

# Ramadan and Exams: information for schools and students (ASCL - Association of School and College Leaders)

## Diversity within Islamic law and ethics (Shari'ah)

The Islamic scholars we consulted made it clear that a key feature of Islam is the diversity of possible interpretations of Islamic law. Islam, like most major religions, has a pluralist tradition and is composed of a wide range of interpretations. This plurality is considered a strength and Muslim traditions evolve and can respond to new issues that emerge. Reasoning is encouraged and this has allowed different schools of Islamic law to flourish. Islam encourages all Muslims to engage in critical reasoning and to turn to local imams and scholars for further guidance.

Achieving what is good and protecting from what is harmful is an ultimate underpinning philosophy of Islamic law. While there are key principles on which most Muslims agree, such as the importance of fasting (*sawm*) and prayers (*Salah*), details vary from one school of law to another.

This means that when there are competing views, an individual is at liberty to decide what is best for themselves and their family.

## The importance of education in Islamic law

The pursuit of education is a religious and moral duty for all Muslim students of both genders. There are many references in the Qur'an and the *hadith* which urge believers to gain knowledge. For example, '*Seeking knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim, man and woman.*' (*hadith*). A favourite supplication of the Prophet was, '*O Lord, increase me in knowledge.*' (Qur'an 20:114)

Al-Bukhari attributes a tradition to the Prophet which says that the disappearance of knowledge and the absence of scholars from society would spell the demise of civilisation. For Muslims the ultimate goal is to seek God through knowledge, including learning how to deal effectively and knowledgeably with this world. Muslim students, like all students, will want to do as well as they possibly can in their examinations. Grades attained at GCSE and A level are critical to the further education and career prospects of young people. Due to the importance of these grades, young people sitting exams will need to seriously and thoughtfully take their future and their studies into account, alongside their previous experiences of Ramadan when deciding how they will observe Ramadan this year. Young people should be made aware that Islam does not require them to put their futures in jeopardy.

Students who have important exams should be advised not to spend all night praying to avoid tiredness. Students will not be able to perform the full *I'tikaf* due to attending school, but shorter *I'tikaf* is encouraged and may occur on a weekend so as not to interfere with school and exams.

Children and their parents or carers should be informed that extra devotions in Ramadan are voluntary; whereas for a child or young person to perform well in exams, given their consequences, is obligatory.

## Possible solutions:

### Fixed-length fasting

The Al-Mahdi Institute (Birmingham, UK) hosted a scholarly workshop in 2013 entitled *The Practice of Fasting (Sawm) In the Modern World*. Scholars present at the workshop agreed that Muslims residing at high latitudes of the world should fast a 'normal' days length. As for what constitutes as a 'normal' day, the opinions of the scholars ranged from 14 hours to 16.5 hours.

### Following the timings of Mecca/Makkah and Medina/Madinah

A number of classical jurists have argued that in extreme latitudes, people could follow the approximate timings of Mecca/Makkah or Medina/Madinah, where the dawn-to-sunset fasting hours vary between 12 and 16 hours over the year. This ruling has been revived since the 20th century and endorsed by various jurists.

The imams, Islamic scholars, experts, chaplains and leaders we consulted were agreed that there is a pressing need for UK-based religious authorities to collectively discuss this issue and recommend solutions for Muslim communities. In the absence of such guidance, ASCL has consulted as far as possible, putting the welfare and education of UK schoolchildren first.

## Ramadan and performance

Fasting and staying up late for prayers may affect memory, focus, concentration and academic performance. There is a lot of clear research about the effects of hydration, dehydration and nutrition on performance but a paucity of research specific to students observing Ramadan. One Dutch study found that students fasting during Ramadan may be disadvantaged in their exam performance while another study found that students reported reduced activity, study desire and concentration ability when observing Ramadan.

Anecdotally, some Muslim pupils say that fasting enhances their performance, particularly if they have been used to it for some years. There is huge enthusiasm for fasting and some young people, who have made a positive decision to fast, say they feel energised during Ramadan.

Sleep deprivation should also be taken into account and may be the biggest factor affecting performance for young people who are both fasting and observing prayers at night.

### Do students taking GCSEs and A levels, fall into the category of 'hardship'?

Some Muslim jurists allow students who are experiencing hardship to break their fast during Ramadan (and make up the days later), if it affects their ability to revise and study for important exams. The imams, Islamic scholars, experts, chaplains and leaders we consulted thought that sitting important examinations can be an exemption from fasting if a student fears that fasting will affect his/her performance adversely.

## Some relevant key Islamic principles

The primacy of mercy, compassion, justice, goodness and public welfare

"The Law is all about wisdom and achieving people's welfare in this life and the afterlife. It is all about justice, mercy, wisdom, and good. Thus, any ruling that replaces justice with injustice, mercy with its opposite, common good with mischief, or wisdom with nonsense, is a ruling that does not belong to the Law, even if it is claimed to be so according to some interpretation." Imam Ibn al-Qayyim of Damascus, 14th century CE, in *I'lam al-Muwaqqi'in*

The obligation of ease (taysir) in the presence of hardship (mashaqqa)

"God wishes ease for you, not hardship" (2:185), a Qur'anic verse in the context of concessions related to the Ramadan fast.

## List of endorsers

***The imams, Islamic scholars, experts, Muslim chaplains in the education sector and leaders listed below agree that school and college leaders, teachers, Muslim children, young people and their parents or carers need the information contained in this information paper to enable them to make informed decisions about how to fulfil their Islamic obligations by observing Ramadan and doing as well as they possibly can in their public examinations.***

***It should be noted that there was diversity of opinion within the group particularly in respect of the legitimacy of shorter fasting hours. Their endorsement here does not mean that they are aligned with every part of this paper.***

Dr Shaykh Salah al-Ansari, Heythrop College

Imam Mohammad Asad, Association of Muslim Supplementary Schools

Dr Hashim Bata, Research Fellow and Member of Al Mahdi Institute Education and Research Board

Ashfaque Chowdhury, Chair, The Association of Muslim Schools

Maurice Irfan Coles, CEO, The CoED Foundation, former director of Islam and Citizenship Education Project

Rabiha Hannan, Co-Founder of New Horizons in British Islam

Kamal Hanif OBE, Executive Principal, Waverley School, Birmingham

Andrew Harland, Chief Executive and Founder Member of the Examination Officers Association

Khola Hasan, Scholar Islamic Sharia Council and Imams Online

Sheikh Dr Usama Hasan, Imam and Astronomer, Quilliam Foundation

(Imam Sheikh) Mohammad Ismail, The Muslim Chaplain and Member of SIIBS, The University of Sheffield and Lead Imam of Birmingham Central Mosque and Senior Member of Board of British Muslim Scholars

Tehmina Kazi, Director of Media, Outreach and Lobbying, British Muslims for Secular Democracy

Shabnam Khan, Executive Director, Education and Support Services VIP Minds

Imam Muhammad Sarfraz Madni, Assistant Headteacher and Director of Islamic Ethos, Al-Hijrah School Birmingham

Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, imam, University of Leicester World Faiths Advisory Group member, Assistant Secretary General of The Muslim Council of Britain

Dr Farid Panjwani, Director of the Institute of Education Centre for Research and Evaluation in Muslim Education

Asgar Halim Rajput, Association of Muslim Chaplains in Education (AMCed)

Dr Mohammad Shahid Raza OBE, Chair, Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB) Head Imam, Leicester Central Mosque, Leicester

Nasreen Rehman, Chair, British Muslims for Secular Democracy

Mawlana Sayyid Ali Raza Rizvi, Head of Ahlul Bayt Islamic Centre, London

Sir Iqbal Sacranie, Al-Risalah Education Trust, former Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain

Mohammad Imran Sulaman Al-Azhari, Leicester

Dr Matthew L N Wilkinson, Research Fellow in Islam in Education and Law and Director of Curriculum for Cohesion, SOAS, University of London

Rukhsana Yaqoob, President, of the Muslim Teachers' Association on behalf of the Muslim Teachers Association