within our community at the moment, even without talking about exchange programmes. Just in general, the Muslim community has an inferiority complex about itself such that, automatically the Asian, for some reason we assume that we are not good enough. You could take this back to Edward Said’s *Orientalism*<sup>18</sup> and find the answers in there why we think that way.

In contrast to this view, a female participant asked why she should feel guilty about such terrorist activity and have to change her behaviour to accommodate other people's fears which come from stereotyping and the media.

The upshot of the above, whether a fear of Islamophobia or a general sense of awkwardness, suggests that some young Muslims would feel uncomfortable in groups and destinations in which they would be in a small Muslim minority. Although a majority indicated that they would prefer to explore new and different cultures, this pursuit would obviously be dampened if they thought that other group members or the host community would be hostile towards them.

### **The impact of terrorism and the media**

As indicated above, the sense of 'feeling different' that discouraged participation was, of course, accentuated by the impact of terrorism and its media coverage:

The only problem that we have got is the stigma surrounding us ... sometimes I stand on that Leeds train station, and I'll be stood there with my rucksack on. And I know by the way people are looking at me, they are feeling really uncomfortable thinking, what is this guy's intention? And I don't blame people, because two days earlier they have been watching on the news that some young lad has blown himself up or something. So, that's the kind of thing, that's the only thing that is affecting us as Muslims.

It was also suggested that such media coverage has deterred some organisations from recruiting Muslims. This, it was argued, should be challenged:

...There is sort of an obligation on us to go on these trips and let other people know...we don't just go around bombing ourselves... The whole concept of Islam is peace. Some people, the second you say 'Islam', all they straight away think is 'terrorism', all the stuff in the media. ... We are in a world where we can't afford to constrain ourselves just to other Muslims. We live in a western society, so we do need to get out there, tell them what our religion is about, it's not just about this stuff you hear about in the news, this is what it is about, this is what we do. And every single action that you do, when you are on the exchange trip, you are basically a walking promotion for Islam.

There was some discussion about the extent to which it was fair for that responsibility to be placed on Muslims. Although the danger of stereotyping was recognised, some in the group argued that individuals should represent their chosen faith positively and actively:

If you choose to be Muslim then you choose to hold the moral obligation of representing it. So, technically when you chose it, and once you know about your religion and you are fully convinced that this is the way for you, why shouldn't you be a walking advert for it, because you have chosen that for yourself?

## Location

Some countries were perceived to be more problematic than others for visits. In previous exchanges, local men had tried to touch some of the young women – although this would be less likely in other destinations. In addition, there are parts of the world where it would be more dangerous for Muslims to visit, where they would be a vulnerable minority:

Wherever you go there are going to be different attitudes towards you, whether you are Muslim or another religion...anyone who goes on these kinds of projects will be aware of the fact that you are not in the majority, you are the ones who are going to be different out there and you have just got to take what comes with that.

Sometimes the exchange may be to a country that has laws that conflict with the fundamental values of Muslims, e.g. laws against Muslim dress such as in France, where recent press coverage in the UK had indicated that the burka could be banned in public places and some negativity towards wearing the veil was reported. The French example was discussed in two different focus groups, and questions were posed as to whether an exchange student need comply with their laws.

Parents will be particularly concerned about the safety of their children and so they would obviously disapprove of such destinations as Iraq. Other locations, such as Ibiza or Amsterdam, would also be unacceptable to parents because they are negatively perceived as places of alcohol, drugs and immoral nightclubs. Of course, such perceptions of these locations are also held more broadly and these concerns are common to many parents.

## Type of exchange

Exchanges that did not have a clear educational or cultural content would not be seen as a valuable use of time or money and were unlikely to receive parental support. Muslims might not want to participate in non-Muslim religious practices or feel completely comfortable with exchanges that involved going to other religious buildings, such as churches:

I was in primary school and there was a school trip to a church. There was another Muslim girl with me and she wasn't allowed to go, because Muslims are not supposed to go to churches, whereas my background was, no, Muslims *can* go to churches and it is good to learn about other religions. That's not necessarily from the religion of Islam, it's just the way people have been brought up and the background and the cultural values that come with that.

This was expressed as a potential barrier, but was not an issue for the majority of participants in our focus groups.

## Mix of people in the exchange group

There was some disagreement about what Islam states about coeducational activity. As discussed above, a very small minority argued that gender mixing was haram, but most argued that it was acceptable “within limits” and “As long as there is no joking around, and talking in the wrong ways ...”. A small minority in the Pakistani community also apparently believe that it is haram for Muslims to mix with non-Muslims. With this, as with many other related issues, there were broad differences in interpretations of Islam, and how it impacted on the possibility of youth exchanges. On the other hand, it was also argued that “Islam encourages mixing with others from different backgrounds, going abroad, rather than discourages it”.

Some would be reluctant to participate if they were the only Muslim on the exchange, but this clearly reflected a concern over support rather than mixing with others:

... sometimes an issue comes up that is to do with something that you can't do religiously, or culturally, and you need someone else there to support you.

However, some parents could be concerned about their children losing their Muslim identity if they mixed more with others:

I think another big obstacle in the way of Muslim exchanges could actually be the parents. The parents might be over-protective of their children. They don't want much socialising going on between Muslims and non-Muslims. They might be against that, they might not want to integrate fully into society...because they are scared of the Muslims losing their identity.

The groups generally felt that they were a lot more open to mixing with non-Muslims than were previous generations.

## Organisers

Overall, as demonstrated by our statistics (see Figures 9-10), there were mixed feelings about the importance of the organisers and whether participation would be affected by who organised the exchange. Many commented that parents would want to be assured that organisers had enough knowledge about Islam and the needs of Muslims, for example about prayer times and halal food. For others, it was more important that their parents viewed the organisers as ‘authentic’ and ‘not racist’. One person said that, although it would not matter to her, her mother would only trust the organisers if she thought they were following Islamic rules.

## Isolation

The Muslim community in the UK, and the Asian community generally, was often described as very insular and, therefore, very unaware of many of the possibilities in the wider community. It was explained that, for some young Muslim people, school was their life, and they only went on holiday to visit the family ‘home’. A youth exchange would be something completely new and different, and so there would naturally be concerns and anxieties from both young people and their parents.

Within the Muslim community, there was believed to be a lack of support for initiatives such as youth exchanges. For example, the after-school *madrassa*<sup>19</sup> classes in the mosque involve many young people, but they focus more on religious education than wider issues and activities:

The madrassas are set up for praying and that's about it. There is no sort of social side.

One participant argued that the Jewish community had a lot of schemes for their young people. In contrast, there was no funding put aside for Muslim young people, apart from such initiatives as the 'Prevent' government funding.

There was some discussion about the extent to which they mixed and communicated with different groups in society:

Probably people stick with people who are the same as them, because it is no questions asked, kind of thing. Because maybe if you were telling somebody, a non-Muslim about this, if you said 'I can't go' they would ask why? And then getting into that whole, 'I can't go because of my culture'...

You kind of stick with your own. But I think nowadays, I try to just talk to everybody, because I don't want people to make assumptions about me before they even know me, so I just go and talk to everybody.

### **Airport security**

At immigration control, it was observed that young Muslim men were generally treated differently. They tended to be questioned and checked more than others because they were perceived to be more likely to be a terrorist threat. It was suggested that the whole issue of airport security, and the extension to body scanning, could act as a barrier in itself to people wanting to travel.

## **3.3 Suggestions to encourage participation**

### **Introduction**

Participants were enthusiastic about making suggestions about how to encourage the participation of young Muslims in youth exchanges. These are grouped under the following headings:

- General considerations
- Design and organisation of the programme
- Content and focus of programme
- Identifying individual needs
- Incorporating Islam
- Gender

- Involvement of parents
- Intergenerational work
- Intermediaries and building trust with organisations
- Organisers
- Widening inclusion and disseminating information
- Culture and religion
- 'Feeling different' and Islamophobia
- Finance
- Location

## **General considerations**

### Prayer

Youth exchange programmes need to provide time and facilities for prayer. Parents will want to know that the organisers will remind their children to pray. Therefore, organisers will need to know prayer times and ensure that the young people know where the prayer facilities are.

However, many participants emphasised that they were flexible about the accommodation of prayers, such as the need to wash before praying, and would not want this to become a major issue:

Not saying: 'Now is prayer time!' But knowing that there is that indirect kind of sense that there are breaks around; I can do this work and I know that I can pray. Not making it stand out to people, saying: 'These people are leaving to go and pray', which would make you feel uncomfortable.

I was the only Muslim on that trip, but I found a way to pray which was quite easy. I didn't really ask about it before I went, because I was a bit shy about it back then. But it was very easy to cope with praying and stuff like that.

### Halal food

Although halal food was mentioned as a requirement, vegetarian food would be acceptable, and again, the participants demonstrated much flexibility:

... if you go to another land and there is no halal then you are allowed to eat of the food there is. So, it's brilliant if there is halal food, but I think that's difficult for you to ask an organisation, just because I am the only Muslim on this trip, 'can you provide everything'. [However] if you were catering for Muslims then that's a different kind of thing.

### Accommodation

Separate sleeping accommodation and washing facilities for young men and women are required; a good distance from each other, and preferably on different floors or on different corridors. A few female participants stipulated a need for separate buildings.

## Design and organisation of the programme

### Design

Both parents and youth should be actively involved in the programme design, preferably identifying areas of interest, and then shaping the programme around that. Youth exchange programmes should have “proper evidence, accreditation” and “something that you could really put solidly on your CV, to say that: ‘I have participated in this programme’”. It would be beneficial if participating in the programme could be built upon and contribute to other qualifications or lead to a higher level activity, such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme levels of bronze, silver and gold. This would keep participants in touch with the organising body for a longer period of time and also attract new participants. It was suggested that the benefits of participating, including accreditation and validation, should be stressed in any publicity. There should also be follow-up activities.

Designers and organisers of youth exchange programmes should be knowledgeable about Islam. Staff and other non-Muslim participants should have a prior understanding of ‘what Islam is all about’, so that Muslims on the programme are seen positively by all, with consequent benefits for intra-group communication and cooperation. Moreover, this could be a core aim of an exchange programme:

Non-Muslims are not aware of what a real Muslim is, so there should be an exchange showing Muslims in their mosque, in their community, so that non-Muslims can understand more about Muslims.

Exchanges could also take place between Muslims from different schools of thought or versions of Islam, and different beliefs and practices. Recognising this diversity was considered important because, ‘You can’t fully know everything about Islam’:

Everyone has got a different point of view and you can’t judge all of them.

If you think of a Muslim you think of praying, Koran, headscarf, that’s not what we are. Even in Islam everyone has got the opportunity to choose themselves whether, for example, they want to wear the hijab.

Some suggested that there could be exchanges with Muslim countries, including, for example visits to Mecca or Medina, not specifically for Hajj.<sup>20</sup> However, a majority thought that exchanges and their locations should be more diverse to encourage people to learn more about other faiths and cultures, as discussed below in ‘Incorporating Islam’.

It was also recommended that everyone going on an exchange should learn about the target culture, including something about its language. Opportunities should be taken to link with people beforehand and to create a respectful and reciprocal atmosphere from the start.

## Organisation

Participants and parents should have the opportunity to meet each other and get to know the staff members involved from the outset. Workshops would be very useful for all potential participants and their parents, particularly for parents of girls. These issues are examined in more detail below. For some, it was important to know others who were going, so that they would be in their 'own comfort zone'.

It is important that mechanisms of communication between parents and young people on the programme are clarified. Contact by e-mail or phone would aid 'a sense of security'.

Some Muslims travelled far on holiday to their families' countries of origin, and so it is important to plan and agree dates well in advance for them to be able to shape their holidays around the exchange. Visits would need to avoid exam times and clashes with religious holidays such as Ramadan, Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha to improve participation levels.

It was also viewed to be important to provide a clear programme structure and itinerary at the early stage of promoting the exchange to instil confidence and trust in both potential participants and their parents:

That is quite important because then people can see what it is you are actually doing, you are not just going there for a party, or just leisure, ...they can see that there is something going to be done each day, and what it is that they are doing.

I went to a presentation [about a specific exchange programme], that was so haphazard. It seemed like [the organisers] were trying to do something last minute with the money, it seemed like it was being made up as it went along. So, I think there has got to be a lot of planning beforehand as to what the point is...if [not] then why can that money not be spent somewhere else, to help our own community, rather than doing something which is half hearted for someone else.

## **Content and focus of programme**

The purpose of the trip was a crucial point identified by the focus groups. When asked what they wanted from an exchange programme, they said that they should 'offer something new', and provide tangible and new training or skills. Young Muslims are more likely to participate if the youth exchange has a clear educational focus, for example learning about people from different cultures and about different countries.

Although most focus groups discussed the importance of education, especially to encourage parental consent, the charitable nature of the exchange was a distinct priority for some. There was greater interest in participating in something that was beneficial, that would benefit the community and do some good – "to actually, practically, do something" - rather than simply a social activity which, they considered, could not be justified.

When I think about going on such expeditions, I think about helping people build schools, teaching HIV awareness, finding out stuff...not just to see what it is like...but to do something that makes a difference.

They need also to be exciting and develop opportunities for young people:

You have to have something ... to make them feel: 'yes, I could make a difference'. It's difficult to do that these days, there are not that many opportunities going around, there are all these youths hanging around all these centres, and there is an increase in youth crime, and it's because they don't have that sort of ambition, they need opportunities.

There was no agreement about a religious focus. Some argued that an exchange would be their preference "If there are pursuits Islamically, that Muslims like to do". However, others expressed a wish to visit places of other religions. It was argued that any barrier was due to a 'cultural mentality' rather than religion:

My mum would be, it's another place of worship, go and see. So, it's not Islam as such, it's the cultural thing behind it.

### **Identifying individual needs**

As this project emphasises and demonstrates, Muslims are individuals with as many variations in interests, values and opinions as can be found in any other community.

Therefore, exchange programmes must address the individual needs of young Muslims in the same way as they should for any individual from any other community.

It would be useful if organisations collected more detailed information from those going on exchanges, inviting them to identify and detail their specific needs. This information could be collected when individuals applied for exchanges. They could be invited to express their interests, likes and dislikes in the application form, including, for example, a preference to lodge with a family of a certain faith.

### **Incorporating Islam**

As our statistics demonstrate (see Figure 11), 77% of the participants believed that Islam is compatible with youth exchanges. It was explained that whether Islam is viewed as compatible depends on the particular interpretation of Islam and how 'strict' or 'traditional' young people and their parents are. It was also evident that flexibility was needed on both the side of the organiser as well as the participant. For example, some participants expressed that the organisation must be willing to accommodate 'Islamic values' within their programme:

I don't think it is about being compatible or not compatible. I think if youth exchanges are adapted to Islam, then it might be reasonable.

If we want to take out time to remember our God, and pray...so if we can get flexible timing on praying I don't think there is anything that would stop us going if it is following our rules.

If it is set for us that 'you should do this, you should do that', we can't work around that, we cannot make compromises. So, if we are going for an exchange programme we cannot miss our priorities like prayers. If everything is done in a halal way, then it's ok.

Such a 'halal way' would include women being accompanied by a male relative (i.e. someone who they cannot marry); providing opportunities to pray; and ensuring that there was halal meat and no alcohol. Another added that Islam was compatible if certain rules were followed, such as segregated sleeping quarters for males and females. Making such adjustments would mean that the programmes would be compatible for both parties- the organisations would see greater take-up and Muslim youth would participate.

Conversely, other participants held that religion should be flexible and adaptable to such activities:

If it does make us a good person I don't think we should be ignorant... we should work around religion and not make religion work around us.

Despite the many different individual interpretations of the impact of their religious beliefs on their possible participation, it was agreed that Islam was compatible with youth exchange programmes that had a clear educational focus:

It is pretty much a religious imperative to gain knowledge.

I think Islam is all about education...it doesn't want you to be ignorant...

Many also viewed Islam as compatible with cultural exchanges:

Islam, on the opposite, encourages the integration of different cultures and societies and people from different countries. So I think something like this is welcomed by Muslims.

The groups also emphasised that respect of the religious and cultural values of others was equally important. They explained that respecting others was a requirement of Islam:

We want respect between religions and not just for us. We want this opportunity to be given to all religions rather than just Muslims. So, it is not just to give us the opportunity for our prayers, we want it to be privileged for everyone, so it is not just favouring Islam.

Islam is also 'about helping others', and would therefore encourage participation in youth exchange programmes that centred on charitable work:

...if a member of the Muslim community shows [Muslim youth] this is really beneficial Islamically, and is good charity work and doing good deeds, then that would also be a good incentive for them to go.

Overall, it was considered that:

Religion wants you to go and open your eyes and see other cultures and broaden your minds a little bit. There are some kind of barriers, but they are not extreme barriers.

However, it was also frequently argued that, whereas their faith was compatible, aspects of some cultures were not: “Islam is, Pakistani culture isn’t”. Nevertheless, whether considered to be cultural or religious, the values of their community were generally accepted to be congruent with the idea of youth exchanges, with some participants suggesting that Muslims and their communities needed to engage more with the cultures of others:

One thing, as a community, we are not used to going around, going out of our way to learn other people’s cultures. To learn about what different people do. And I think this would actually help Islam, to seek for knowledge.

Us Muslims need to stop ... saying we want everybody to do everything for us. We want everyone to accommodate us, but we don’t want to know about them. How about the people who don’t eat halal food, for example, and they have to entertain that, because we want it that way? So we have got to look at it from two points. If we want to go away somewhere we have to make sure that we are just as accepting towards them as what we are expecting them to be towards us.

## **Gender**

Mixed accommodation was more of a concern for women, and many explained that they (and their parents) would need their overnight accommodation and washing facilities to be segregated from boys, with some preferring a separate building from them.

A few female participants suggested that the issue of dress and modesty would be much easier to address in single-sex exchanges, and a very small minority of women suggested that a female group, run by a female staff member, would be more acceptable and compatible with Islam. The idea of single sex groups and exchanges was also suggested to prevent any haram or forbidden forms of contact between the sexes. However, most women argued that exchanges should be mixed gender, with accommodation made for additional privacy for those that required it. There was some experience of this.

We have at the moment a group doing the Duke of Edinburgh Award. It’s a small group of about 10 people, girls and guys. And we go out in the mountains for hiking, walking, overnight sleep and everything. We all walk together, as a big group, not too close. Overnight, girls sleep in a tent, guys sleep in a different tent. But we are still close so that if anyone needs help, we help each other.

Although views differed on the obligations of the two sexes towards their religion and culture, it was generally agreed that these should be balanced with the benefits of finding out about different cultures:

If you go on an exchange, it gives you not only the benefit of the exchange, it gives you the benefit of learning about different cultures. Exchanges should be a high priority because you are learning about things like charity, which is very strong in Islam. You are learning to be selfless.

Similarly, against those who supported restrictions on women travelling in order to meet family obligations, many argued that education should be considered as a priority:

I don't think you should sacrifice education. Even in Islam, education is a must...your priorities are what you need to focus on. So, if you can learn what you can within the nation, or within the local community, you don't have to go international to do that. And if you do, why don't you do it in a halal way.

On the subject of mahrams, this was not seen as an obstacle for most woman or their parents when considering a youth exchange:

...they don't really practice that. It's only if you really go to Hajj, the pilgrimage, that's when they really adhere to it.

It was explained that even Muslim scholars disagree as to whether women need a mahram, and business women often travel on their own without chaperone. In general, although this requirement was a reality for some, it was something that many thought could be worked around, particularly if more strenuous efforts were made to help parents understand that it would not always be possible to have a mahram on youth exchanges. If the purpose of a mahram was safety, this was implicitly ensured by virtue of the size of the group, and the supervision of older people with the assistance of male and female workers.

However, for families that insisted that a woman could not travel and stay away from her family for more than three days without a 'protector', then this issue could only be accommodated by allowing a father or brother to travel with them on the exchange:

If we can travel with someone who we can't marry, then that would be convenient for us as well.

Other suggestions were that a brother and sister or young married couples could be encouraged to go together on the exchange.<sup>21</sup> Female-only groups or female-led and male-led sections of a larger group could also be considered.

Views on these gender issues differed widely, and many urged that the rules about travelling and ‘covering up’ should only be seen as guidelines. Many women also emphasised that these rules should not be viewed negatively as ‘barriers’ or ‘obstacles’ because they did not serve to oppress them. It was their own personal choice to follow them, and it was actually beneficial to women to do so. There were diverse views on this: some believing that women should be able to travel without a close male relative; others had never even heard this view prior to this focus group discussion.

### **Involvement of parents**

To help overcome the major barrier of parental consent, there was general agreement that parents needed to be approached and consulted directly about youth exchange possibilities. Their children could not always be relied upon to tell their parents exactly what they needed to know:

I am not going to just tell them I want to go on this youth exchange programme. I have to tell them where it is, how long, what it is for, what I am getting out of it and stuff like that. They would probably be ok; they would come here to find out more about it. Then they would probably find out that there are other Muslims going.

Information needs to be provided to parents on youth exchanges, including events lists and information packs, so that they are aware of what is involved and to allay any concerns.

Leaflets to parents, directly or indirectly via their children, were thought to be of little use on their own. Direct interaction with parents was required to allow them to put a face to the organisation or scheme, and to ask any questions and discuss any anxieties or concerns with the organisers. A common suggestion was for parents to have the opportunity to participate in parent evenings or workshops about upcoming youth exchanges. This would allow them to learn more about the programmes and the destinations, as well as give them the opportunity to meet the organisers, the other parents, the other participants, and to see whether there would be other Muslims accompanying their children, either as staff or other participants. According to the participants, questions raised by parents are likely to include:

- *What are they going to be staying near?*
- *Are they going to be near mosques, schools, libraries?*
- *Are they going to be near clubs and bars?*
- *Are girls and boys going to be on different floors?*
- *Are they going to have unisex or different bathrooms?*

If parents are given positive answers to these questions, it was argued, there would be fewer objections raised later, and the children will have less of a struggle to convince them. Indeed this might result in the parents encouraging the children to participate.

Focus group participants listed the following important elements for these workshops:

- Having a representative from the major organisation at briefings, for example from the British Council as well as from any intermediary organisation, and include their staff members in the workshops so that the parents get to know them. This would explain their role and provide information about how much input they are going to have in the exchange.
- Parents would gain a more positive view of the organisers if they were shown that an integrated group was involved in the organisation of the exchange, with Muslim people amongst those in charge.
- The organisers should demonstrate that they have knowledge of Islam and other religions, and the implications that different faiths have for the exchange programme:

If the parents know that the people, leaders or other participants, are aware of what it is to be a Muslim, and what you have to do, then maybe they would feel more comfortable with sending them. If your parents know that the people you are going with know that you can't drink alcohol, and they know that you are not going to engage in certain social activities then maybe they would be more comfortable, because they know that other people are informed as well.

- Enable parents to get to know other parents of young people intending to go on the exchange.
- Provide information about the place that the exchange is going to, what is going to happen, why they are going and who they are going with.
- Presentations could be given by previous participants and their parents, who could relate their experiences of the exchange and the barriers they had to overcome to participate in and support the exchange. This may take the form of a cultural evening in which parents and overseas exchange visitors could participate and thereby develop awareness and understanding amongst parents.
- Information about funding and the full costs involved for the exchange programme.
- Show videos of previous exchanges and their activities and locations.
- Provide information packs to be taken away and considered at home, and possibly circulated amongst the wider community.
- After a period of time another event could be organised for parents to ask for more information at that stage.

Further research is necessary to examine the views of parents directly, rather than indirectly via their children, if such perceptions and assumptions are to be verified.

## Intergenerational work

It was suggested that it would be helpful to bring both generations together to look at the information about the exchange and to discuss the issues raised in the focus groups. These events could include a range of activities, including barbecues, as a way of linking parents with the youth, and to help parents gain enough confidence and trust in their own children to allow them to participate in an exchange. Efforts would need to be made, however, to ensure that parents and youths do not congregate in separate groups, that discussions are held jointly, and that young people are encouraged to speak up in front of their parents, possibly through some kind of activity or game to bring people together.

## Intermediaries and building trust with organisations

People may be more likely to participate if they have had previous contact with an organisation, or if the organisation is well-known with a good reputation. Many argued that intermediaries, such as mosques, local community groups, youth groups or Muslim organisations, were necessary in order to extend the reach of youth exchange programmes as well as to gain the trust of participants and their parents: 'I don't think I would have been able to go to Palestine if it wasn't for the YCSA'.<sup>22</sup>

## Widening inclusion

Although, as the responses to the ballot question on this issue illustrate, there was not a consensus about the general necessity of involvement of intermediaries, they were considered to be vital for the inclusion of the most marginalised Muslim communities. In broader terms, it was also suggested that a certain type of Muslim would end up on a youth exchange programme. They tend to be middle class with a good education, such as university and college students with access to more information about exchanges, and living away from home.

It was suggested that youth exchanges could extend their reach to those from a working class background by engaging with the structures that are already in the community and have earned its trust: *masjids*<sup>23</sup>, mosques, community centres and programmes that are already running:

... if you did come from the British Council, then quite frankly, it would be like: 'well, here's another government-funded programme to try and assimilate us and take us away from our values and what we are about'...it's about engaging with the structures that are already there. You are losing out by not doing that. You can save an awful lot of money by engaging with them, and going out to the community and getting those groups to talk to these people. And the imams, they have been getting flak, and sometimes quite rightly so, but at the end of the day, for some reason or another, they are quite highly regarded in our community...you have got to think of parents who are coming from a traditional working class class Pakistani Asian family...in terms of attracting them you are going to have to go right back into community level.

<sup>22</sup>The YCSA facilitated our focus group in Glasgow. It is one of the leading youth organisations in Glasgow with expertise in working with young people from ethnic minorities and more recently with all young people. See: [www.ycsa.org.uk](http://www.ycsa.org.uk)

<sup>23</sup>'Masjid' is the Arabic term for a mosque.

## Building trust

In order to have trust and confidence in the organisation running the exchange, it was important for many of the participants to already know the organisation, and for it to have a good reputation and be able to demonstrate that they had experience of organising exchanges:

I think it is important to people to know that they [the organiser] have taken other groups of young people, or they have worked with young Muslims before. Because, say YCSA, they have got a background of working with Muslims and they know they are ok with issues that might arise, so people might feel comfortable with them, than going with a group that have never worked with Muslims.

The issue of trust was considered to be particularly important to parents:

I think the parents need to have faith in the group. There should be a link between the parents and the group. The organisers or the leaders of the group should talk to the parents and find out their fears.

Parents need to be reassured that their children will be safe under the care of the organisers, and they would also be particularly concerned about whether Islamic beliefs would be respected and upheld.

To help develop such trust, a reputable Muslim organisation or individual (for example, a local imam known to the parents) needs to support the exchange, giving respectability to the whole Islamic aspect of the exchange:

There are certain established community members that have got a good reputation, people trust them, they are reliable, and what you will find is if you go to these people and say that you want them to be here, and invite maybe fifty people to come to this place, they will just come, because they have that sort of support and trust and reliability. So, within the Muslim community generally, people will trust these individuals and you will get the cohort of the community come to the meeting by that means.

It was also suggested that someone well known in the community should accompany the group on the exchange to encourage and enable participation. These community networks could also work in favour of circulating information to positive effect, where if one person participated this could trigger others feeling more comfortable.

Parents would tell parents more. They are really good friends, they see each other a lot. So my mum would hear from her mum.

Some also argued that Muslim staff on youth exchanges were needed to gain the trust of youth and their parents, but there were diverging views on this issue, and others – including female participants - held that a white, non-Muslim male would be more acceptable to parents as the face of an organisation or scheme even over an Asian Muslim male:

My mum is happy for me if I am going somewhere far away and have a male with me, but would trust a non-Asian male more. That's cultural.

Indeed, some parents also had reservations about Muslim organisations because of the twin fears of radicalisation and of state surveillance and stereotyping: "Because you have got that scarf around your head you are a target".

...if Muslim organisations want me to come and help them, my parents say: 'be careful'. My parents have both said: 'why are you getting involved with that organisation? Are you going to become radical?'... It can be jokey, but at one point my parents said: 'you are getting involved with Muslims now, and if you are going to get involved with the wrong [ones], then you know what the right thing is and you know what Islam teaches. So if you are on the wrong path we are not going to support you because it is against Islam'.

However, views differed on the effect of a representative of the British Council in London approaching a family, rather than a local Muslim community worker. For some, this would represent something progressive, an opportunity to move forward in society, and therefore a positive approach. Others would have more confidence in a person who was known and trusted in the local community. The link between the British Council and the Foreign Office could be a valuable element since parents who have not heard of the British Council will know that the Foreign Office is reputable and, as part of government, has a public duty to look after those in its care. Experience of working with the Foreign Office would also be considered to be valuable in terms of future employment prospects of their children. However, some others had shown a concern about the link with government and whether this indicated a link to the 'Prevent agenda', as discussed above.

## **Organisers**

It was emphasised that any organisers should be knowledgeable about Islam. If there were Muslim staff members involved in organising the programme, this would help develop trust and ensure that the needs of young Muslims are included. Having Muslim employees as organisers and group leaders would also allow parents and young people to ask questions that they may not feel comfortable about asking non-Muslims:

They would know what you would be thinking...things like issues of drinking, or if you get harassed sexually by a guy there, that would be a big issue for us Muslim girls.

I personally feel that a non-Muslim wouldn't take me as seriously when I am making that complaint against someone in the youth group; they would think it was something, well, if other Muslims were there ... I feel they would understand me more. I would have more capacity, like a resource.

## Widening inclusion and disseminating information

There was a consensus that better promotion and understanding of youth exchanges was needed. The target group participants in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in particular, felt that such information was failing to reach them, and that “You have to promote to young Muslims in Northern Ireland itself, to make them aware”. It is important, for example, to access schools and community places, and provide more specific information to them through presentations to groups. Communications across the Muslim community are needed in order to be able to publicise such opportunities. It was acknowledged that the organiser may not have the resources to target all these groups; however they could work with grassroots organisations such as mosques and local community centres who could assume that role.

Such direct contact and discussion with organisers or such intermediaries would provide the best opportunity to clearly explain and discuss what is involved, and help challenge pre-set ideas of youth exchanges:

If someone talks about youth exchanges to me I automatically think about France, learning French, being in a stranger’s house with dry meals. That’s not necessarily the case; we all know that, right? So, if you just sort of sit down and have discussions with people about what is involved, and what you can do to make it more exciting, just allowing people to have more awareness of what it actually means to be on a certain project, how flexible it is.

Focus groups listed the following possibilities to target for the more effective dissemination of information:

*Areas with relatively large Muslim populations.* Also Muslim societies in universities play a big role in organising social events, Islamic lectures and charity drives, as well as providing a platform to advertise upcoming events.

*Schools* (for the 14 to 16 years old age group) because ‘that is when they are learning what they want to do in their life’. Schools with a majority of Muslim students could be targeted with presentations about what the exchange programmes are about; “in actually getting them to understand that this is a viable alternative to them, this isn’t just a pie in the sky dream”.

*Muslim Organisations* can provide information to youths and parents, and they can also help publicise exchanges at specific community events. Many Muslim organisations reach a diverse range of people, and acting through such groups would provide reassurance that the needs of Muslims would be met.

*Mosques and imams* are an effective way of promoting and providing information on youth exchanges to the most marginalised Muslim communities. Indeed, the Belfast Islamic Centre provided us with a very large focus group by advertising and promoting the activity on their website, and by asking participants to come along between prayer times. Mosques could post advertisements on specific significant occasions, such as Eid, or Friday prayers, to promote these exchanges or make

announcements about them. This had to be with enough time for people to make plans and be able to take up the opportunities offered.

If they tell the mosque and the mosque tell us, then we'll tell our friends. Then friends will [tell] friends. I think it'll get about fast, but no-one comes to us.

Mosque-based publicity could challenge or reassure parents that a particular exchange tied in with their traditional values, and parents would be more likely to provide their consent because 'they could not really deny it on a religious basis':

If the imams are all brought on board, and they all know what is going on and they are comfortable with it and they are then telling the parents of the children, the parents are running out of obstacles to put in front of the children.

It was noted that large mosques tend to do a lot of work with non-Muslim organisations. We were told that many people think that you have to be a Muslim organisation to approach a mosque, which is not the case.

*Social networking* is a free resource and can be very helpful in accessing large numbers of people. Through them one can get to know other people going on the exchange and keep people in touch after an exchange. It was suggested that a *Facebook* group would be a good start, as it would facilitate the dissemination of information to young Muslim people and encourage networking. This would help address communication needs across a geographically dispersed population:

There has to be a link, a social networking site which we are all on, like *Facebook*. Keep in touch with people, see what they are up to, get interested in each other's hobbies and activities, places they go.

In Scotland a variety of other social networking sites were suggested to use to advertise the exchanges, such as, GUMSA (Glasgow University Muslim Students Association); SUMSA (Strathclyde University Muslim Students Association); CUMSA (Caledonian University Muslim Students Association), and FOSIS (Federation of Student Islamic Societies) which overlooks all the networks of all the Muslim associations in Scotland. Having a place where one can access information and have questions answered, without actually approaching someone, is beneficial.

*Websites*: it was viewed to be very important to have updated information about exchange opportunities on the websites of organisers and their intermediaries.

*Newspapers* disseminate information to the Muslim community, particularly local newspapers.

*Street work*: getting information out to a wider range of young people was recognised as a particular challenge, and it was suggested that getting previous participants in exchanges to go out and do street work, give presentations in a variety of settings, put up posters in key locations where people would definitely see the information, would get young people interested.

*Word of mouth* can be an effective medium: “Most of the people that went on the actual trip knew each other through work”. Such word of mouth would spread between parents and youths at mosques.

### Useful information

It is vital that the information that is disseminated is useful and detailed, and stresses what a participant would gain from an exchange, such as a focus on charity, being selfless, working for people in distress, or educational work.

Considering the importance placed on parental consent and trust, access to useful and detailed information was also important for parents. Since safety is a major anxiety, especially for parents, then it is very important to provide useful and detailed information about the exchange programme and the destination prior to the exchange. Parents need to be reassured that their children are going to a safe environment and that there will be support available should they get injured, for example.

Parents also need to understand the value of the experience, e.g. “more education provided to the parents that broadening your mind by travelling is genuinely a good thing”, in order for them “to be able to make an informed choice”.

There was felt to be a need for youth and parents to know that their cultural and religious differences would be considered and respected and that there would be flexibility in the programme, for example regarding their need to pray at specific times. Therefore, the consideration of their requirements (for example, prayer times, segregation of sleeping and washing facilities, halal food) must be clearly stated.

It was considered important to gather such information about an individual’s needs prior to a trip:

Everything was explained, I was asked if I had any specific needs, and I thought that was good.

Both young people and parents need detailed information about the culture of the host country, to overcome any unnecessary anxieties. To encourage participation, they will want to have detailed information on why a particular destination has been chosen:

Education as to the location of the place where they are going, the sort of society there is, the history that that place has, and how much of a difference this would make to their children’s wellbeing, their mentality in general. The fact that they learn that Glasgow isn’t the end of the world basically.

Information must also provide a clear account of any laws that may affect them in the host country such as the extent and implications of the French laws affecting Muslim dress. It was obvious, for example, that what they had previously heard had raised concerns about whether they would be welcome in France.

The programme itself must be detailed and clearly explained. It was felt to be important to know the itinerary before actually agreeing to participate, including detail on the content. This would allow potential participants to decide whether it was well organised and the extent to which it was a valuable use of their time:

You want to know: how much benefit can I actually bring to these people by going, and is it going to bring me any benefit? Am I going to learn from it, and am I going to grow as a person? Because obviously you don't want to have an organisation pay so much money and, what did I get out of it? I just had a holiday, I got to see things. I might have been able to do something, like maybe help one place, but I don't feel like I have improved anyone's life.

It was also viewed as important to educate the group about Islam, as others might have preconceptions about their faith that are not necessarily true.

### **Culture and religion**

Within the Muslim community, it was suggested there was a need to educate parents about Islam and what it prevents and what it allows, because this gets merged with culture. In effect, they argued that culture and religion are two different things:

The Pakistani tradition and culture does not feasibly work with Islam and religion. We use all these traditional touches in our culture to corrupt religion and make it into what we want it to be and in actual fact it is not.

However, their own interpretations of what is meant by 'culture' and 'religion', and the difference between them, also differed a great deal. Although it could be argued that individual freedom to interpret religion is the most important thing to respect, it could be suggested that the organisers, the youth, and the parents, would benefit from more learning and discussion of Islam and how it impacts on such community activities.

### **'Feeling different' and Islamophobia**

The anxiety about feeling different, and the concern over Islamophobia, both from others in the group, or from people in the host country, meant that many participants thought it would be important to know whether there would be other Muslims, and other people that young Muslims feel they can trust, on the trip:

If you are on your own, you might feel uncomfortable. Whereas, if you have got a Muslim friend with you, along with other [non-Muslim] people. Some parents would feel more comfortable if you have other Muslims with you.

This was particularly the case for women:

From a female perspective, you would want another sister to be there, you would just feel more comfortable with it.

As stated above, some argued that Muslims would only participate in a Muslim-only exchange. However, many considered that having all kinds of differences in the group would be beneficial. They indicated a preference for exchange groups with good relations between people from different religions, and in which you felt free to express the “independence of your own religious practices”.

In some countries, it was argued, they expect visitors to be ‘white tourists’. There was, it was considered, no provision for Muslims coming into those countries. They suggested that the exchange organisers might be able to have some influence on this, at least in relation to the facilities on their programmes.

Regarding the issues faced particularly by young males at airports, it was acknowledged that youth exchange organisers do not have control over airport staff or airport security policy. However, a useful example was cited whereby, on an exchange to Palestine, each participant had a letter from the organiser that could be shown to security staff to confirm the reason for their travel. An employee of the organiser accompanied the group, and this also had a positive impact.

## **Finance**

The total financial cost, as well as any possible concessions, must be clearly communicated. It was felt that Muslim youth groups do not get as much funding as other youth groups, such as the Boys Brigade; if they could get more funding, they could do more activities. It was explained that many young Muslims come from working-class backgrounds and so clear information about the cost of exchanges was very important. It needs to be very clear what is funded and what participants are required to pay:

The Muslim community has a lot of people that are not necessarily from privileged backgrounds, so cost is a significant issue. If it is broken down and there is a clear line of what they are required to pay, that's another incentive.

## **Location**

Exchange programmes need to be clear about destinations. Parents would be more comfortable if the exchanges were to a location where there was an Islamic influence, such as Palestine or Istanbul:

But if you are going to go to some place which has never been touched by the light of Islam then they [parents] are going to be less comfortable sending their children away.

However, as discussed above, if the reason for the exchange is clearly educational, charitable or cultural, such barriers can be overcome for most youth and parents.

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

Youth exchange programmes can make an important contribution to cultural relations, community cohesion and mutual dialogue. By providing an opportunity to exchange ideas and experience different cultures, people can learn to understand and trust each other. Individuals participating in such programmes can maintain their values and norms to some degree, but they need to open themselves up to different cultures in order to experience them and learn from them. Only then can they discover commonalities across cultures and develop greater understanding and acceptance of the views and values of others. Similarly, youth exchanges that seek to accomplish a charitable goal will inevitably require participants to be flexible regarding their own chosen values and their usual and preferred 'way of life'.

As illustrated in their positive and enthusiastic identification of solutions to barriers, a majority of the participants in this research were fully aware of the need for such flexibility in order to reap the benefits of youth exchanges, and they expressed a clear willingness to do so. Such opportunities were seen to reflect the Islamic pursuit of knowledge and the understanding of other faiths and cultures, as well as its belief in charity. Perhaps more crucially, the participation of this large majority would not actually require any substantial flexibility by them or in the design of the programme.

As the research findings demonstrate, this is not to say that there were no broad differences in opinions. There were many discussions about religious practice, and how faith and culture impact on the possibility of participation in youth exchanges. There was a broad spectrum of views from liberal to conservative, reflected in the degree of flexibility that each participant would be willing to take in order to participate. However, only a very small minority had such a conservative or traditional interpretation of their faith or culture that would significantly obstruct the possibility of their inclusion in a youth exchange, or had parents that would firmly oppose their participation from such a position, particularly if certain small adjustments and accommodations were made.

Of course, as indicated above, flexibility is required on both sides: by participants as well as the organisers that design and deliver the programmes. Mutual dialogue and understanding requires us all to meet each other half way. As is often the case in cultural relations work, such a position requires a careful balance between *cultural relativism* and *ethnocentrism*. That is, between the polar opposites of accepting and accommodating all cultural differences as equally valid (cultural relativism) and imposing particular cultural values as superior to all others (ethnocentrism). Here, the question is how far should or can an organiser go to accommodate the more isolating individual choices in values and beliefs shown by a very small minority? If an individual wishes to interpret their faith in such a way that they are not open to engagement with other cultures, then there is little point in accommodating the additional requirements that would allow them to participate. Unless you can encourage them to be

more open to others, then the additional costs in accommodating them would be fruitless as you would simply be transporting their isolated 'bubble' from one place to another. This would reflect a move towards cultural relativism. Moving towards ethnocentrism, you would need to persuade this individual that they *should* change their values to a more open and flexible position in order to gain the benefits of youth exchange programmes. The difficult solution is to find a middle way, where all those who are willing to be flexible and open are accommodated and included, and those who are not are fully informed of the benefits of participating and are given an opportunity to change their position and participate if they choose to do so.

An additional consideration here is to what extent do isolating interpretations of faith and culture truly reflect individual freedom of choice, as was often suggested by the participants. As with all other choices, they do not take place in a vacuum. Our identities are affected by our background and surroundings, and our choices in life are thus influenced by multiple social forces, including our family, friends and education.

Flexibility is also required by the other participants from other cultures as well as those in the host country. A concern for many participants, and a difficult obstacle to overcome for organisers, is the Islamophobic attitudes of others. However, as emphasised, the aim of many youth exchanges is precisely to develop mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue between participants, and between them and the host community. It is through such programmes that others would learn more about young Muslims in the same way that young Muslims could learn more about others. As many participants observed, they have stereotypes about others in the same way as others have stereotypes about them. As they also acknowledged, youth exchanges are opportunities to exchange ideas and learn about each other:

Most exchange programmes are, basically, 'I learn from you, you learn from me'. So, you are going over there to give them insight into Islam, so you are not going to change who you are because you stay with people for three days. If you go, you go to pick up what they have to offer and you give them what you have to offer...so essentially you are teaching them... it is our duty as Muslims to teach.

In order to overcome the initial obstacle of encouraging young people to travel to new destinations in the first place, organisers need to provide the opportunity to develop knowledge about the host communities and locations prior to the exchange to alleviate the concerns for both them and their parents.

There are also other obstacles that are hard to overcome, such as the impact of terrorism on the perception of Muslims, negative media representations of Muslims, and the laws of the host destinations that impose restrictions on Muslims. Also, some young people simply are not interested in participating in youth exchanges, whether they are Muslim or not.

With these considerations aside, the participants provided a variety of useful suggestions for overcoming many of the barriers that they identified. Most participants agreed on two factors: improving access to useful

information and involving themselves and their parents in youth exchange organisation. As with many of these factors, these two suggestions are interlinked. That is, parents require more information about youth exchanges.

Clear ways of extending the reach of useful information were suggested by the participants. Social networking sites can be used as a tool for broadening reach to young people more generally, and they also allow young people to discuss the possibilities between themselves and send the information to others. Local intermediaries can be used to help distribute information to the most marginalised Muslim communities, with mosques being another useful site for the discussion and sharing of information.

Regarding the inclusion of parents, this was viewed as essential in the light of the general agreement about the major obstacle of attaining parental consent. It was generally agreed that young Muslims are under the care of their parents longer than young people from most other communities. Therefore, parental concern for their safety, especially of daughters, as well as anxieties over faith or cultural-related issues, would have a major impact on the take-up of youth exchanges.

The participants also identified many obstructing views, values and concerns that they thought would be held by their parents, or the parents of others. Given the amount of emphasis put on the importance of parental consent, it is clear that future research needs to examine the views of parents directly rather than indirectly via their children. This recommendation is compounded by the observation that many males identified barriers to Muslim women's participation, but the women themselves often disagreed with them.

To overcome the barrier posed by parental consent, a strong recommendation was to involve parents in the design of youth exchanges so that they can be assured that their children are going to be safe, their values are going to be respected, and the programme is going to provide something that they would consider to be of educational or charitable value. Face-to-face discussions with organisers, accompanied by workshops or parents evenings, would also be a useful way to develop the trust of parents. This trust could also be developed through the support and inclusion of well-known and respected intermediaries, including Muslim organisations, local community groups, youth groups, and mosques, which can give programmes a reassuring stamp of approval.

Parental consent was also inter-linked with the issue of gender. Since parents were reportedly more protective of their daughters, and there was an observed tendency for this older generation to have more conservative and traditional views, parental consent would thus have more implications for the inclusion of young women than young men.

Whether such conservative and traditional views were held by the young women themselves, or by their parents, it is apparent that such beliefs have more implications for the participation of young women than young men, and so greater measures would be necessary to include them. However, the obstacles faced by most women would not require any significant alterations to the standard requests of women or parents from other faiths or cultures. For example, the practical issues relating to female dress, and

separate sleeping and washing facilities. It must be emphasised that the women that would require a 'mahram' or single-sex programmes were a very small minority. The women that did represent this minority emphasised that their faith could not be appropriately described as a 'barrier' because it reflected their own individual choice and their best interests, and should not be viewed as a form of female suppression. As many of the other participants argued, this choice would not be easily accommodated by youth exchange programmes.

Both sexes expressed a sense of 'feeling different' that may affect participation. Accentuated by the impact of Islamophobia, this feeling caused anxiety about travelling with others, passing through airport security, and going to unknown places. Although more obstacles relating to Muslim faith and culture were generally experienced by women, young men were affected more by external issues relating to the impact of terrorism, such as airport security problems. A suggested solution was the provision of an official signed letter from the organiser that could be given to participants and shown to airport security.

An issue which divided participants was the distinction between what was cultural or religious. It was generally argued that Islam teaches the pursuit of knowledge, learning about and respecting other cultures, and encourages involvement in charitable activities. However, it was claimed that many cultural values, particularly the more traditional cultural values of their parents, could conflict with these goals. Many spoke of a cultural divide between young people and the older generation.

It was also suggested that class played an important role, with youth exchanges seen to attract a certain type of Muslim with a middle class background and a university education. The underlying themes of culture and class needed further attention and so would be a useful focus for future research.

The above indicates that participants were able to provide many solutions to improve the participation of young Muslims. The research findings also demonstrate many practical solutions provided by the participants, such as, if required, using sand rather than water when washing before prayer, or eating vegetarian food if halal meat is unavailable. Indeed, such flexibility is part of everyday life for most people in the UK, Muslim or not.

Again, and to conclude this section, it should be emphasised that the amount of barriers discussed in this research project do not reflect the amount of obstacles that were faced by the majority of the participants. As participants were asked to identify barriers to the participation of young Muslims, rather than barriers to their own participation, they provided an extensive, if not exhaustive, list of potential obstacles, rather than only identifying barriers that would affect them personally. The first group discussion on barriers thus provided a negative and distorted picture that the participants were keen to address in the second group discussion that gave them the opportunity to offer positive solutions to any such obstacles potentially faced by themselves or others.

## Recurring themes

The following themes were identified in the research consultation meeting and in the focus group discussions:

<b>Research consultation meeting</b>	<b>Focus Group</b> (discussion on barriers)	<b>Focus Group</b> (discussion on encouraging participation)
Parental engagement	Parental consent	Involvement of parents, Intergenerational work
Gender issues	Gender	Gender
Information and communication	Information	Widening inclusion and disseminating information
Use of intermediaries, Whether the programme is organised internally or externally to the local community, Trust	Organisers	Organisers, Intermediaries and building trust with organisations
Type of exchange	Type of exchange	Content and focus of programme, Design and organisation of the programme
Financial barriers	Financial barriers (general considerations)	Finance
~	Location	Location
Understanding Islamic culture	~	Incorporating Islam, Culture and religion
Community knowledge and understanding of ethnic differences	Perceptions in the local community, Isolation	~
International political arena	'Feeling different' and Islamophobia, The impact of terrorism and the media, Airport security	'Feeling different' and Islamophobia
~	Mix of people in the exchange group	~
~	~	Identifying individual needs

As this table demonstrates, the participants of the research consultation meeting and the focus groups considered similar issues to be important in addressing the barriers to young Muslim participation in youth exchanges. The following provides a summary of the key common discussion points:

- The research meeting indicated that Muslim young women were particularly under-represented in youth exchanges, and the focus groups identified many reasons why this may be the case, as discussed above.
- Both forums also emphasised the importance of achieving trust, particularly from parents, and developing dialogue with the Muslim communities. There were divisions on the issue of using intermediaries, with the suggestion by some that they should at least be used to extend the reach of youth exchanges to the marginalised. However, there was much more resistance in the research meeting to the idea of using mosques.
- In order to design programmes that would appeal to young Muslims, there was a common belief that organisers must develop a good understanding of the diversity of ethnicities and cultures within Muslim communities.
- Both emphasised the importance of ensuring that information about youth exchange opportunities must be equally accessible to all young Muslims and other under-represented groups, with the focus groups also stressing the importance of *useful* information.
- There were similar observations about the amount of research that is focussing on Muslims. This raised concerns that this (generally unrequested) specific focus on Muslims could be counterproductive if the interests of other groups were not given equal or proportionate attention. There were also suspicions that such a focus was directly or indirectly linked to the Prevent agenda, especially since such interest in Muslims seems to have emerged since 9/11 and other Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks in Europe.
- Another common suggestion was the use of a broader age range in the research and the inclusion of schools.

These common observations and suggestions have been taken into consideration in developing the recommendations, presented in the following section.

# 5. Recommendations

The following recommendations emerge from the research findings.

1. Collect information about individual requirements in the application process. Consider, given the location and practicalities, whether and how these can be responded to. This should include issues such as dietary requirements, religious practices, sleeping accommodation and washing facilities. Publicity material about programmes should provide broad information on these issues. This information should also clearly state the total final costs of the exchange programme for the participants and any concessions available.
2. Information about youth exchanges should be very clear about the aim and objectives of the exchange. Emphasis should be placed on the opportunity these offer to learn about other people, which can result in changes in attitudes and behaviour, challenging of stereotypes, and positive cross-cultural interaction. Educational and any charitable aspects of the youth exchange should be stressed.
3. Consider timing of youth exchange programmes and any clash with major religious dates. For Muslims, if these clash with dates of Ramadan, Eid Al Fitr and Eid Al-Adha, for example, this may impact on levels of participation.
4. Provide a coherent and planned strategy for the promotion and dissemination of information and promotional material about youth exchanges. Use intermediaries, such as local Muslim community organisations, youth groups, schools and mosques to help circulate information to the most marginalised Muslim young people. Use social networking sites and the websites of local intermediaries as a means of extending the reach of information and promotional materials to Muslim young people.
5. Include young people and parents in the design and organisation of youth exchanges. This could include parents' evenings where young people and their parents could receive more information about the exchange face to face with the organisers as well as meet other parents and young people involved. Such evenings 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.
6. Include intermediaries, for example well known and respected figures and organisations of the local community, in the organisation and the promotion of youth exchanges. At the very least get their "stamp of approval" to help build the trust of parents and assure them that their children will be safe and their values respected. Such intermediaries could include the facilitators of this research, which would cover the UK nationwide.
7. If the exchange involves a flight, organisers should provide an

official letter on headed paper to all participants for them to show to airport security in order to confirm the reason for their travel. This should include a photograph of the participant.

8. Collect data on religion or belief categories in application, evaluation and scorecard processes. When collecting this information, consider the inclusion of 'Arab' or 'Arabic' in the list of options, as well as continuing to include the option of providing 'other' individual descriptions. Check what the categories are for the 2011 census to see if there will be comparable data for this new suggested category. Look at benchmark population data in the relevant age groups, plus seek relevant benchmark data for participation in other international youth programmes.
9. As part of the evaluation process of youth exchange programmes, participant feedback forms should include a section to provide comments on how well the programme addressed any specific needs in relation to their faith and/or culture. Space should be provided for comments to describe any problems they experienced, as well as suggestions for improvement.
10. It is essential that the momentum of this research project is kept going in terms of continued communication with the facilitators, the focus group participants and their broader communities. After reaching out to these communities and asking for their opinions, and assuring them that we care about their concerns and interests, this project could be counterproductive to the broader aims of *Our Shared Europe* if we fail to act on their feedback or communicate to them that we have done so. We must therefore continue our outreach work to these communities and to others, particularly those that we can identify as marginalised.

## 6. Suggestions for further research

1. As parental consent was considered as a major barrier to participation, we need to examine their views, anxieties, and interests directly, rather than indirectly through the perceptions of their sons and daughters. As participants suggested, this could be achieved by getting a group of parents together, and this could take the form of a series of regional meetings or focus groups. This focus could also provide a socio-economic profile of the parents to reveal more about their background and that of their children. Such research would also help expose parents to youth exchange opportunities, and potentially extend our reach to marginalised communities. By listening to the concerns and ideas of parents, this research will also help build the trust between parents and organisers that our research shows is essential for increasing participation.
2. Future research could also broaden the age range in order to capture the views of school children and their teachers. Such views would be useful for designing youth exchanges that would appeal to the next generation of potential participants. Many teachers will have extensive relevant knowledge and experience, and schools will also have useful data about the background of their young Muslim students. In addition, many other European youth programmes provide a broader age range, so such a change would reflect this norm.
3. Explore the sorts of historical visits that would contribute to giving young Muslims, and non-Muslims, a sense of the contribution that Muslims have made to the UK and to European society.
4. We need to interview any UK-based young Muslim participants of the OSE exchange programmes to collect their feedback on any barriers they experienced and how to avoid them in the future. The first pilot OSE youth exchange was taking place at the time of this research project.
5. Future research could examine the views of both parents and youth on class, culture and Islam. Additional focus groups or meetings of researchers, facilitators, young Muslims youths and their parents, could also be organised to delve deeper into some of the themes of discussion we have captured. For example, it may be fruitful to examine in more depth how the frequently expressed individual and autonomous interpretations of Islam of the youth reflect certain cultural, religious or family traditions.
6. It was suggested by some participants that we should also examine the inclusion of other faiths and ethnic groups in further research. As also observed in the research consultation meeting, it can be counter-productive and divisionary to have what may be considered to be a disproportionate focus on one particular marginalised group and not others. In addition, it is only possible to verify the extent to which certain findings are Muslim-specific through supplementary inter-cultural and inter-faith comparative research.

7. As *Our Shared Europe* and thus, its youth exchange programme, have a European focus, the aim is to roll out this research project in other European countries to provide a broader and comparative European study. Future research planning for both the UK and Europe should draw on any lessons learnt from this initial study and reflect on its methodology, findings and recommendations. To this end, a follow-up research consultation meeting could be organised for the research team and facilitators.

## 7. Spin-off benefits from the research

This research project helped us develop stronger 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 community. This was particularly the case in Belfast, where some participants commented that no-one really ever came to talk to them about such activities.

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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### **Websites**

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Erasmus ([www.britishcouncil.org/erasmus](http://www.britishcouncil.org/erasmus))

Global Xchange ([www.globalxchange.org.uk](http://www.globalxchange.org.uk))

International Climate Champions  
([www.britishcouncil.org/usa-science-projects-climate-champions.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/usa-science-projects-climate-champions.htm))

National Youth Agency ([www.nya.org.uk](http://www.nya.org.uk))

Our Shared Europe ([www.oursharedeurope.org](http://www.oursharedeurope.org))

UP2YOUTH ([www.up2youth.org](http://www.up2youth.org))

Youth Community Support Agency ([www.ycsa.org.uk](http://www.ycsa.org.uk))

Youth for Development ([www.vso.org.uk/volunteer/youth](http://www.vso.org.uk/volunteer/youth))

Youth in Action ([www.britishcouncil.org/youthinaction.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/youthinaction.htm))

# APPENDIX 1

## OUR SHARED EUROPE RESEARCH PROJECT EUROPEAN MUSLIMS AND YOUTH EXCHANGE OPPORTUNITIES FOCUS GROUP

Personal details form

Please complete the following form. This is anonymous data, which we only collect to ensure that we have consulted with a broad mix of people across the UK. Many thanks.

Are you:

- <sub>1</sub> A student (please state subject and school/college) \_\_\_\_\_
- <sub>2</sub> Employed (please state type of work) \_\_\_\_\_
- <sub>3</sub> Seeking work (please state what type) \_\_\_\_\_
- <sub>4</sub> Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

Gender – please tick below

- Female <sub>1</sub>
- Male <sub>2</sub>

Age – please write

Ethnic origin – please tick

(These are categories drawn from the national census, plus some additional options to reflect some local communities)

- <sub>1</sub> Asian – Bangladeshi
- <sub>2</sub> Asian – Indian
- <sub>3</sub> Asian – Pakistani
- <sub>4</sub> Asian – Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- <sub>5</sub> Black – African
- <sub>6</sub> Black – Caribbean
- <sub>7</sub> Black – Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- <sub>8</sub> Chinese
- <sub>9</sub> Kurdish
- <sub>10</sub> Mixed – White & Asian
- <sub>11</sub> Mixed – White & Black African
- <sub>12</sub> Mixed – White & Black Caribbean
- <sub>13</sub> Mixed – White & Other
- <sub>14</sub> Mixed – Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- <sub>15</sub> Turkish
- <sub>16</sub> White – British
- <sub>17</sub> White – English
- <sub>18</sub> White – Irish
- <sub>19</sub> White – Scottish
- <sub>20</sub> White – Welsh
- <sub>21</sub> White – Other White British
- <sub>22</sub> White – Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

If you do not feel that any of the above describe your ethnic origin, please tick the box below, and write in your details:

- <sub>23</sub> Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

## Your education – you can tick multiple boxes

- <sub>1</sub> Ph.D. or equivalent
- <sub>2</sub> Masters degree
- <sub>3</sub> Honours degree or the equivalent
- <sub>4</sub> Bachelors Degree
- <sub>5</sub> Diploma/certificate (e.g. technical, vocational) from an institute of higher or further education
- <sub>6</sub> 'A' levels
- <sub>7</sub> Technical/vocational certificate from institute of tertiary education
- <sub>8</sub> High school/secondary school certification (e.g. GCSEs or equivalent)
- <sub>9</sub> No education qualifications
- <sub>10</sub> Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

## BALLOT QUESTIONS

Question	Yes <sub>1</sub>	No <sub>0</sub>	Not sure <sub>2</sub>	Comments (optional)
1. Have you ever participated in a youth exchange programme? (national)				
2. Have you ever participated in a youth exchange programme? (international)				
3. Have you received any information about youth exchanges before?				
4. Have your parents received any information about youth exchanges?				
5. Have you travelled abroad in the last 10 years?				
6. Do you think you would need your parents' agreement to go on a youth exchange scheme?				
7. Should an intermediary organisation get involved (i.e. one in your community that you/your parents are more familiar with?)				
8. In your opinion, is Islam compatible with youth exchanges?				
9. Are there any issues that relate to your gender that might affect your participation?				
10. Are there any issues that relate to your religion or culture that might affect your participation?				
11. Is participation affected by who the organisers are?				
12. Please tick ONE of the following:  Do you usually socialise with:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Muslims and non-Muslims equally? <input type="checkbox"/><sub>1</sub></li> <li>•Mainly Muslims? <input type="checkbox"/><sub>2</sub></li> <li>•Mainly non-Muslims? <input type="checkbox"/><sub>3</sub></li> </ul>	COMMENTS:			

**Many thanks. Please fold this sheet over and give to the facilitator.  
April/May 2010**

# APPENDIX 2

## OUR SHARED EUROPE RESEARCH PROJECT EUROPEAN MUSLIMS AND YOUTH EXCHANGE OPPORTUNITIES

### FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

#### Research aims

To examine whether Muslim participation in youth exchanges is lower than it should be, and if so, what the reasons are, and how possible obstacles might be removed.

#### Background for the facilitator

On 12th December 2009, the British Council brought together twenty-five people involved in exchange programmes, local government, academia, and a wide range of Muslim organisations. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss the aims of our research, and capture the expert opinions of these participants, as well as to obtain their guidance on the design of the research programme. This Topic Guide identifies the following interrelated themes and conclusions from the discussion of the research aims in this meeting. The questions which are set out overleaf have been designed in order to explore these themes and to identify any further issues relating to participation.

#### Topic Themes

- Trust
- Parental engagement
- Use of intermediaries
- Information and communication
- Gender issues
- Whether the programme is organised internally or externally to the local community
- Type of exchange
- Community knowledge and understanding of ethnic differences
- Financial barriers
- Understanding Islamic culture
- International political arena

#### Conclusions

In the research meeting, there was general agreement that young people with Muslim backgrounds are under-represented in youth exchanges, and especially Muslim young women.

There was much said about the importance of achieving trust and developing dialogue with the Muslim communities. Achieving the trust of parents was considered to be particularly important. It was emphasised, therefore, that we must engage in dialogue with parents from the outset to ensure that we listen to their concerns and respect their values. We must

then clearly communicate to parents that their concerns and values have been respected and have also informed the design of our programmes.

In the absence of trust and long or close relationships, we were advised that we would need to use intermediaries and 'opinion-informers', such as community groups or youth workers, to facilitate focus groups and identify participants. There were differing opinions about whether imams and mosques should be used as such intermediaries.

We also need to be aware of and engage with the evolving and informal map of Muslim youth activity, organisations, connections, and networks, which were referred to in this meeting.

It was also deemed important to develop a good understanding of the diversity of ethnicities and cultures within Muslim communities. Such an understanding would help us to identify what types of exchanges are most suitable and preferred by whom, and why.

It was emphasised that information must be equally accessible so that all young Muslims and other under-represented groups are informed of such opportunities.

Some participants warned that targeting Muslims and not other under-represented groups could be divisive and thus counterproductive.

As for all communities, there was a general consensus that faith and culture combine with other categories of individual identity, such as class and gender, which all also have an impact on participation levels.

### **Facilitator role**

As indicated, this initial research meeting was also set up to inform our research design, which includes a series of focus groups with young Muslims who have been involved in youth exchange programmes, as well as those who have not, to identify key factors affecting participation. For each geographical location under study (Belfast, Bradford, Cardiff, Glasgow, London), focus groups will be run by facilitators that have already worked with young Muslim people in that area. The role of facilitator, as will now be outlined, has been developed in response to the feedback and guidance provided in the research meeting.

- To contribute their views on the draft research project topic guide, the questions to be discussed in the focus group, and the accompanying guidance.
- To liaise with the researcher to ensure that the research is carried out in a consistent manner across the UK.
- To identify a group of 16-20 young Muslims (18-25 years old) that reflects a diverse profile in terms of gender, social class and ethnic origin, and which gives consideration to inclusion of disabled people. The facilitator should provide a brief summary of the mix of the group in terms of these categories. This group should also comprise of those who have experience of participating in youth programmes as well as those who do not but have views on why they would or would not do so.

- To arrange a time and location for this group of young Muslims to meet for a focus group discussion (approximately 2 hours).
- To guide the focus group discussion and ensure all pre-identified questions are addressed. To encourage participation and responses.
- To ensure responses to the questions are captured (focus groups will be attended by a member of the British Council research team who will take notes and prepare a draft report for the facilitator to check).
- To check through and comment on the draft notes from the focus group discussion, which will be given to the facilitator by the British Council researcher.
- To participate in an expert group to explore the findings and comment on the emerging recommendations of the research study.

## **FOCUS GROUP FORMAT**

### **INTRODUCTION (15 minutes)**

Please introduce the overall aim and explain your role:

*To examine whether Muslim participation in youth exchanges is lower than it should be, and if so, what the reasons are, and how possible obstacles might be removed.*

Then introduce Gavin Moorhead and he will explain his role. Then introduce June Jackson and she will explain her role.

Then ask participants to introduce themselves.

#### **June Jackson**

Recording of focus group – to assist with writing up the notes.

The information provided will be anonymised and not linked to what individuals say.

#### **Gavin Moorhead**

*Why is the British Council undertaking this research?*

We want you to help us design youth exchange programmes that better reflect your interests. We also know that you are vital in helping us identify any existing barriers to participation in them. We want to know your ideas about improving them and any of your present concerns or anxieties about them.

For over 75 years, the British Council has been the UK's leading international cultural relations organisation seeking to develop intercultural learning and dialogue between local and international communities. To meet these aims, the British Council has developed youth exchange programmes in education, arts, science, sport and governance. Our projects reach over 112 million people a year in the UK and around the world.

Our projects are funded by such bodies as the European Commission and are designed and delivered in partnerships with such non-governmental organisations as the Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO). Examples are:

**Youth In Action:** [www.britishcouncil.org/youthinaction](http://www.britishcouncil.org/youthinaction)

**Global Xchange:** [www.globalxchange.org.uk](http://www.globalxchange.org.uk)

**Erasmus:** [www.britishcouncil.org/erasmus](http://www.britishcouncil.org/erasmus)

We have decided to specifically examine the views of young Muslims because our previous research and evaluation of our projects show that this group is participating less than any other groups, so we want to find out why this is the case and what we can do about it.

Just like everyone else, 'young Muslims' are of course a very diverse group - for example, in terms of gender, class, family country of origin, level of religious belief and cultural background. We hope to have captured this diversity in this series of focus groups, because we want to develop programmes that reflect the interests of all.

This is one of 6 focus groups that we will run across the UK in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. You are therefore helping us identify any similarities and differences in views across the UK. Your views will contribute to a research report that will examine the findings from all these focus groups in order to help us develop better and more informed youth exchanges for you and others in the future. You will have access to the results of our study, which you will have played an essential part in producing.

*What do we mean by 'youth exchange'?*

For the purpose of this research, the term 'youth exchange' refers to national or international activities which involve young people and taking them 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.

Explain to the group the purpose of focus group:

*To listen to and collect your opinions and suggestions about improving our youth exchange programmes and encouraging participation in them.*

Reinforce the point re confidentiality/not identified or linked to what individuals say.

Length of group: 2 hours

Basic ground rules:

- Switch mobile phones off
- Feel free to contribute but don't feel pressured on any particular questions
- Speak one at a time

Explain that there will be three activities:

1. **Ballot questions:** A set of questions about your experience and views of youth exchanges, take-up of youth exchanges, and also about your own background and opinions that might be of relevance.
2. **Group discussion:** Questions that relate to identifying issues that might mean young Muslim people do not take up the opportunity to participate in a youth exchange.
3. **Group discussion:** Questions that relate to what changes could be made, or what might be done, in order to overcome any barriers and therefore increase the opportunities for young Muslim people to participate in youth exchanges.

1. **BALLOT QUESTIONS** (20 minutes)

Run through the instructions below. Then explain each question one by one, briefly, and ask participants to tick 'yes', 'no' or 'not sure'.

Once all questions have been asked, select some or all of the questions and prompt a discussion to get more information from the group.

Then ask the group the following:

*Please now use the table on the back of your personal details form. As for the personal details form, your answers will remain completely anonymous. I am going to run through the questions and would like to ask you to tick your response to each question.*

As a reminder:

*The term 'youth exchange' refers to national or European activities which involve young people and take them 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 in Europe would be relevant.*

Question	Yes <sub>1</sub>	No <sub>0</sub>	Not sure <sub>2</sub>	Comments (optional)
1. Have you ever participated in a youth exchange programme? (national)				
2. Have you ever participated in a youth exchange programme? (international)				
3. Have you received any information about youth exchanges before?				
4. Have your parents received any information about youth exchanges?				
5. Have you travelled abroad in the last 10 years?				
6. Do you think you would need your parents' agreement to go on a youth exchange scheme?				
7. Should an intermediary organisation get involved (i.e. one in your community that you/your parents are more familiar with?)				
8. In your opinion, is Islam compatible with youth exchanges?				
9. Are there any issues that relate to your gender that might affect your participation?				
10. Are there any issues that relate to your religion or culture that might affect your participation?				
11. Is participation affected by who the organisers are?				
12. Please tick ONE of the following:  Do you usually socialise with:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Muslims and non-Muslims equally? <input type="checkbox"/><sub>1</sub></li> <li>•Mainly Muslims? <input type="checkbox"/><sub>2</sub></li> <li>•Mainly non-Muslims? <input type="checkbox"/><sub>3</sub></li> </ul>	COMMENTS:			

2. **GROUP DISCUSSION** (40 minutes for discussion and feedback)

a) **Introduction (5 minutes)**

b) **Discussion (25 minutes)**

c) **Feedback (10 minutes)**

a) Introduction (5 minutes)

Move on to the group discussion on possible barriers to participation. When doing this, ask the group to also reflect back on their responses to the ballot questions and to feed in any barriers that they have identified already. Ask them to work in small groups. (If group has no more than 8 participants, you may consider keeping them together for this activity.)

Get the small groups to use the paper provided to list their responses, and the recorder to capture their discussion.

Get the group to nominate one member of their group to report to the larger group.

They have 25 minutes for the group discussion.

NOTE: When taking the feedback, although we have ‘prompts’, try not to prompt for particular answers found in previous research unless there are no responses to the more open question.

b) Small group discussion (25 minutes)

Ask the groups to discuss the question:

***What do you think are the obstacles or barriers that prevent young Muslims participating in youth exchange programmes as much as other groups?***

Refer to the bullet point headings below if you need to help their thinking, but only use the prompts in brackets if groups get stuck.

Think, for example, about:

- Nature of the exchange (educational, cultural, destination)
- Information (access for self, for parents/family; style)
- Practical issues (food, prayer times and facilities, staying with non-Muslim families, finance)
- Responsibilities (e.g. family)
- Organisers (confidence in the organisation; prior knowledge of it; need to be known in own community)
- Travel/international travel

c) Feedback (10 minutes)

(2 groups of 6 – 8); or 3 groups if required)

**3. GROUP DISCUSSION (40 minutes for discussion and feedback)**

**a) Introduction (5 minutes)**

**b) Discussion (25 minutes)**

**c) Feedback (10 minutes)**

a) Introduction (5 minutes)

Move on to the group discussion on ways to overcome any barriers to participation and ways to encourage and increase participation. Remind the group to address any barriers they have already identified themselves.

Ask them to stay in their small groups.

Get them to use the paper provided to list their responses, and the recorder to capture their discussion. Get them to nominate one member of their group to report to the larger group.

They have 25 minutes for the group discussion.

NOTE: When taking the feedback, although we have ‘prompts’, try not to prompt for particular answers found in previous research unless there are no responses to the more open question.

b) Small groups (25 minutes)

Ask the groups to discuss the question:

***What could be done to improve the participation of young Muslim people?***

Here, ask them to think about the barriers that they indicated in response to the previous question.

Following this, you can refer to the bullet point headings below, but only use the prompts in brackets if groups get stuck.

Think, for example, about:

- Nature of the exchange (educational, cultural, destination)
- Information (access for self, for parents/family; style)
- Practical issues (food, prayer times and facilities, staying with non-Muslim families, finance)
- Responsibilities (e.g. family)
- Organisers (confidence in the organisation; prior knowledge of it; need to be known in own community)
- Travel/international travel

c) Feedback (10 minutes)

(2 groups of 6 – 8); or 3 groups if required)

**CONTACT DETAILS** (5 minutes)

A sheet is available for them to leave their name and contact details if:

1. They are interested in receiving a copy of the research report.
2. They are interested in being sent more information about the British Council youth exchange programmes.
3. Sign the sheet if they would like their name to be listed on the research report, on a list of all participants, and not identified with specific views or comments.

Project information

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