The British Board of Scholars & Imams

THE BRITISH BOARD OF SCHOLARS AND IMAMS (BBSI)

PROSPECTUS REPORT 2022-2023

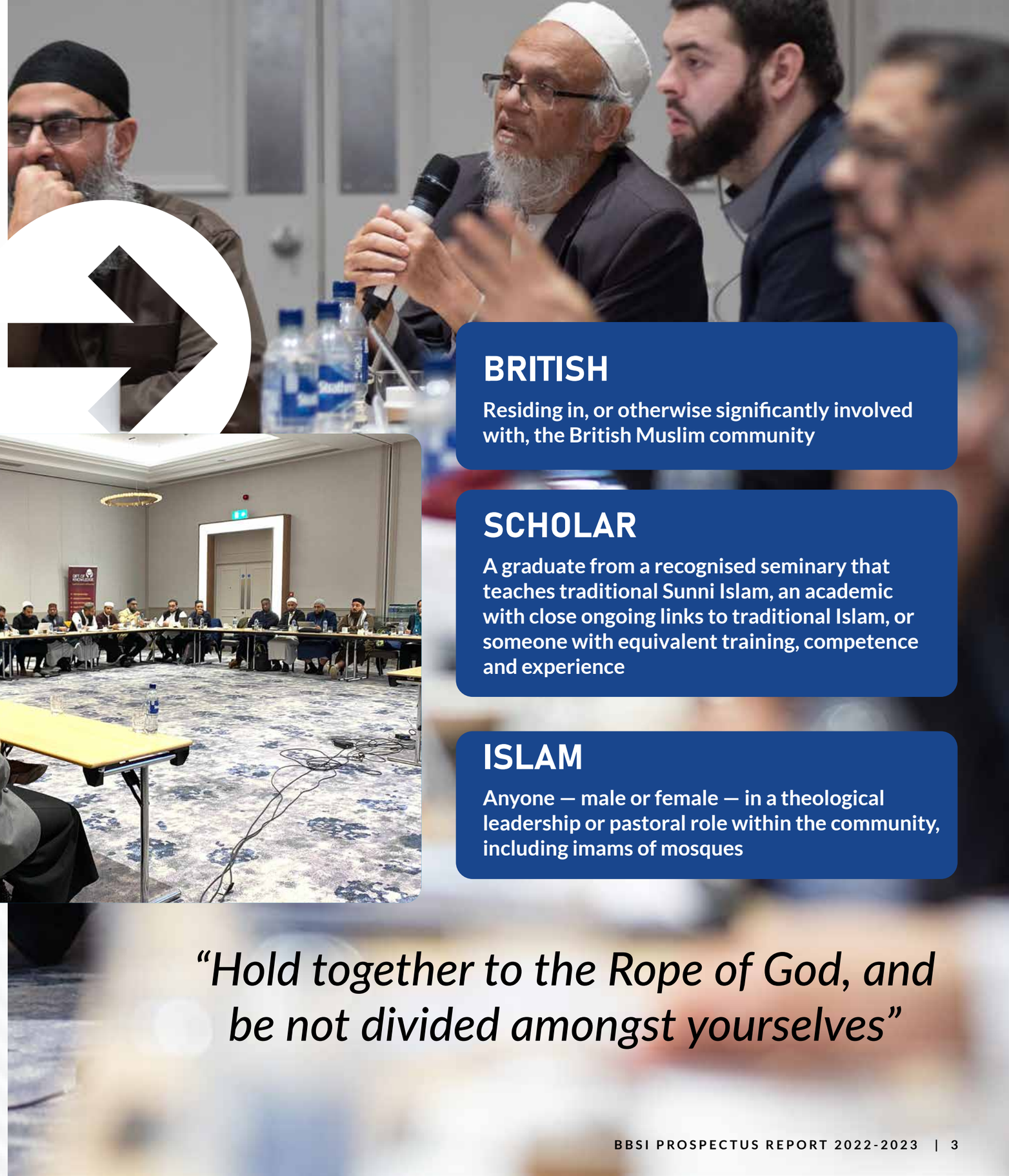
***Leadership** through Service*
***Development** through Learning*
***Cooperation** through Dialogue*

The British Board of Scholars & Imams

WHO ARE WE?

The BBSI is an apolitical national assembly of imams, traditional scholars and religiously learned academics. The BBSI has been formed to facilitate scholarly intra-Muslim research and dialogue, and to provide authoritative ethico-theological guidance and leadership on matters relevant to Muslims, whilst promoting wider community welfare.

It primarily seeks to do this by developing theological leadership that can authentically represent the rich scholarly inheritance of Sunni Islam, whilst responding flexibly to the context of modern times. Its ultimate aim is to both serve and represent the Muslim community in an ethical, inclusive, professional and scholar-led way.



BRITISH

Residing in, or otherwise significantly involved with, the British Muslim community

SCHOLAR

A graduate from a recognised seminary that teaches traditional Sunni Islam, an academic with close ongoing links to traditional Islam, or someone with equivalent training, competence and experience

ISLAM

Anyone — male or female — in a theological leadership or pastoral role within the community, including imams of mosques

"Hold together to the Rope of God, and be not divided amongst yourselves"

Why BBSI?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

MUSLIMS IN THE UK

The Muslim community in the UK numbers around 3 million, the majority under the age of 40. This young, vibrant and growing community has many strengths, but is also struggling with issues of belonging, direction and purpose. Many feel trapped between the conservativism of their cultural backgrounds and the liberality of the society in which they have been raised.

Large-scale post-war migration from Muslim majority countries of the Commonwealth created the first major presence of Muslims in the UK. Small and scattered British Muslim communities played an important preparatory role in the first half of the 20th century, such as Shaykh Abdullah Quilliam in Liverpool.

The post-war generation of British Muslims established mosques, learning institutions and commercial enterprises. Representative and advocacy organisations such as the UMO, MCB, BMF merged later during the 1990s. Such organisations carried out important campaigning on social and political issues.

This period also saw the development of various 'inward-facing' scholarly bodies, such as those of the Deobandi and Barelwi communities. They concerned themselves with issuance of fatwa and training of scholars. These were largely insular endeavors, with little inter-communal interaction. The scholarly bodies also tended to be entirely male-dominated, non-English speaking and often focused on historical contentions and theological politics imported from their countries of origin. As such, they were removed from the challenges of ordinary British Muslims, especially those of the younger generation.

The disconnect between advocacy based organisations and scholarly bodies meant that each side missed out on the skills of the other. Advocacy bodies were disconnected from scripturally faith and traditional rooted thinking, whilst scholarly bodies did not engage in outreach work.

THE STATE OF PLAY

This younger generation has grown up linguistically, culturally and socially distanced from the previous generation. In some respects, this has created a 'lost generation' stuck between two different conceptions of self, society and ultimate purpose.

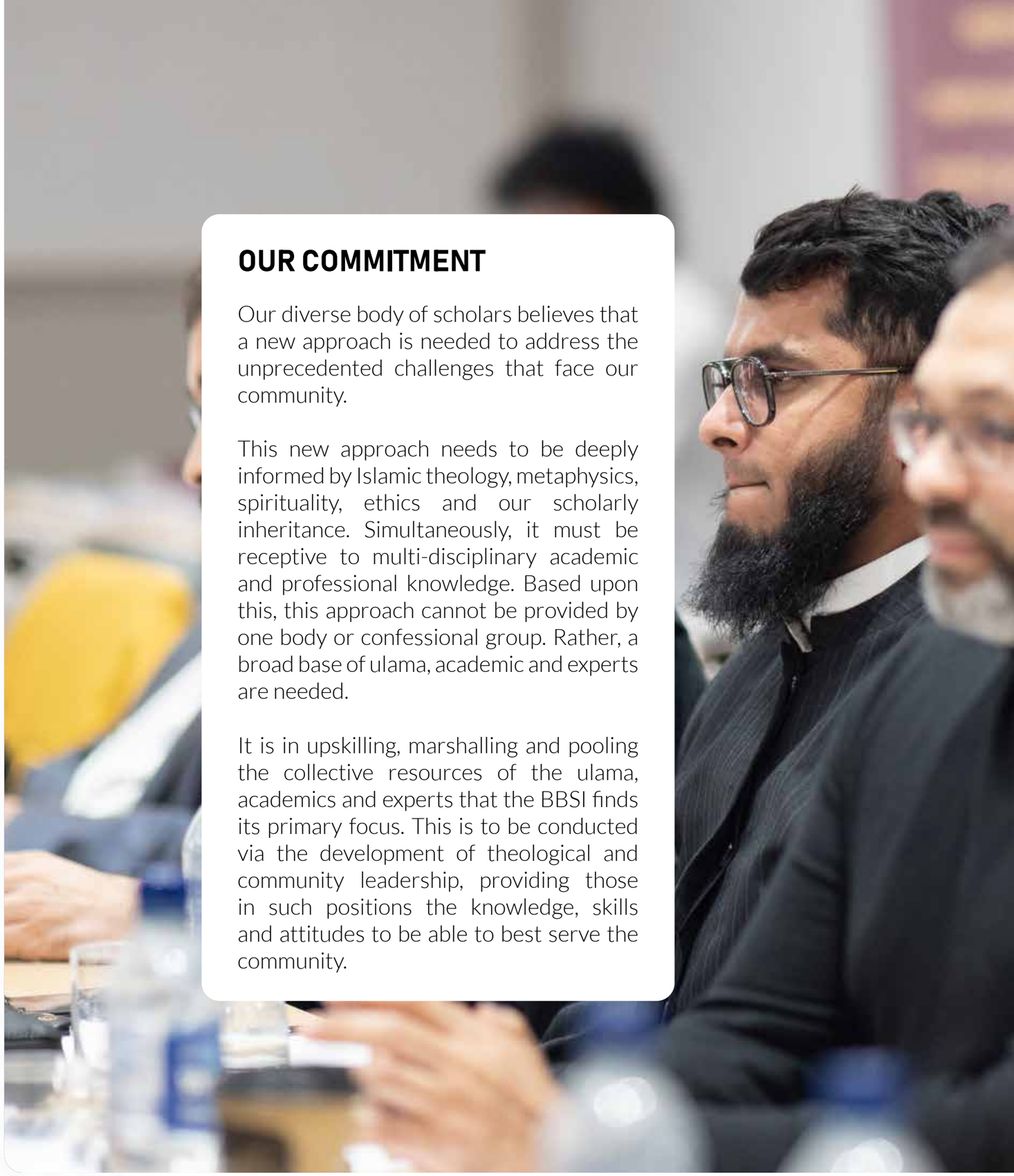
They often feel marginalised by religious discourse, detached from (or excluded by) mosques, confused by often vitriolic dispute about topics whose relevance they struggle to see, and bereft of religious guidance on matters that are crucial to them. As such, Islam in its traditional manifestation has become divested of authority and relevance in their lives. This is a potential catastrophe, and it is unfortunate that the responsibility for much of this fall squarely on the shoulders of the present-day ulama.

CURRENT CHALLENGES

THE CHALLENGES FACING THE COMMUNITY:

1. 'Theological' such as safeguarding oneself from materialist philosophies and atheism, and the religious bases of radicalisation
2. 'Leadership,' including navigating conflicting and contradictory religious guidance, schisms between confessional Muslim communities, and an increase in disputation and hatred fueled by social media. This also includes questions around governance and assurance of those in scholarly leadership roles, both in terms of competence and probity.
3. 'Societal,' including drugs, criminality and gangs, changing family and relationship dynamics, Islamophobia, assimilation versus integration, unemployment, and advocating to influence local and national government policy.
4. 'Academic' such as underachievement, difficulties faced in higher education with the growth of Islamophobia etc., and underrepresentation in academia
5. 'Moral/Spiritual' — how to maintain fidelity to God and His Prophet (S) in a secular context, our role as vicegerents of God on earth and preserving individual, communal and environmental harmony.

"Developing theological leadership means upskilling, marshalling and pooling the collective resources of the scholarly tradition to meet the challenges of the modern age."



OUR COMMITMENT

Our diverse body of scholars believes that a new approach is needed to address the unprecedented challenges that face our community.

This new approach needs to be deeply informed by Islamic theology, metaphysics, spirituality, ethics and our scholarly inheritance. Simultaneously, it must be receptive to multi-disciplinary academic and professional knowledge. Based upon this, this approach cannot be provided by one body or confessional group. Rather, a broad base of ulama, academic and experts are needed.

It is in upskilling, marshalling and pooling the collective resources of the ulama, academics and experts that the BBSI finds its primary focus. This is to be conducted via the development of theological and community leadership, providing those in such positions the knowledge, skills and attitudes to be able to best serve the community.

OUR VISION AND PURPOSES

To understand why BBSI, it is worthwhile taking an aims-led view. Ultimately, the aim of the BBSI is to enable the Muslim community of this country to fulfil their primary purpose: the holistic worship of God, via fidelity to the exalted guidance of the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad (s).

This holistic worship entails two primary objectives:

1. Performance of worship and adoration of God

2. Ethical conduct towards (and service of) His creation, and one facilitating objective:

3. The removal of internal and external barriers that hinder these goals.

The training of scholars and imams (as defined previously) needs to be focused around delivery of these objectives, as well as identifying what these barriers may be in individuals, groups and societies, then working with them and revising guidance to help mitigate them. This in turn requires training of scholars and imams not merely in the classical subjects of theology, law, scriptural hermeneutics and so forth, but also in counselling, youth development, relationship support, and other such topics.

It is the vision of the BBSI to provide the continuing support, guidance and development required to create and sustain such theological leadership for the benefit of the Muslim community. This in turn is to facilitate the growth and development of the Muslim community as a whole, and their positive contribution to the wider British community.

Providing guidance and advocacy

1. Cross-denominational guidance and advocacy around social welfare topics that impact on the entire Muslim community. A successful example of this is the production of cross-denominational religious guidance on fostering and adoption.

2. Providing theological leadership and guidance in collaboration with other organisations, such as charities, in identifying and meeting the challenges that the Muslim community — as well as other communities — face in the modern age. An example might be that of harmonious family life, raising children or care of the elderly.

3. The BBSI aims to address these priorities and more in a professional, strategic and farsighted manner, in order to establish a platform to represent Islam in 21st century Britain. Drawing on the skills, stature and contacts of the many British scholars and imams who contribute positively to British society, this organisation will contribute to and symbolise the British Muslim experience.

Professionalising scholarly discourse

1. Facilitating cross-denominational discussions on specifically religious (jurisprudential) topics to maintain the vitality of ikhtilaf (beneficial differences of opinion) without these being clouded by sectarianism. Currently, there are few 'safe spaces' where such discussions can occur in a constructive and facilitated way. An example of this is to bring together the various 'moonsighting' camps for discussion.

2. The development of agreed standards for scholarly education that allow different methods, approaches and syllabi to flourish within an agreed competency framework and also allow for continuing development' of scholars and imams through peer-review, symposia, and pooling and making available expertise found within the scholarly community to others.

3. The establishment of rules of engagement' among the scholarly class, including mechanisms to resolve disputes ethically, that can then permeate down to other sectors of the Muslim community.

"The very first question to ask must always be: what is our purpose in this life? Every subsequent query returns to that — and it has been answered for us..."

The BBSI undertakes to achieve this in partnership with, rather than competition against, currently existing bodies.

It is submitted that, in order for any Muslim organisation to represent Muslims in any domain, it necessarily adopts a view of 'the right thing to do' that is deeply informed by Islam. However, what precisely 'Islam' says about a particular issue is often not a simple topic.

It is precisely the responsibility of scholars to investigate, analyse, consult and determine what an Islamic ethical perspective on a given matter is, and to then work with other organisations to motivate for this or provide guidance on it.

The ecumenical nature of the BBSI allows for the widest possible purview of opinions and positions to be discussed, critiqued and constructed on a specific issue, in turn allowing the most contextual and beneficial positions to be arrived at and advocated.

It is thus the intent of the BBSI to work alongside and complement (rather than replace or compete with) the excellent work being done by other Muslim organisations, such as those above-mentioned, as well as Imams Online, Jamaat Ahle Sunnat, Wifaq al-'Ulama, the BMF, the ECFR and Muslim charities, among others.

However, we cannot do this without your support and input. We would welcome and value your expertise and contribution to this laudable project!

SCHOLAR-LED

The BBSI is independent and comprised of traditionally trained scholars as well as university trained academics — of both genders - bringing together the seminary and the academy to enrich both.

ECUMENICAL

Its current consultative (shura) assembly has representatives from the full spectrum of Sunni faith traditions, bridging sectarian divides in a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect, whilst allowing each to retain their own identity and outlook.

CO-OPERATIVE

It is the intent of the BBSI to work alongside and complement (rather than replace or compete with) the excellent work being done by other Muslim organisations.

HUMAN FLOURISHING

WHAT WE STAND FOR:

- Strengthening faith and man's connection with God
- Improving lives, holistic health and wellbeing
- Building bonds of family and community
- Holistic education
- Maximising human dignity and ethical conduct
- Social upliftment and welfare

HOW WE ACHIEVE IT:

- Striving for Ihsan (excellence of conduct)
- Working collaboratively
- Building bridges
- Helping each other achieve our potential
- Taking and giving good advice
- Working strategically and far-sightedly

"Be compassionate to all on the earth, that the One beyond heaven may be merciful to you."

THE PURPOSES OF DIVINE LAW

The Divine guidance of Islam (the Sharia) is considered by scholars to return to one principle: that of mercy — which in practice means seeking to avert harm and acquire benefit for as many of God's creation as possible.

The classical scholars, upon surveying all of rulings of Islamic law, determined that this 'benefit' returns to five (or six) principles, which form the basis of the rights-paradigm of Islam. They also, therefore, form the basis of the BBSI's mission:

- The right to know God and nurture the soul
- The right to life, health and physical welfare
- The right to education and intellectual development
- The right to a family life and social inclusion
- The right to dignity and self—esteem
- The right to material welfare and relief from poverty

STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

A LONG AND WINDING ROAD

It has taken eight to ten years for the BBSI to reach its current stage. From the first tentative conversations — to more structured online discussion — to developing approaches to respectfully challenge each other — to organising formal symposia for research and insights to be shared — to agreeing a representative structure — to present day, ready for an official launch!

TRACING THE BBSI'S DEVELOPMENT

2012 - DIALOGUE
Dialogue begins under Imam Abdullah Hasan. Barelwis, Deobandis, Sufis and Salafis begin tentative conversations and building relationships.

2013 - SYMPOSIA
The first formal symposia are held on topics such as zakat and taxation, living as a minority in the UK, and dealing with Islamophobia.

2013 - MULTAQA
The Multaqa (the meeting place) is created, an online theological safe space for discussion and relationship building

2017 - BBSI DISCUSSION
Symposia continue, but discussions begin about formalising the structure, registering the entity and appointing directors

2019 - PREPARATION
Development of BBSI: organisational structure, constitution and by-laws, vision, objectives and strategic planning

2020-2023
Launch of the BBSI and execution of its mission and purposes - watch this space (**or better still, get involved!**)

The Multaqa al-A'imma wa al-Du'at

AN ECUMENICAL MEETING PLACE

THE BBSI SYMPOSIA

A number of private academic symposia have been organised to date, in different locations around the UK, attended by up to 50 scholars of different backgrounds.

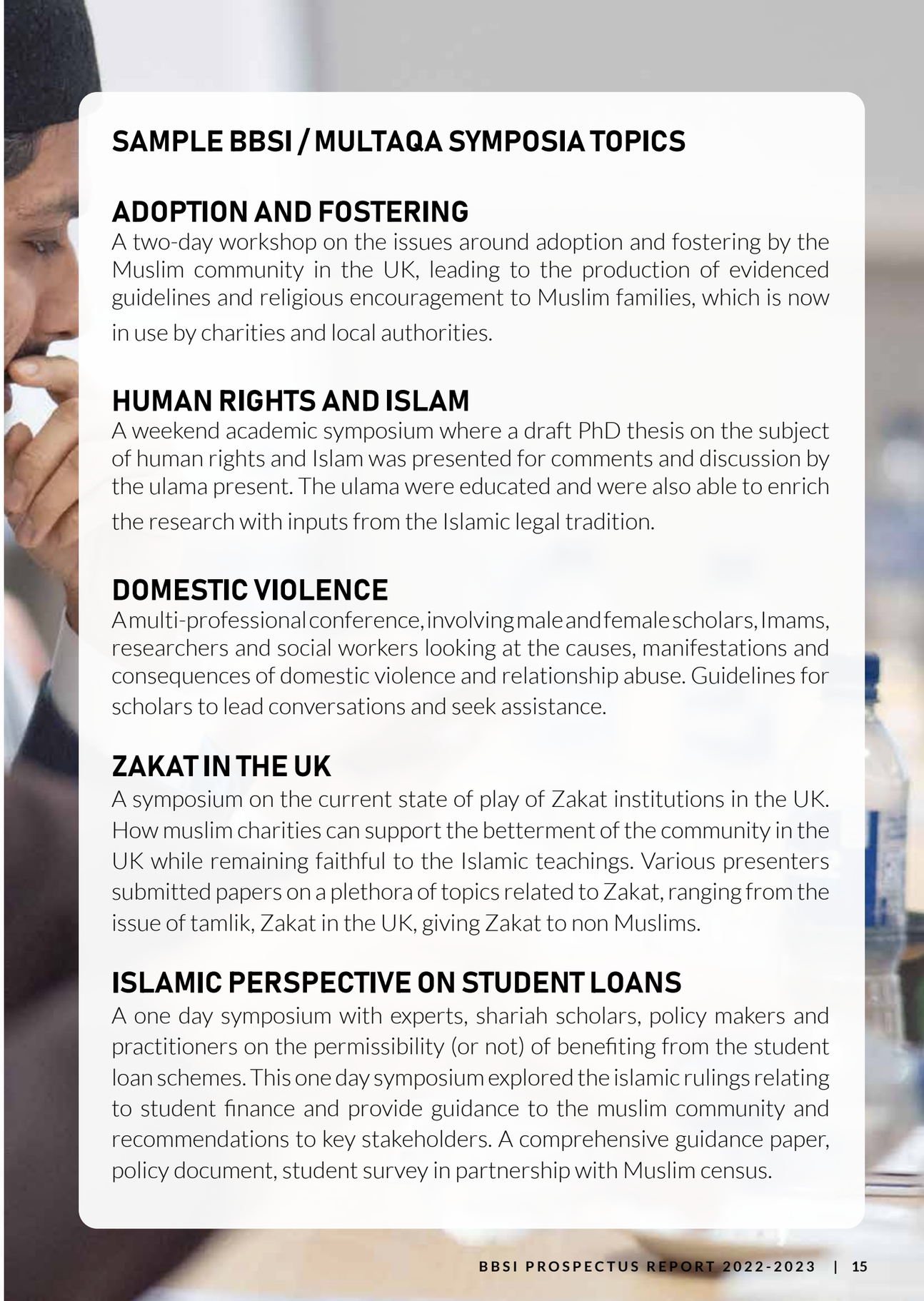
It has covered topics such as: the methodology of ijtihad, the role of women in society, Islamic finance in the UK, pluralism, the collection & utilisation of zakat in modern times, the relationship between Islam and politics, adoption and fostering in Islam, Islam and Human Rights, and Domestic and Relationship Abuse.

This informal group of diverse Imams, Scholars and Islamically-literate academics are from various backgrounds and regions of the UK - from Sufi, Tablighi, Deobandi, Salafi, Jamati, Barelwi etc. The participants are from all over the UK and even other international countries. Scholars present were English speaking and included some of the most prominent Imams, Scholars, Muftis, and teachers in the western religious scene.

Since the onset of online discussions in 2013, most of the work carried out thus far has been under informal circumstances, but highly collaborative in nature.

The benefit of such a methodology has been overwhelmingly constructive. Both the process and methodology to produce the end research papers has been enlightening and ground breaking. This is one example of the many that have been done. But the research and its findings have not been publicised. This, along with the various public declarations and statements that have already been made. The benefit of the likes of groups for the community will be many including advocating operational unity as well as reducing perceived misunderstandings and tensions on the ground.

The Multaqa continues to run alongside the BBSI, and there are around 1000 Imams and Scholars in various networks, including, more latterly, female scholars who have been historically either difficult to engage or marginalised. It now comprises an invaluable discussion forum for ulama and academic scholars of every background to learn from and advise one another.



SAMPLE BBSI / MULTAQA SYMPOSIA TOPICS

ADOPTION AND FOSTERING

A two-day workshop on the issues around adoption and fostering by the Muslim community in the UK, leading to the production of evidenced guidelines and religious encouragement to Muslim families, which is now in use by charities and local authorities.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND ISLAM

A weekend academic symposium where a draft PhD thesis on the subject of human rights and Islam was presented for comments and discussion by the ulama present. The ulama were educated and were also able to enrich the research with inputs from the Islamic legal tradition.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A multi-professional conference, involving male and female scholars, Imams, researchers and social workers looking at the causes, manifestations and consequences of domestic violence and relationship abuse. Guidelines for scholars to lead conversations and seek assistance.

ZAKAT IN THE UK

A symposium on the current state of play of Zakat institutions in the UK. How muslim charities can support the betterment of the community in the UK while remaining faithful to the Islamic teachings. Various presenters submitted papers on a plethora of topics related to Zakat, ranging from the issue of tamlik, Zakat in the UK, giving Zakat to non Muslims.

ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON STUDENT LOANS

A one day symposium with experts, shariah scholars, policy makers and practitioners on the permissibility (or not) of benefiting from the student loan schemes. This one day symposium explored the islamic rulings relating to student finance and provide guidance to the muslim community and recommendations to key stakeholders. A comprehensive guidance paper, policy document, student survey in partnership with Muslim census.

The Current Make-Up of the BBSI

ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM & COUNCIL

SAMPLE RECENT ONLINE DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Responses to Relationship and Sex
- Education in primary schools
- Islamic finance options in the UK
- Meeting the challenge of atheism and the rise on anti-Islamic sentiment
- Annulment of marriage contracts and the role of sharia courts
- The methodologies of bid'a in different schools
- Accreditation of Dar al-Ulums
- Islamic theological and practical responses to climate change The role of religion in promoting positive mental health
- Chinese medicine, Chi and Islam
- The use of Artificial intelligence in fatwa
- Customary stipulations in contracts and tort law

THE CONSULTATIVE (SHURA) COUNCIL

The full list of the council members can be found on our website.

"The amazing opportunity to have discussions in real time with learned experts from different backgrounds is unique and invaluable. I have both learned different perspectives and developed a real respect for those I otherwise would never have encountered."

ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BBSI

The BBSI is a formally registered entity (a non-profit organisation). As such, there is a formal constitution and by-laws by which we operate. The principle is the need to balance continuity and consistency with accessibility and accountability, all the while ensuring that the BBSI remains representative of the UK Muslim community.

As such, there are five levels to the BBSI's structure: Affiliates, Members, the Shura consultative council, the Executive Board, and the Trustees. The basic make-up of the organisation is of course its membership, made up primarily of those who fulfil the criteria of scholars or Imams (as defined earlier), as well as - secondarily - affiliates who do not fulfil these criteria but serve as 'honorary members'. This level does not have voting rights, but will select the Shura Council.

The Shura is the consultative arm of the BBSI, both being apprised by the Executive Board, about progress towards objectives, and advising them, whilst also retaining a binding say in major decisions that relate to the BBSI's primary objectives. It is balanced across confessional, gender, ethnic and national lines (as far as possible) so as to remain representative.

The Executive Board is the primary decision-making organ of the BBSI, holding the responsibility for day-to-day decisions and overseeing fulfilment of its objectives. Decisions are taken by consensus or majority. It is headed by the Chair, who holds the overall authority and the casting vote in cases of deadlock. In the first session of the BBSI, the trustees are also on the Executive Board.

TRUSTEES

The founding Trustees of BBSI. Their role is to ensure that the BBSI remains true to its founding objectives, and that the core purpose is maintained.

MEMBERS / AFFILIATES

Members form the bulk of the BBSI, from whom the Shura is selected. They have access to the BBSI resources and may join or form various working groups. Affiliates are honorary members who, despite being neither scholars or imams can positively contribute to the organisation.

EXECUTIVE BOARD

The executive board, heading by a chair, are responsible for developing and overseeing the execution of the BBSI projects. They meet online each month to discuss progress and in person at least twice a year.

They are nominated by election and must be able to actively contribute to remain part of the Executive Board. They serve three-year terms and decide the day-to-day running of the organisation.

There are a number of roles that comprise the Executive, including statutory ones such as chair, vice-chair, secretary and treasurer, but also some organisation specific ones like Spiritual Affairs Director.

SHURA COUNCIL

The main legislative organ of the BBSI, which must (by constitution) remain representative of the community in terms of confessional background, gender and ethnicity.

The Shura are primarily a consultative body, from whom the Executive Board are selected. They meet at least once a year and must be kept updated (online) and consulted about major decisions (those directly relating to core BBSI objectives).

They ensure that the BBSI remains representative of the Muslim community in terms of its projects and undertakings.

PROJECTS AND AMBITIONS

The BBSI is grateful for the God-granted grace (taufiq) to contribute, in our various iterations over the years thus far, to the development of theological leadership, despite next to no resources in terms of time or finances. Up to this point, with some notable exceptions, everything has been done voluntarily and in participants' own free time. We have, however, reached the point where our ambition will need to be supported with additional resource.

The BBSI is acutely aware of the risks of both over-extending, but also stagnating into a mere 'talk shop' for scholars. There are a number of projects and collaborations that have been mooted, but which need to be weighed up in terms of the fundamental objectives of the BBSI and the likely resource commitment they will entail.

The below represent what we believe is achievable in the short and long term, in terms of both the inward and outward-facing objectives of the BBSI. It is envisioned that the short-term projects will require relatively less resource, especially given our already existing links.

INWARD FACING - SHORT TERM

1. The creation of a searchable database of members' interests and expertise, facilitating cooperation on relevant, beneficial topics
2. Academic survey on members' experiences of the training of religious scholars and Imams, focusing on identifying gaps/needs
3. Continuing organisation of two symposia each year - one focused on academic topics and the other on community facing issues

INWARD FACING - LONG TERM

1. Development of a vertically-integrated framework of required competencies for scholars against which graduates can be assessed
2. Provision of Continuing Holistic Education to scholars and Imams to ensure their further development and ability to serve the people
3. Creation of a regulatory body overseeing the conduct, probity and competence of theological leaders, e.g.: preventing spiritual abuse

BBSI PROJECT APPROVAL PROCESS

1. Project proposal completed by member or outside body
2. Assessed in accordance with BBSI strategic objectives (Exec)
3. Costing of project (man-hours, cost, other required resources)
4. Assessment of the benefits and risks of a project
5. Approval and prioritisation by Executive Board
6. Execution and overseeing of project

OUTWARD FACING - SHORT TERM

1. Development and publication of a collection of jumua khutbas for use by the public on relevant and beneficial topics
2. Identification - via survey and guided interview - and prioritisation of the religious and social needs of the community
3. Continuing guidance and advocacy work in partnership with other organisations (like the adoption/fostering work done previously)

OUTWARD FACING - LONG TERM

1. Creation of working groups, partnering as appropriate, to develop cross-denominational guidance (eg: on ethical marriage contracts)
2. Enriching already-existent relationships with seminaries, etc., to develop their curricula accordance with identified competency needs
3. Development of a public committee to liaise with other groups, both Muslim and non-Muslim, and provide theological leadership

GET INVOLVED!

CAN YOU HELP?

A task like this cannot be done without support. The BBSI is a strongly collaborative organisation at its core, and we would welcome support, encouragement and strategic or financial assistance from other organisations or concerned individuals.

This support may be financial, but we would also welcome the services and expertise of professionals, as well as opportunities to work synergistically with other organisations to be of most benefit to the Muslim community in a strategic, long-term manner.

WHY JOIN?

Support and Fellowship
Participate in a unique and motivated group of ecumenical scholars and imams, determined to make a difference in their communities, and always willing to learn from and support one another.

Develop Knowledge & Skills
Participate in or lead symposia on areas of interest and expertise, as well as masterclasses by acknowledged experts in their fields. Collaborate to research and build the scholarly tradition.

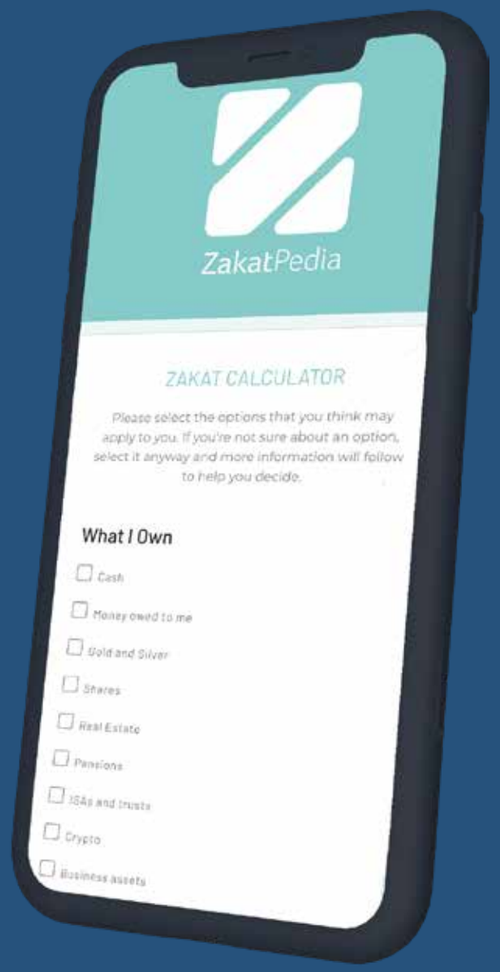
Develop Leadership
Join the Shura body or nominate yourself for the Executive Board, to assist and contribute to the objective of developing theological leadership in national and international forums.

Work to Common Goals
Get involved in projects and working groups, pooling resources to develop guidelines, advice and advocacy that will benefit and support the Muslim community nationwide and beyond.

The BBSI is an apolitical national assembly of imams, traditional scholars and religiously-learned academics formed to facilitate scholarly intra-Muslim research and dialogue, and to provide authoritative ethico-theological guidance and leadership on matters relevant to Muslims, whilst promoting wider community welfare.

Zakat Council & Global ZakatPedia platform

In the UK, for example, the Charity Commission's legal responsibility is to ensure that the money charities collect is sourced, managed and expended appropriately and with due care. While this provides strong and clear regulation for some Zakat institutions (not all are registered, and some are companies), it is beyond the remit of the Charity Commission to determine the religious eligibility, ethical standards or processes used for Zakat by Zakat Institutions. It is for this reason the Zakat Council has been developed to asses and verify Zakat institutions and to ensure that Zakat payers fulfil their ibadah with trust and confidence, Insha'Allah. The ZakatPedia website is a global platform and each region will have its own Zakat Council to asses and verify Zakat 'programmes'. This will be done via the Zakat Assessment & Verification Tool (ZAVT) which is based on the Zakat standards.



What does ZakatPedia do?

ZakatPedia is an independent platform where you the donor and zakat payer can safely learn about Zakat and securely pay your Zakat to an approved Zakat 'programme' and organisations.

ZakatPedia

UK ZAKAT COUNCIL

www.zakatpedia.org

"ALLAH IS IN THE ASSISTANCE OF HIS SERVANT SO LONG AS HIS SERVANT IS IN THE ASSISTANCE OF OTHERS"

www.bbsi.org.uk/mental-health-toolkit-for-imams-and-scholars

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