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Contemporary Influences on the Role of Imams in Britain: A Critical Analysis of Leadership and Professionalisation for the Imamate in 21st Century Britain

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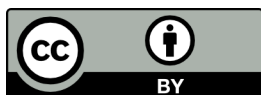
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Abstract: This article is based on the findings from a research project, referred to hereafter as #ImamsBritain, commenced with a series of discussions with Imams in the north of England. The role of the Imam has undergone far-reaching changes over the last thirty years chiefly due to the changing socio-economic and political climate, which in turn has directly affected the needs of Muslim communities. Consequently, Imams are now seen as professionals who need a wider range of pastoral care skills that go beyond those of their traditional role, which was mainly focused on religious teaching and spiritual guidance, The second stage of the data analysis for the research involved the exploratory Group Delphi technique, in which the Imam respondents underwent the processes of two critical reflections on the data collected. The resultant findings reflect their individual perceptions of the kind of training and development they need. This provides a unique framework for constructing a professional guide for Imams in Great Britain. The discussions and critical analyses in this paper draw on the discourses of professionalisation and pastoral care and relevant reports and reviews on Imam training in Europe and Canada.

Keywords: Imams; professionalisation; professional standards; Muslim community leadership

1. Introduction

The central aim of the research project #ImamsBritain and was to explore how Imams, as faith leaders, could best address the current needs of South Asian Muslim families and communities[1] The traditional role of the Imam was that of providing "religious teaching, and spiritual guidance" (Schmid 2020, p. 2) to the local Muslim community. However, over the last thirty years, the evolving socio-economic and political climate in Britain has affected the needs of Muslim communities and brought about far-reaching changes to the nature of the Imam's role. Imams are now presented as "professional function holders who need a wide range of abilities corresponding to the needs and requirements of both communities and wider society" (Schmid 2020, p. 65). In common with non-Muslim families, Muslim families' needs now incorporate (amongst others) issues such as: mental health problems; domestic abuse; drug and alcohol abuse and hate crime, the implications of which are discussed in detail later. This paper draws on the findings from a British-based research project that originated from a series of discussions with Imams, in the north of England, about how their faith leadership could best address their communities' current needs. These discussions sought the views of Imams on their evolving role and its wider responsibilities, and the research project aimed to: explore the range of issues the Imams dealt with and which they considered to be additional to their (traditional) duties and responsibilities; identify the further skills the Imams perceived they needed to address these

additional issues and to assess the Imams' level of need for training and qualifications to establish those skills they considered as priorities for their own professional development.

#ImamsBritain was a small-scale research project, conducted by a team of researchers that comprise university academics[2] and experienced professionals from a third sector[3] Muslim organisation, Arooj. The initial discussions with the twenty-one respondents revealed a consensus on two significant issues. Firstly, the Imams feel that there is a pressing need for a professional level qualification for Imams that corresponds to the training/preparation for ordination in the Church of England, the seminary training for Catholic priests and the rabbinical training for leadership in the Jewish faith. Secondly, the Imams agreed on the need for an ongoing professional training programme, to help them develop the skills that they need to support their communities more effectively and better meet the diverse nature of the needs of Muslim communities in 21st century Britain.

Identifying the need for a professional training programme for Imams is not an original finding and has been the subject of research and reviews over recent years. Ten years ago, the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) set up an advisory group to steer a review, in response to consultations with Muslim communities, that would reflect "the importance of the training of Imams" (Mukadam Mohamed et al. 2010, p. 8). The review acknowledged that whilst there was "much good practice in Muslim faith leadership training in Britain at all levels—secondary education, higher and further education"— there was also an urgent need for further development of this training (ibid., p.12). The implications of this "urgent need" are the focus of this paper, which will critically discuss the research data and findings from #ImamsBritain and identify more precisely the different elements of the training and developmental need as they apply to Imams today.

The findings from this small-scale research project present Imams' individual perceptions of their specific training and development needs, which gives us a unique framework around which to construct a common set of values and a professional guide for Imams in Britain, which currently does not exist. (This development is the anticipated, longer-term outcome from this project.)

2. Literature Review

The discussions and arguments in the next two sub-sections draw on the literature that was reviewed for the project. In the first section, the problematics of the Imam's role are discussed with regard to the kind of training needed to equip Imams with the necessary skills to meet the changing needs of Muslim communities in Britain today. In the next section, the discourse of professionalisation will be discussed critically with regard to the wider role of the Imam, as perceived by the research respondents. These discussions will probe some of the potential tensions and conflicts that can emerge when a faith-based, third sector organisation (such as a mosque) is subject to the bureaucratic processes of professionalisation, with specific regard to the implementation of a standards framework and monitoring the quality of professional practice. The methodology for the research is then outlined, including the design, sampling and the tools used for data analysis, followed by the findings and discussion sections.

2.1. The Problematics of the Imam's Role in Britain Today

Hussain and Tuck (2014, p. 5) wrote that in the wake of the migration of Muslims into Europe, in the second half of the twentieth century, "Western European Muslim communities concentrated on retaining the traditions, norms, cultures and practices of their countries of origin rather than focusing on integrating into European societies". The legacy of this is that "Imams have traditionally been brought in from outside Europe. The necessary frameworks and institutions needed to train domestic Imams were slow to materialise, and in many cases remain inadequate considering the current size of the Muslim population in Europe". Written six years ago, this provides a useful historical context within which to consider a framework of training for Imams today, which is designed to help them develop the professional skills they need.

Reaffirming the need for professional training, Mukadam Mohamed et al. (2010, p. 9) cite the Muslim Council of Britain as stating, "there is a feeling that not enough Imams are being developed from Britain and that the existing training is inadequate or has serious shortcomings. It has been claimed that graduates from British seminaries are"without sufficient communication skills, without leadership skills and without a good understanding of British culture". The respondents from #ImamsBritain strongly agreed that there is an absence of national policy, professional guidance or training available from either Muslim organisations, the government or educational establishments that are tailored to meet the new demands of Imams in Britain. These new demands can be attributed, certainly in part, to the changing socio-economic and political climate that has prevailed over the last ten to fifteen years and the consequences of these changes for Muslim communities[4].

According to Mukadam Mohamed et al. (2010, p. 16), "from as far back as 1997 there [has been] an increasingly widespread perception in Muslim communities that Imams are not equipped by their own training to help young British Muslims cope with issues such as unemployment, racism and Islamophobia, drugs, and the attractions of Western youth culture". This mismatch is also identified by Scott-Baumann et al. (2019, p. 8) who draw on the work of Lewis (2006), who "reflected on the new social roles emerging among the graduates of the Darul Ulooms (Muslim seminaries) . . . {who} were forging paths into community service and leadership that their training did not equip them for, nor even intend". Bauman et al. argue that the lack of contiguity between the traditional form of Imam training (focusing mostly on religious teaching) and the more secular demands made of Imams today is due to the outmoded syllabus of the Deobandi[5], which was originally "geared to producing civil servants for the Mughal Empire, not necessarily youth workers and local mosque Imams in England". The factors associated with this "new social role" of Imams today create a wider and more complex range of pastoral care needs within families and their communities, and these issues are reflected in the #ImamsBritain findings. Some of the more significant of these issues, identified by the respondents, were associated with general health, mental health, family issues, drugs and alcohol and domestic abuse.

The increased incidence of these health, family and social issues in the Muslim communities can be contextualised within the prevailing socio-economic and political situation in England, over the last ten to fifteen years, which Sir Michael Marmot summarised bleakly in the Marmot Review 10 Years On (Marmot et al. 2020): "For part of the decade 2010–2020 life expectancy actually fell in the most deprived communities outside London for women and, in some regions, for men" (ibid., p. 5). This refers to the decade that followed the credit crash of 2008 and the government's subsequent swingeing financial, austerity cuts to public services, which gave rise to a range of pronounced, negative effects on the health and well-being of people in the most deprived communities. The Casey Review (Casey 2016) supports this, with statistics that show 26% of the Muslim population live in the 10% most deprived areas in England and that, more broadly, "Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic populations and Muslim faith populations live disproportionately in the most deprived areas in England compared with other ethnic or faith groups" (ibid., p. 78). Evidence from the first Marmot Review (Marmot et al. 2010) and the Marmot Review 10 Years On (Marmot et al. 2020) shows that in England minority ethnic groups—especially Pakistani—have the lowest levels of life expectancy, the highest rates of poverty (Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black people in particular) and that the lowest levels of "disability free life expectancy" were experienced by Bangladeshi men and Pakistani women (Marmot et al. 2020, pp. 21–23). These politico-economic changes over time and the fact that "austerity was followed by failure of health to improve and a widening in health inequalities" strongly suggest the two factors are connected. Whilst Marmot is at pains to point out that this does not prove that the one caused the other, "the link [between the two] is entirely plausible" (ibid., p. 5). Therefore, the range of health, family and social issues that Imams are now dealing with can be attributed, in no small part, to these changing political, social and economic factors, alongside emerging social problems such as family

conflict, drugs and alcohol. Furthermore, since writing this paper, the effects of COVID-19 have also added considerably to the range of health and social problems for families and, perforce, to the workload of the local Imams.

2.2. Professionalising the Imam's Role

One of the key drivers for conducting the #ImamsBritain research work was that in Great Britain there are no statutory requirements for Imams to have any formal or specific education or training. Indeed, the educational qualifications of the Imam respondents for this project reveal a widely varying picture, ranging from post-graduate to entry level 1–3[6]. The providers of training for Imams in France and Germany—as discussed by Hussain and Tuck (2014, p. 6)—offer a subject-based teaching and learning provision through courses in Arabic language, Islamic theology, law and Qur'anic studies (amongst others). Aslan (2012, pp. 39–40) discusses the training that is available for Imams in Britain as falling into two categories. The first is foundation training (i.e., pre–higher education), which is provided by some 54 traditional secondary schools, known as "Dar-ul-ulum" and these award the academic qualification of Imam scholar. The second category is provided by specialist, higher education institutions that offer academic training in Islamic Studies, or Islamic Science. The content of these models of training, discussed by Hussain and Tuck and Aslan, is essentially academic and in direct contrast to those skills identified by the research respondents as priorities for their own learning and professional development. These priorities focus on developing their practitioner and professional skills, rather than gaining academic qualifications and they included: working with young people and women; communication skills; counselling; dealing with hate crime and engaging more fully with government legislation. The need to bridge this gap between academia and the provision for a more professional, practitioner-weighted form of training is echoed by Gilliat-Ray and Timol (2020, p. 6). In the introduction to their guest edition of the journal *Religions*, they discuss how "programmes of Islamic Studies in many British universities were seen by those from some Institutes as too heavily orientated towards historical, linguistic, and textual approaches, at the expense of attention to . . . personal self-development, contemporary issues, and an appreciation of Islam in its British, inter-religious context".

The analysis of the data from #ImamsBritain (discussed in detail in Section 3) revealed that respondents felt strongly that their role would be improved by the introduction of a framework of national standards for Imams alongside a continuing professional development programme and accredited training to help them upskill. The nature of these skills bears a close resemblance to those included within the professional standards frameworks for both teachers and social workers in Britain. These frameworks promote professional skills such as effective communication, tolerance of and respect for the rights of others, safeguarding individuals' well-being and adhering to the relevant statutory frameworks (Social Work England 2020; Department for Education 2011). Therefore, constructing a framework of national standards/guidelines and best practices for Imams in Britain would be a significant step towards meeting the professional needs expressed by the #ImamsBritain respondents, not the least because currently there is no formal process involved in becoming an Imam.

However, the discourse of professionalisation encompasses a number of critical issues relating to the bureaucratic processes that characterise a 'professional' workforce and these issues are particularly relevant to workplaces that operate in the public sector or third sector (such as a mosque) rather than in a commercial organisation. A useful working definition of the term 'professionalisation', for this article, can be found in the European adult education sector, where it is discussed in terms of "functional markers of professionalism—increasing competence, quality and qualification" (Jutte et al. 2011, p. 7). This is often the rationale for professionalising a workforce, that of improving the quality of provision and the competence of practitioners. For those professions that do adhere to a set of professional standards (such as schools and local authority children's services), they are subject to inspection by the relevant regulatory authorities, such as the Office for

Standards in Education (Ofsted) and the Care Quality Commission (CQC), and the quality of practitioners' performance is judged against these standards.

There was a strong consensus of agreement across the #ImamsBritain respondents of the need for some kind of professional qualification and national standard of performance, along with an ongoing professional development programme to support Imams in the wider range of work they are now expected to do within their communities. The process of measuring standards of professional practice can create conflict and tension for practitioners in any organisation, and particularly so in faith-based, third sector organisations (see notes 3 and 4 for working definition of third sector organisations, applicable to mosques). In 2014, "amid increased pressure on third sector organisations (TSOs) to provide evidence of the effectiveness of their services" (Harlock 2014, p. 1), Harlock writes that "the Public Services (Social Value) Act (2012) has been seen as an important opportunity for third sector organisations (TSOs) to demonstrate the value and impact of what it is they do". The concept of social value is directly relevant to the role of Imams, whose pastoral role is based on a framework of cultural and social values, closely bound with building trust and non-hierarchical relationships with individuals and communities.

Research undertaken by Harlock examines the "nature of the evidence required by commissioners from TSOs to demonstrate their effectiveness" and findings showed that "difficulties in quantifying and measuring social value posed considerable challenges". These difficulties stem from the fact that the "evaluation of success or failure has come to rest on indicators of internal systems performance" (McLaughlin and Muncie 2000, p. 178). Harlock (2014) is critical of this approach to "quantifying and measuring social value, based on the wider public sector model of assessing performance delivery, where outcomes tend to be measured in terms of cost effectiveness" (ibid., p. 5). The danger of this, McLaughlin and Muncie (2000) suggest, is that such a mechanistic approach to evaluating the performance of third sector professionals can serve to subsume or replace the typically "transformative" aspects of their work, such as supporting individual needs, providing counselling and pastoral care, into a range of "actuarial techniques of classification and resource management" (ibid., p. 178). They write at length about the danger of adopting this kind of commercial approach to performance evaluation in a third sector organisation, where it could serve to curtail and reduce the professional's role to one of productivity and output rather than a provider of care and support. This has implications for Imams, whose pastoral role is complex and demands a high level of interpersonal skill and sensitivity and these kinds of skills are not easy to measure or quantify, which presents a challenge to this aspect of professionalising the Imam's role.

The bureaucratic burden of actually carrying out such a process of evaluation presents additional challenges to the establishment of professional standards because it raises the question of how or, indeed, if Imams should be assessed in the performance of their duties in this way. Therefore mosques—and particularly the Imams—would need to decide if this kind of regulatory framework is the best means through which to implement the professionalisation of their role. There is also the question of identifying a suitable body, possibly at a national level, which could take on the necessary bureaucratic duties of professionalising the Imamate and fulfilling functions such as the registration of Imams, verification of their level of professional performance and implementing professional standards.

Professional Standards

The necessary bureaucratic duties associated with professionalising a workforce will also include the determination and structure of the professional standards themselves. "These standards of practice should describe practices to which Imams and leaders aspire. They should recognize that personal and professional growth is a developmental process, and that Imams move through a variety of career and life changes that affect their practice" (ISSA 2016, p. 6). This statement is taken from the Professional Guide for Canadian Imams, which was produced by the Islam Social Services Association (ISSA) in Canada. ISSA worked collaboratively with a number of religious organisations and the

Canadian Association of Social Workers' (CASW) Code of Ethics to create a set of Professional Standards and guidance for Imams that gives them the information and resources "pertaining to ethical, legal and professional protocols" (ibid., p. 2). The implementation of these necessary, bureaucratic processes can be burdensome for smaller, third sector organisations, discussed by MacMillan (2015), who views the professionalisation of third sector organisations from the critical standpoint that they are in danger of "losing their distinctive and valuable starting points as informal associations". Once in the grips of the process of professionalisation, . . . "Many organisations drift, sometimes unknowingly . . . towards becoming more formal and hierarchical bureaucracies" (ibid., p. 105), to the extent that they may find themselves curtailing or "reforming their own advocacy roles and functions" (Hough 2016, p. 11), which in turn can become subsumed by the whole process. This argues that there is a potential danger of the professionalisation process becoming an end in itself, rather than a means of providing a "set of norms for the education and formation of an office of the Imam" (ISSA 2016, p. 6). This critical point highlights another potential challenge to implementing the process of professionalisation and provides the context for the discussions and findings sections on later on.

3. Method

3.1. Design

The #ImamsBritain research project was a small-scale qualitative research study (twenty-one respondents) for which the data were collected through two means. The first was a questionnaire, which contained questions that were factual and demographic (such as the respondents' age, country of origin, ethnicity and length of time served as an Imam) and also questions that asked about any difficulties they might have in their roles and their training and development needs. The language of the questionnaire was English, but one of the research team was fluent in Urdu/Punjabi dialect and so was able to interpret for respondents where necessary. This researcher constructed the questions, basing them on those used for a Ph.D. thesis (Abuelezz 2001) undertaken in the United States that explored the qualifications, challenges, principal duties and training of Imams in America.

In order to achieve a greater understanding and depth of analysis of the answers from this first phase of the research, these data were used to inform a second collection of data, through using the Group Delphi approach, said to have originated in the work of the Rand Corporation in the 1950s (Armstrong et al. 2011; Okoli and Pawlowski 2004). "Delphi was originally devised as a procedure to help experts achieve better forecasts than they might obtain through a traditional group meeting" (Armstrong et al. 2011, p. 121). The Delphi approach also provides an opportunity to gather knowledge in a domain where a qualitative approach might elicit insight to inform forecasting or decision making, which fits well with the research aims of the #ImamsBritain project.

3.2. Sample

Twenty-one Imams (20%) from the one hundred who were originally contacted responded to the questionnaire, which was the initial means of contact. The Imam respondents comprised a non-probability, or purposive, sample of respondents, meaning they were selected on the basis of suitability and accessibility, The respondents were all resident in North West England, where the Muslim population is 5.1% of the total population of England and Wales (and the lowest for the region). It is lower than London, (12.4%), West Midlands (6.7%) and Yorkshire and The Humber (6.2%) (Ali 2015, p. 25). A significant number of the respondents were already known to the researcher from Arooj, through the organisation's professional work in prisons and Muslim communities throughout the region.

Purposive sampling is a "non-random technique" used by the researcher, who "decides what needs to be known" and then "sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information, by virtue of knowledge or experience" (Etikan et al. 2016, p. 2).

The sample used for the Delphi method was a subset of the original group of respondents; from the twenty-one original respondents to the questionnaire, thirteen agreed to participate further in the Delphi process. All interviews took place in the north of England where the majority of the participants are based. The choice of geographic region was for expediency, rather than any other specific factor; the researcher that conducted most of the field work is a consultant with Arooj, which is based in Nelson, East Lancashire. The demographic details of the respondents are contained in Table 1—Age, ethnicity and place of birth of respondents, and Table 2—Length of residency in GB/UK.

Table 1. Age, ethnicity and place of birth of respondents.

AGE	Percentage	Ethnicity	Percentage	Place of Birth	Percentage
18–21	19%	British	4.8%	UK and England	43%
22–29	9.5%	British Asian	4.8%	Pakistan	48%
30–39	24%	Indian	9.5%	India	5%
40–49	29%	British Pakistani	9.5%		
50–59	19%	Pakistani	71%		

Table 2. Length of residency in GB/UK.

Years	Percentage
Since birth	43%
20+	29%
16–20	10%
6–10	5%
1–5	14%

Summarising the data in Tables 1 and 2, the majority of respondents (53%) fell into the 30–49 years age group, 71% were of Pakistani ethnicity, 5% had been born outside the UK/GB and 72% had lived in GB from birth or more than twenty years.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data collected from the first questionnaire helped to establish the range of developmental needs the Imam respondents identified, as well as the difficulties they experienced in their role. The next stage involved analysing the data collected from the Delphi approach (during a series of workshops) through three iterations, i.e., the results from each workshop were used as the starting point for the next. For the first workshop, each participant was provided with a set of eight questions that were based around particular issues that had emerged from the answers to the original questionnaire. These eight questions were designed to encourage the respondents to think critically about the issues the questions probed, record their thoughts and bring them to the next workshop session. This process was repeated for a second iteration, where the facilitator for each workshop gathered together all points of consensus and debate, which were then used in the third and final iteration that brought all of the participants together. These final data were written up and analysed, using the content analysis methodology, which is defined as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, p. 1278). Of the three approaches to content analysis (basic, interpretative and qualitative (Drisko and Maschi 2016), the #ImamsBritain researchers agreed that the interpretative approach best matched the aims of the project. This is because the application of this approach goes beyond a simple "frequency-count approach" to identifying phrases, words

and themes within the data (ibid., p. 59) and so the coding process reflects more fully "the core dimensions communicated" by the respondents (ibid., p. 60). This related directly to the purpose of the research project: to explore the Imams' individual perceptions of the kind of training and development they needed. The coding of the Delphi data was systematic, in that the researchers identified and grouped the key themes that related to each question, then listing the themes according to the most relevant, overarching concepts they represented.

3.4. Limitations

This was a small-scale research project, and the respondents were located in North West England, rather than nationwide. Therefore, it is not possible to make wider assertions from the findings for Imams across the whole of Britain. However, the Delphi approach to the analysis of the data ensures that the findings emerging from the final iteration reflect the Imams' own, unique perceptions of the kind of training/professional development they need and so they are true to the "core dimensions communicated" by the respondents (Drisko and Maschi 2016, p. 59) and likely to have some issues in common with Imams elsewhere in Britain.

4. Findings

The final concepts that emerged from the interpretative content analysis process fell into three overarching categories, discussed in the following sections and represented in Boxes 1–3. These final categories were selected because they incorporate a range of issues that were considered to be the most relevant to the rationale of the research project and they encompass: the selection process for Imams, the role of the Imam and the key skills needed by Imams in today's society. The questions they relate to provide the sub-headings for the discussions below and the issues in bold typeface (inside the boxes) are those considered to be the most significant.

4.1. Selection Process of Imams

The selection process for recruiting Imams, and how it could be improved on, was the subject of the first of the eight questions set for the Delphi workshop reflections. The first iteration of the Delphi process showed that there was currently no formal selection process and that "candidates are selected by parents to study Islamic studies then hope to become Imams". The analysis of data from the third and final iteration of Delphi is included in Table 3—Interpretative content analysis Delphi 3, workshop question 1. The emerging concepts here show that the respondents felt that there should be an improvement on this ad hoc, informal approach to selection. In addition, they also suggest a requirement for a minimum level of general education and that an Islamic qualification is essential for potential candidates for the Imamate.

Table 3. Interpretative content analysis Delphi 3. Workshop question 1.

	Becoming an Imam—The Current Selection Process and How It Could be Improved:.
1.	Selection process should improve by: Introduction of National Standards (which would provide a nationally recognised benchmark against which to assess potential Imams).
2.	Min age 18+—Islamic qualifications essential.
3.	Minimum requirement 5 GCSEs.
4.	Be bilingual (fluent).
5.	Knowledge and understanding of social issues and community needs.

The educational profiles of the research respondents (Table 4a—General education and Table 4b—Islamic education) show that with regard to general education, 48% have post-compulsory qualifications (degree or Ph.D. and/or postgraduate or HNC) and 62%

have qualifications up to and including A levels. Three respondents (14%) had entry level qualifications only (see note 6), which are just below the minimum level of educational qualifications the respondents recommended. Thirty-eight percent have post-compulsory qualifications for Islamic education (Ph.D., masters or degree), which is similar to the 48% with post-compulsory qualifications in general education. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents had no formal Islamic education at all and 24% possessed a Licence, which is an accreditation that is not currently acknowledged by any educational institution.

Table 4. (**a**) General education. (**b**) Islamic education of Imam respondents.

(a)		
General Education (Compulsory and Non-Compulsory)	**Respondents**	
	%Age	**Number**
Ph.D.	5%	(1)
Post Grad Certificate (excl. Ph.D.)	5%	(1)
Degree only	33%	(5)
HNC (post compulsory)	5%	(1)
A levels only	43%	(9)
GCSEs only	5%	(1)
Entry level[7]	14%	(3)
(b)		
Islamic Education	**Respondents**	
	%Age	**Number**
Ph.D.	19%	(4)
Masters only	5%	(1)
Degree only	14%	(3)
No formal Islamic education	38%	(8)
Licence (not an acknowledged accreditation)	24%	(5)

The, predominantly, British-based residency of the #ImamsBritain respondents (evident in Table 2) differs from the contexts of Imams in other European countries. For example, in Switzerland (Schmid 2020, p. 84), the "overwhelming majority of Imams in Switzerland [are] born and trained abroad". In The Netherlands, there has been a "long lasting political desire to establish an Imam-training program . . . which might put an end to the tendency to import Imams from abroad" (Ghaly 2011, p. 2). The advantages to having 'home-grown' Imams are argued for by Ghaly with specific regard to the situation in The Netherlands. Here, the government favours a home-based Imam training programme so that Imams can "actively contribute to the integration of Muslims into Dutch society", because "the integration process is currently negatively influenced by the presence of imported Imams" (ibid., p. 3). However, the training programme set up with Leiden University (and also with two other Dutch universities) was short-lived. A brief account of the failure of these programmes for Imam training is found in the research of Sözeri et al. (2018), which is entitled *Training imams in The Netherlands: the failure of a post-secular Endeavour.* This piece of research provides some useful points for comparison with the findings from #ImamsBritain. Historically, Dutch secularism is "built upon a notion of a separation of church and state where different religious communities have operated within their own, separate section of society" (p. 3). Sözeri et al. claim that this state approach became more assertive after the 2000s, with the rise of far-right parties and the emergence of violent Islamic extremism. This is a different context of change

compared with the rationale of #ImamsBritain, which aimed to establish the perceptions of the Imam respondents regarding their own professional training and development needs. In contrast, Sözeri is suggesting that the Dutch government's programmes for Imam training were conceived as part of a means of controlling the ways in which Islam was taught and regulated. In 2004, the Dutch Ministry asked for applications for existing universities to set up national Imam training programmes and three universities qualified for financial support. The programme at Leiden University was set up as Islamic Theology with the accreditation of an international committee of Islamologists and "recognised by many experts as unique in Europe" (p. 4) but the cooperation agreements with the Muslim communities were never completed and in 2011, due to insufficient interest by prospective students, the programme was discontinued. Similarly, at one of the other universities, despite involving major Muslim organisations, there was a high drop-out rate from the programme, and it failed to attract new students. There were criticisms about the level of teaching and interpretation of course content and this programme closed down in 2017.

In France recently, President Macron announced the introduction of a law that heralds the introduction of a system whereby Imams are trained and certified in France (Willsher 2020). The reasons for this, at the time of writing, were in direct response to incidents of terrorism and therefore likely to be aimed at the fuller integration of Muslims into French society (or increased state control?). Time will tell just how effective this measure will prove to be and the extent to which the government engages in partnership with Imams and Muslim communities in the process of certification. In contrast, the findings from #ImamsBritain show the perceptions of Imams who reside in Britain and have received their education here, which suggests their integration into British society is more embedded and therefore the chances for working in partnership with government and other national bodies may have a better chance for success than the programmes in The Netherlands

The research respondents recommended the implementation of a set of National Standards for Imams in Britain (Table 3), which they felt would provide a nationally recognised benchmark against which the quality of professional practice and of potential recruits to the Imamate could be assessed. This, in turn, would help to ensure the consistency of professional practice and its fitness for purpose in British Muslim communities. However, Schmid (2020) acknowledges the importance of the role of Islamic organisations in defining standards and training for Imams in his article on Imams in Switzerland. He refers to a document on standards for mosques and Imams in Switzerland that has been published by the Islamic Community of Austria (IGGÖ). Since 1979, the IGGÖ "has been the privileged interlocutor, treated as a unique point of contact between state officials and the Muslim population" (Mattes and Rosenberger 2015, p. 133). This document of professional standards highlights the "requisite skills and capabilities for Imams" and is considered by Schmid to be a "rare example of a Muslim community defining their own views" in terms of standards and professional guidance for the Imamate in Austria (ibid., p. 65). In Canada, the Professional Guide for Canadian Imams (discussed earlier) provides a definitive set of ethical standards and guidelines, which was produced by the Islam Social Services Association (ISSA) in collaboration with several religious organisations.

As a recognised national Muslim institution, the Muslim Council of Great Britain might provide similar support (and professional integrity) to a collaboration with relevant public sector organisations in order to agree the content and context of a set of National Standards for Imams in Britain.

4.2. The Role of the Imam

The processes of change involved in professionalising the role of the Imam may give rise to the kind of difficulties and tensions that are often associated with the "more formal and hierarchical bureaucracies", discussed by MacMillan (2015, p. 105), which characterise both the public and commercial sectors. These tensions are often the result of "private sector management practices" being adopted by third sector organisations (ibid., p. 108) and are, often, connected to the nature of leadership and management in the organisations.

The findings presented in Table 5—Interpretative content analysis Delphi 3, workshop question 2, identify leadership (incorporating pastoral care, counselling and guidance) and management (management of staff at the masjid/mosque) as the main priorities for the Imam's role, along with elements of a more outward facing role (points 3–7). However, the extent to which an Imam is actually enabled to fulfil both leadership and management roles will depend in part on the organisation and structure of individual mosques.

Table 5. Interpretative content analysis Delphi 3. Workshop question 2.

What Sould Be the Role of the Imam?	
(1)	Community leader—provider of pastoral care, counselling and guidance..
(2)	Management and administration, including management of staff at the masjid/mosque
(3)	Faith leader.
(4)	Teacher.
(5)	Resolve differences within the community.
(6)	Mediator
(7)	Advisor on national/local issues and be able to respond to issues raised by state agencies and the media

Mosques are normally managed by a local mosque committee, which itself takes responsibility for the appointment of the Imam and other paid and volunteer staff (Rahman et al. 2006, p. 1) so there would need to be consensus on how and which aspects of leadership and management would attach to the Imam and which to the committee.

Within the context of leadership, it is useful to consider how the term religious leadership is interpreted with regard to the role of the Imam. Gilliat-Ray and Timol (2020) use the term in its widest sense, across a spectrum from the "liturgical and ritual leadership that prevails at local level in mosques, to bodies such as the Muslim Council of Britain that exercise national influence" (ibid., p. 1). The authors use this local–national binary to define Muslim leadership as comprising two "distinct yet complementary roles" (ibid., p. 2). These roles are exercised (a) internally, within the community for the purposes of providing pastoral, moral and spiritual guidance and (b) externally, whereby the Imam enacts a more outward facing role to the wider society, "including the media, government and non-Muslim colleagues". Elements of this analysis of Muslim leadership can also be identified in point 1 of the findings shown in Table 5, where pastoral care, guidance and counselling correspond to the internal and local community role. Advisor on national/local issues and responding to issues raised by state agencies and media (point 7) correspond to the external, more outward facing role that Gilliat-Ray and Timol discuss.

In attempting to fulfil leadership roles across this broad spectrum, it is likely Imams will encounter some overlap and/or tension between the extent of their leadership responsibilities and those of the mosque committee (indicated earlier). This more critical discourse of leadership and management within mosques is discussed further by El-Yousfi (2019)[8], in his recent article, Conflicting Paradigms of Religious and Bureaucratic Authority in a British Mosque. This particular research project aimed to "re-examine and challenge the narrative of decline in religious authority (in Western mosques, ibid., p. 1)" through observations of and interviews with Imams and committee members in a London mosque. The findings show how the religious and spiritual authority of the Imam, over time, "became controlled by the bureaucratic authority of the committee members" (p. 1), which arose because of two conflicting factions within the mosque committee. One faction favoured the "permanent marginalisation of the Imam as an employee" (p. 8) and the other wanted to protect the Imam's active role in the management of the mosque. This 'power struggle' within the committee resulted in a marked reduction in the extent of the Imam's religious authority, which he exercised but "only within the bureaucratic framework set by the

committee members" (ibid., p. 9). Consequently, the Imam resigned because of these bureaucratic constraints. Therefore, when considering the nature of leadership training for Imams it would be critically important to consider the scope of the management and leadership roles that are currently occupied by their own mosque committee. It would also be of benefit to think about the development of a leadership training programme for Imams that worked in collaboration with the committee members and other religious leaders within the mosque (which may prove to be quite a challenge in some mosques). El Yousfi argues that "what happened in the last ten to fifteen years inside the mosque" needed to be viewed "not as a decline of religious authority but rather the rise of bureaucratic authority" (ibid., p. 9). Thus, it could be that where mosque committees exert undue bureaucratic authority and control over an Imam and his/her role, there is an argument for structuring a professional development programme that benefits both Imams and mosque committee members equally.

4.3. The Key Skills Needed by Imams

In the original questionnaire for this research project, the Imams' responses revealed that the most significant skills they felt they needed for their role were those for pastoral care (81% considered this to be the most or second most important skill) and counselling (76% of the respondents thought this was the most or second most important skill). The analysis of the data from the third Delphi iteration is summarised in Table 6—Interpretative content analysis Delphi 3, workshop question 3, where these two areas of skill appear as the top priorities. Further skills are listed in points 2 and 3:: working with members of the community who are of different ages and gender, engaging with the local and wider community and reaching out to those who do not attend the mosque.

Table 6. Interpretative content analysis Delphi 3. Workshop question 3.

What Are the Key Skills Needed by Imams?
(1) Counselling/coaching and pastoral care skills.
(2) Skills for working with memebers of the community who are of different ages and gender (especially young people and women).
(3) Able to engage with the local and wider community and reach out to those who so not attend the mosque.

The spectrum of skills included in Table 6 gives us a fuller picture of the Imams' perceptions of the extent and range of the pastoral care and counselling roles they are required to fulfil. Using an analogy from the business sector, counselling and pastoral care can be viewed as the overarching, core competences of the Imam and mosque. Hamel and Prahalad (1990, p. 5) define the term, core competence, as "communication, involvement, and a deep commitment to working across organizational boundaries. It involves many levels of people and all functions". They discuss how, within a business environment, core competences link to the different skills of the workforce and how they can be viewed as "the linchpins between design and development skills" (ibid., p. 8). Using this kind of structural analysis for developing the content of an Imams' training programme could be useful. A training programme to develop Imams' wider-ranging skills (including the further skills in points 2 and 3 in Table 6), will contribute to the overall, or core, competences of delivering a better quality of pastoral care and counselling, which will be tailored to support the specific needs of the community. If a training and development programme for Imams was constructed from an organisational standpoint, rather than as a separate training requirement for Imams only, one positive outcome would be that both Imams and mosque committees would be involved equally. In this way, the process would be more likely to be managed strategically, through collectively agreeing and coordinating the development of skills that best match the most current (and changing) needs of the Imams,

the committees and their communities. This more strategic approach would better enable the Imam to respond flexibly to social change and the subsequent needs of the community.

The effects of the significant socio-economic and geo-political events of the last ten years or so have served to re-shape significantly the needs of all social and ethnic groups and individuals, but the impact of these factors on Muslim families has presented specific challenges to their cultural and faith-based family norms. For example, the traditional relationships that have historically characterised the structure of South Asian families are shifting and changing, as successive generations of the family have been born and grown up in the UK (Hough et al. 2018, p. 13) and become more 'British', which has resulted in increased intra-family conflicts. The influence of drugs and alcohol on family members (and the, often, inevitable criminal outcomes) creates further familial conflict that stems from behaviour that goes against the teachings of Islam and so introduces further challenges to the Imam's role in supporting families and communities. These kinds of conflicts are encapsulated in the following quote taken from the Faith Family and Crime (Hough et al. 2018) research project:

> "This is not what we expect. Our organisations (mosques) should be doing more to stop the young ones from getting involved with drugs. Parents should teach right from wrong—tell them (the children) what halal (permissible) or haram is (forbidden)". (ibid., p. 16)

Some of these conflicts, such as involvement in the criminal justice sector, and the use of drugs and alcohol have resulted in heightened levels of social, material and emotional stress for family members that, in turn, make increased demands on the role of the Imam. These influences are introducing significant changes into the lives of Muslim families, which are associated with religious, social and cultural factors (as seen in the above quote) and they reflect some of the conflicts that arise in Muslim families where the expectation is that their children are to live to the traditional teachings of Islam. The conflict arises because the children are living with and assimilating the social and cultural norms and values of 21st century Western society (such as the peer group pressures implicit within accessing social media) and so are living a different 'version' of Islam. This introduces the concept of religious individualisation and how it might relate to the extent to which the different generations of Muslims interpret (and live) their faith, whilst also experiencing 21st century social values and norms that appear to be ever more distant from their traditional religious teachings. Frank (2006) discusses the term religious individualisation, as it relates to the study of "Muslim religiosity", that is, as an "Islam lived in the private sphere . . . [where] the believer decides autonomously which elements of Islam (s)he considers to be binding or not" (Frank 2006, p. 106). This presents another challenge to the Imam's role today. How does he/she maintain the authority implied through their more traditional responsibilities of religious teaching and guidance whilst also supporting individual and families who may be choosing to adhere to (or dispense with) only certain aspects of Islamic teaching? This point is pursued further in Section 5.

The full range of issues that the research respondents now find themselves dealing with, as Imams, is included in Appendix A Table A1. It is interesting to note that the issues with the highest incidence are family relationships and general health and social issues. These resonate with the findings from Faith Family and Crime (Hough et al. 2018), discussed above, which highlight the increased level of intra-family conflicts that stem from criminal behaviour (specifically the influences of drugs and alcohol) and the resultant, heightened levels of social and emotional stress.

5. Conclusions

At the outset of the #ImamsBritain research project, the Imam respondents were unanimous in their agreement that there was a pressing need for their roles to be conferred with a professional status that would place them on an equal footing with the religious leaders of acknowledged faiths in Britain. The research findings reveal there is an absence of any clearly defined national policy, professional guidance or development in place for the

Imamate (in fact, the approach to the selection of Imams is mostly informal). Critical discussions of the research findings, in this paper, argue that the rationale for professionalising the Imamate workforce and establishing a programme of professional training/continuous professional development should be one of responding to the changing needs of Muslim communities in 21st century Britain. As well as the practicalities of establishing a set of professional and ethical standards, implicit within the scale of this level of change will be the need for new and necessary systems and procedures to ensure consistency of professional practice that matches these standards. This also introduces the issue of how the quality of an Imam's performance might be evaluated with regard to professional standards. Harlock (2014) discusses the potential tension this can create for practitioners in third sector organisations, where "measuring" the quality of professional standards is not simply a mechanistic, or box ticking process, but altogether far more complex. This is because the provision of care and support for vulnerable groups and individuals is closely bound up with "many factors that are complex and intangible, such as the psycho-social aspects" of people's lives that are characterised by "chaotic, personal circumstances" (Hough et al. 2018, p. 14). Therefore, any evaluation schedule, or process for monitoring the quality of Imams' work would need to be sensitive to this. Harlock (2014) suggests that a more appropriate approach to measuring performance in the third sector, rather than trying to measure cost effectiveness or outputs, is one that focuses on ends rather than means, which serves to promote "the evaluation of longer-term benefits and differences made for service users and communities". This would be a more appropriate approach to consider for evaluating the quality of an Imam's performance, giving critical regard to Harlock's arguments above.

There are also models of guidance for professional and ethical standards for Imams to be found in Europe and Canada, aspects of which might prove useful to the introduction of professional changes to the British Imamate. For example, in Canada, the Islamic Social Services Association (ISSA) worked collaboratively with other religious organisations and the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASWS) to create a set of professional standards and guidance that related to "ethical, legal and professional protocols" (ISSA 2016, p. 2). As discussed in the findings, Leiden University collaborated with two Islamic organisations to develop a professional training programme for Imams. However, despite these arrangements, the cooperation and agreements with the relevant Muslim communities were never completed and, in 2011the programme was discontinued. This outcome highlights the importance of parties agreeing the terms for cooperation and collaboration at the outset of setting up a new programme, establishing a well-founded partnership between both religious and state authorities, before embarking on a significant programme for change such as one that involves faith, culture and education. If there is insufficient sharing of ideals and values and trust at the start of the venture, there is the danger that the actors involved will see the state's intervention as that of agent of control rather than co-worker. This is an issue worth considering with regard to establishing professional standards and development programmes for Imams in Britain.

Leadership and management were identified, in the research findings, as the priority skills for the Imam's role and these encompassed a wide range of related responsibilities, from pastoral care to administration and management of staff. Leadership and management were discussed with regard to some of the complexities that are associated with the working structure of the mosque. Gilliat-Ray and Timol (2020) definition of the leadership role of the Imam acknowledges that it spans a wide spectrum, from the community-based work of providing "pastoral, moral and spiritual guidance" (ibid., p. 2) to a more outward-facing role in society. The critical discourse of leadership and management provides a, perhaps, more realistic perspective from which to consider some of the difficulties an Imam may encounter in fulfilling their leadership role, with regard to the leadership and management functions of the mosque committee. El-Yousfi's research (2019) showed that the authority of the Imam can become "controlled by the bureaucratic authority of the committee members" and "conflicting factions within the Mosque committee" (ibid., p. 1). Therefore, when

considering the provision of professional development or training in leadership for Imams it would be of benefit to consider, firstly, the scope of the management and leadership roles that are already occupied by their own mosque committee. The extent to which an Imam is able to fulfil the range of his/her leadership responsibilities is likely to be subject to the regime within the management committee.

The research respondents perceived that the most important competences and skills needed by Imams were pastoral care and counselling. A number of additional areas of skill were also seen as significant, such as being able to work with different age groups and, specifically, women and being able to reach out to members of the community who do not attend the mosque. These additional skills contribute directly to the main competences of pastoral care because "pastoral care should neither be prescriptive, following a preconceived script for specific situations, nor should it take place as a mere . . . formality, [or] as a statutory requirement . . . the pastoral carer that adopts this sort of approach is like a medical doctor who treats the disease or symptoms which are presented without being concerned for the whole person" (Guilherme and Morgan 2016, p. 141). Within this context, pastoral care can be seen as an overall or core competence that encompasses a range of other skills that take account of people's holistic needs. Counselling can be viewed within a similar context. Leavey's research findings (Leavey 2008) showed that certain faith organisations and leaders provided pastoral care through a counselling approach (ibid., p. 81) that relieves "anxiety or other emotional pain often caused by life events and difficulties such as relationship problems, loss and bereavement". The relevant skills underpinning this definition of counselling are associated with communication and listening and these were specifically identified by the respondents in the first iteration of the Delphi process.

As discussed earlier, an Imam's skills are challenged further through the conflicts that Muslim families and communities are coping with today, as the result of the 21st century values and cultures being absorbed and lived—especially by the younger generations—who are living lives that are at odds with much of their traditional religious teachings (according to the older generations). Frank (2006) sees this as the process of an "individualisation of Islam" (ibid, p. 106) , where different generations (or older and younger generations) within the family are engaging in a "social adaptation process of Muslim minority groups", which places "Islam within the three interrelated paradigms of secularization, individualization, and privatization, which have until recently been distinctive characteristics of Western societies" (p. 106). This suggests that as successive generations and members of Muslim families adapt and individualise their own 'version' of Islam, they are moving closer to living their faith alongside/in terms of the cultural norms of contemporary Western society. If this is the case, then a secular, , or more business-based approach to professionalising the Imam's role, for example by implementing professional standards and assessing performance to these standards, would provide a strong professional context in which to position the Imam's role. Such a professional framework would be well-placed to provide guidance to Imams on how to balance the religious–secular binary of how the Imam maintains his/her religious authority whilst also advising and supporting Muslims who are selective in the kind of Islam they choose to embrace in their lives. This reinforces the importance the research respondents attached to having the competences and skills to deliver effective pastoral care and counselling to individuals and families in response to these contemporary issues and the value of providing Imams with a professional framework of guidance to their role in 21st century Britain.

To conclude, the research data from #ImamsBritain shows that the Imam respondents perceive that their work in mosques and Muslim communities today lacks professional status and training. The findings have been critically discussed with regard to some of the challenges that would present as the result of professionalising the Imamate as a workforce. There are models of professional standards and guidance for Imams to be found in Europe and Canada and elsewhere, which reflect some of the successes and pitfalls inherent in implementing such programmes of change. However, perhaps one of the more significant conclusions to make is the importance of taking a strategic approach to

professionalising the Imamate. Such an approach is evident in the European and Canadian models discussed and was argued for in Section 4 on the key skills needed by Imams. If mosque committees and Imams worked collaboratively with other agencies, for example branches of social services (as in the case of the Canadian model), this would be more likely to produce professional development and training programmes that reflect a wider and more realistic range of content that spans social, mental health and general health needs. Imams would then be 'tapping into' skills training that is responsive to social change at a national level, whilst maintaining a close focus on the cultural and faith-based needs of their own communities.

Appendix A

Table A1 lists the issues that the Imam respondents are currently dealing with, on an ongoing basis, which they consider to be in addition to their overall traditional Imam duties.

Table A1. Proportion of issues dealt with in addition to traditional Imam duties.

Additional Issues	Respondents' Experience as a Percentage of Their Time
Family relationships	48%
General health/social issues	38%
Domestic abuse	29%
Hate crime	24%
Crime	24%
Drugs and alcohol	24%
Sexual abuse	19%
Mental health	19%

Notes

1   The project was funded by the Citizenship and Governance Research team of the Open University, with the personal support of Professor Simon Lee. Professor Lee was responsible for inviting the Imams to participate in the project and was involved in the workshops that took place in Burnley. The research project arose from discussions with Professor Abbott-Halpin at a symposium convened by Professor Lee and Jessica Giles, Lecturer in the School of Law at the Open University.

2   The respondents from this research project were South Asian Muslim families and so it is this specific minority group that provides the basis for this paper. It is, however, worth acknowledging that Muslims 'do not fall within one ethnic category' (Lammy 2017, p. 3). From the 2011 Census, the profile of Muslims in England and Wales shows that two thirds are Asian, mostly South Asian. The majority of Muslim Asians, and 38% of all Muslims, are of Pakistani origin. Bangladeshis come behind, with 15% of the total (Voas 2013)—Census 2011: Muslims in Britain | (www.brin.ac.uk Last accessed 30 August 2021. Professor Eddie Abbott-Halpin, Principal of Orkney College, The University of the Highlands and Islands and visiting Professor of Law, The Open University; Jessica Giles, Lecturer in Law, Faculty of Business and Law at The Open University; Tariq Mahmood, consultant from third sector organisation, Arooj; Dr Christine Hough, Independent Academic consultant, formerly Senior Lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire.

³   For this paper, the definition of the term 'third sector' is in line with that used by Milbourne and Cushman's research (Milbourne and Cushman 2012), constituting "charities, voluntary and community or not-for-profit organisations" (p. 2).

⁴   This is not to imply that these socio-political and economic factors have not also had a significant effect on the lives of all families and individuals in the UK (and globally) and on those individuals from all faiths and none.

⁵   The Deobandis are one of the groups of Muslims. This group is connected to and named after the University of Deoband Dar al-Uloom in India. It is an intellectual school of thought that is deeply rooted, and everyone who graduated from that university was influenced by its academic characteristics, so that they became known as Deobandis. Available online at: https://islamqa.info/en/answers/22473/deobandis (accessed on 30 August 2021).

⁶   Entry level is the lowest level in the National Qualifications Framework in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Level 1 comprises lower grade GCSEs; Level 2, higher grade GCSEs; Level 3, A, AS or level 3 national diploma; Level 4, HNC or certificate of higher education; Level 5, HND or diploma of higher education; Level 6, graduate (with or without honours) or graduate diploma; Level 7, masters or equivalent; Level 8, Ph.D. or equivalent. Source: https://www.gov.GreatBritain/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels (accessed on 30 August 2021).

⁷   Entry level awards are basic qualifications of a certificate or diploma in the following: English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), Skills for Life Functional Skills (English, Maths, ICT) Essential Skills.

⁸   El Yousfi's research project analysed an "on-going conflict between two groups over the management of a mosque located in an area near London. Based on fourteen months of fieldwork his article provides an in-depth and original account of the transformations taking place in mosques concerning the role of Imams and mosque committee members" (ibid., p. 1).

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