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On the 24th of September 2021, I attended the prestigious Young Muslim Leadership Programme (YMLP) run by the University of Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies (OXCIS). My attendance was supported by EPSRC UKAN+. I didn't really know what to expect, I wasn't given much information before arriving at my residential place of stay, all I was told was to pack some smart/evening wear (dress/trouser suits for women) as there would be formal dinners every other evening with prominent figures such as diplomats and politicians. Once I arrived, I was shown to my room and told to meet later that evening for an informal dinner with my cohort.

So where do I even begin to talk about such an insightful and informative experience? Honestly, it felt like a crash course in all things, politics, finance, business, law, science, and many, many other worldly topics. I was in awe with how little I knew and how much there was out there for the world to offer or rather, how little I was exposed to a world outside of academia (as this was my current background – final year doctoral candidate in Acoustics). High profile individuals ranging from journalism to academia, from politics to finance provided a plethora of astute discussions and in fact gave me the motivation, to truly believe that I can excel in my field of work and give back to my community – whether that was at the grassroots or through my prospective career.

There were evident success stories from YMLP alumni that attended, e.g. Zara Mohammed, the Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, Hashi Mohammed – barrister, broadcaster and author and Zara Sultana – Member of Parliament for the British Labour Party (those are just a few to name) that provided wisdom and thought-provoking questions. Questions like: “What drives you and how can you be a trailblazer for others?”, “What does success mean to you?” and “What kind of leadership are you interested in?” provided self-reflection and a great foundation to start thinking about my future aspirations and the deeper understanding of what I wanted to achieve in life. Not only was I fortunate enough to see such incredible role-models but I was also given the opportunity to put my own leadership skills into practice through the resilient leader's workshop, which was held on Day One of the YMLP. I was able to learn from my peers in my cohort and take extra note; this was useful as it provided a platform for all of us to exercise our leadership skills.

I always thought that being a leader came with great responsibility, particularly for someone that looks so visibly Muslim and not of the usual appearance (of a white, middle-class man?), and while that may be true, it can be such a fruitful and rewarding experience, but this requires a positive mindset from the very beginning. In the past, words like race, equality, diversity, and inclusion felt like buzzwords, but after attending the YMLP it made me realise that these words meant so much more. It emphasised that it's okay to take leadership, even though I don't have the “typical” look of a person in senior authority; it's okay to take lead just as I am, because I

care and because I want to – not because I have to. I should want to empower and inspire change; seize the opportunities I have sought after, be a voice for the voiceless and represent those that have been historically under-represented. I feel so fortunate that my supervisor – Professor Kirill Horoshenkov is always so supportive of my involvement in such professional development activities.

One of the key things that I took away from the YMLP, was that I want to be – and should be – unapologetically Muslim. I want to ensure that there is a space for people of all backgrounds to take lead and inspire future generations to come. I was asked the question “What 3 values do you uphold and do not want to compromise when it comes to leadership?”, for me this was growth, contribution, and spirituality. I think these values reflect me and clearly depict what I want to achieve when it comes to being a young leader in whatever I set out to do.



Group photo of the Oxford Young Muslim Leadership Programme 2021 cohort



Zara Mohammed, secretary of the Muslim council of Britain



Hashi Mohammed, barrister, broadcaster, and author



Zara Sultana, member of parliament for the British Labour party