PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE IRANIAN COMMUNITY

AN IRANIAN ASSOCIATION AND KING'S
COLLEGE RESEARCH COLLABORATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report details the findings of an research collaboration between the Iranian Association (IA) and Sohail Jannesari from King's College London. The research is led by IA members, with staff, volunteers and service users all helping conduct the work. This report details the results of over 60 questionnaire responses and 6 focus groups (48 people) looking at the how to encourage personal development (e.g. increased confidence and independence) in IA service users.

The survey finds that, for IA service users, adaptability and confidence are the two most vital traits for UK integration. Language, a lack of status and the culture clash are crucial barriers to developing these traits. Participants reported that getting qualifications recognised, difficulties with benefits and visa issues were aspects of the British system most difficult to understand.

Focus group discussion shed light on the survey results. Three main interrelated themes were identified: the good and bad of UK culture, feeling alone in old age, and personal growth, hope and education. The first described how, though people held admiration for the UK and its people, participants also felt marginalised by the British system and isolated by British people. The second theme described loneliness people felt, primarily due to a weak Iranian community and difficult family ties, particularly with the new generation. The last theme documented the hope and ambition of participants, tempered by difficulties learning and adapting in old age.

Overall, a significant amount of time was spent criticising Iran and Iranians. This potentially hindered personal development by reducing confidence and weakening community ties. People had little opportunity to talk about their problems without being judged. This report has five clear and practical recommendations which could improve personal development among IA service users and beyond.

Recommendations

1) Encourage the involvement of IA services users at public gatherings celebrating migration like the Migrant Connections Festival, Refugee Week or International Mother Tongue Day.

2) More social ways of learning English, moving away from the classroom. This could include a film and discussion club, advertised to both the older and younger generation.

3) A simple and accessible information monthly newsletter on qualification recognition, finding work experience/work. Include tips on CV writing, cover letters and referees.

4) More intergenerational activities to bridge the divide between generations. These could include field trips around London, which are very popular with participants.

5) Workshops identifying areas of the culture clash and providing a space to discuss these.

BACKGROUND

The Iranian population in London is substantial. The 2011 census suggests there are at least 84,735 Iranian born people in the UK. This is an underestimation of the Iranian community as it excludes Iranians born in the UK (Gholami and Sreberny, 2016). It may also exclude homeless Iranains or those with irregular status, such as refused asylum seekers. Over the last 10 years, more Iranian asylum seekers have come to the UK than any other nationality (Home Office, 2018). In 2017, Iran had the highest numbers of any country with 2,570 asylum applicants. While rates of mental disorder in Iran appear low (Mohammadi et al. 2005), they are much higher in the diaspora. Khavarpour and Rissel (1997) found a 37% rate of mental distress for Iranian migrants in Sydney. Rates are particularly high for forced migrants. Gerritsen et al. (2016) found that for Iranian forced migrants in Holland, PTSD rates were 20%, and depression/anxiety 56%. It is, therefore, crucial to research the mental health and well-being of Iranians in the UK.

Personal development may be critical to mental health and well-being. In their summary of the positive psychology literature, Peterson and Seligman (2004) classify positive character strengths which can improve mental health and well-being. These strengths include qualities closely related to the Charity Research Team's concept of personal development, such as zest, open-mindedness, bravery and leadership. Psychological interventions based on these qualities have been linked with increased well-being and reduced depression (Sin and Lyubomirsky, 2009). Understanding what areas of personal development IA service users are concerned about and how to address this, will help improve the well-being of people at the IA.

The Charity Research Team felt that personal development might affect well-being through its affect on integration. Integration can be defined as keeping some cultural practices from your country of origin, while seeking relationships and networks with people from your host country. Integration has been associated with better mental health (e.g. Lawton & Gerders, 2014; Berry, 1995). There has been limited research on how personal development may be associated with choosing integration as a strategy. We aim to address this gap in the literature.

> **Research Objectives**
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> 1) Understand the areas of personal development IA services users would like to improve.
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> 2) Explore the barriers and facilitators for improving personal development.
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> 3) Understand how knowledge of the UK system and culture links to personal development.
>
> 4) Identify activities and resource to help participants improve their personal development.

A PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROJECT ON WELL-BEING

The Iranian Association (IA) is at the heart of the Iranian community in London and the UK. It is one of the few organisations working with Iranians offering regular workshops on mental health issues and as well as counselling. As part of this work, the IA began a research project collaboration with Sohail Jannesari from King's College London. We wanted to understand what was important to people's well-being, and what we could do to support the Iranian community.

For our research project, we wanted to take a lead from the people who use IA services. We held a discussion event asking people about the best areas for a well-being research project as well as if they'd want to be involved our research project in any capacity. After the discussion we were treated to a live performance of traditional Iranian music and we had open mic poetry session.

The event was a huge success and, as a result, we formed a Charity Research Team of 9 people including staff, volunteers and service users. We also were given a lot of ideas on what area of research were most important in terms of well-being. Based on the event discussion, our team chose to focus on personal development. This included character traits such as self-confidence, motivation and independence.

The Charity Research Team worked together on all parts of the research. This included deciding the research questions, methodology, discussion guides and survey questions as well as conducting the data collection. This report explains our findings and recommendations, which we have already started putting into action.

"This is probably the first research study focussing on the personal development of Iranian migrants in Britain. It significantly contributes to our understanding"

KAVEH KALANTARI
IRANIAN ASSOCIATION DIRECTOR

"This report is an excellent example of community research. It provides practical recommendations which could have a positive impact on the well-being of Iranian Association service users"

SIAN ORAM
LECTURER IN WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH AT KCL

METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

The Charity Research Team spent two meetings debating and refining our research question and objectives. After these were finalised, we spent a further two meetings exploring different potential methodologies, choosing a close-ended anonymous questionnaire of IA members, followed by focus groups. The close-ended questionnaire was designed to give a quick and broad overview of people's priorities and opinions around personal development and integration. The focus groups then allowed us to explore areas of the interest in more detail.

 To be eligible to complete the questionnaire and/or participate in the focus groups, participants needed to be over 18 years old, Persian speaking and spent part of their childhood living in Iran. Participants were given the questionnaire at IA English language classes, celebration events and other activities. Focus groups were combined with a food a music event. Participants were invited to the event through activities at the IA as well as flyers given to people visiting the charity. They were told beforehand that there would be a focus group discussion on personal development and well-being.

The questionnaire and focus group discussion guides were written in English and then translated into Persian. The Charity Research Team discussed and agreed on the translation of key terms, such as personal development (which was ultimately translated as *roshde fardi*). Detailed focus group notes were taken in Persian and then translated into English by two bilingual researchers. Discrepancies between the researchers were discussed and resolved. Results were analysed by two researchers using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Discrepancies in interpretation were discussed and resolved. Questionnaire results were summarized using Microsoft Excel.

This study was approved by King's College London Psychiatry, Nursing and Midwifery Research Ethics Subcommittee.

RESULTS

A total of 61 people completed the questionnaire between Winter 2018 and January 2019, with 48 people participating in 6 focus groups (8 per group). For anonymity reasons, demographic information was not collected. However, the Charity Research Team suggest the questionnaire was completed by a range of adults, including parents at an Iranian celebration and people over the age of 50 attending English classes. The focus groups were similarly comprised mainly of people over the age of 50. For both methods, women constituted the majority of participants and people had been in the UK for anything from a few months to several decades. Due to the low numbers of men, focus groups were either only women or mixed.

Questionnaire results are shown in **Figure 1**. Participants felt that adaptability and confidence were the most important elements of personal development for integration in the UK (30 and 24 people respectively). Language was the overwhelming barrier in developing these traits (42 people). Respondents said the hardest aspects of the British system to understand was the process for getting qualifications recognised (19 people) and the welfare system (17 people). When asked what the Iranian Association can do to help with these issues, 27 people said that creating a leaflet would help, 16 people felt a workshop would be useful.

We also asked people to rate how happy or unhappy they feel in the UK on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very happy and 5 being very sad. The mean score was 2.4. When asked to rate how proud they feel of Iranian culture, the mean score was 1.6 (1 being very proud, 5 very ashamed).
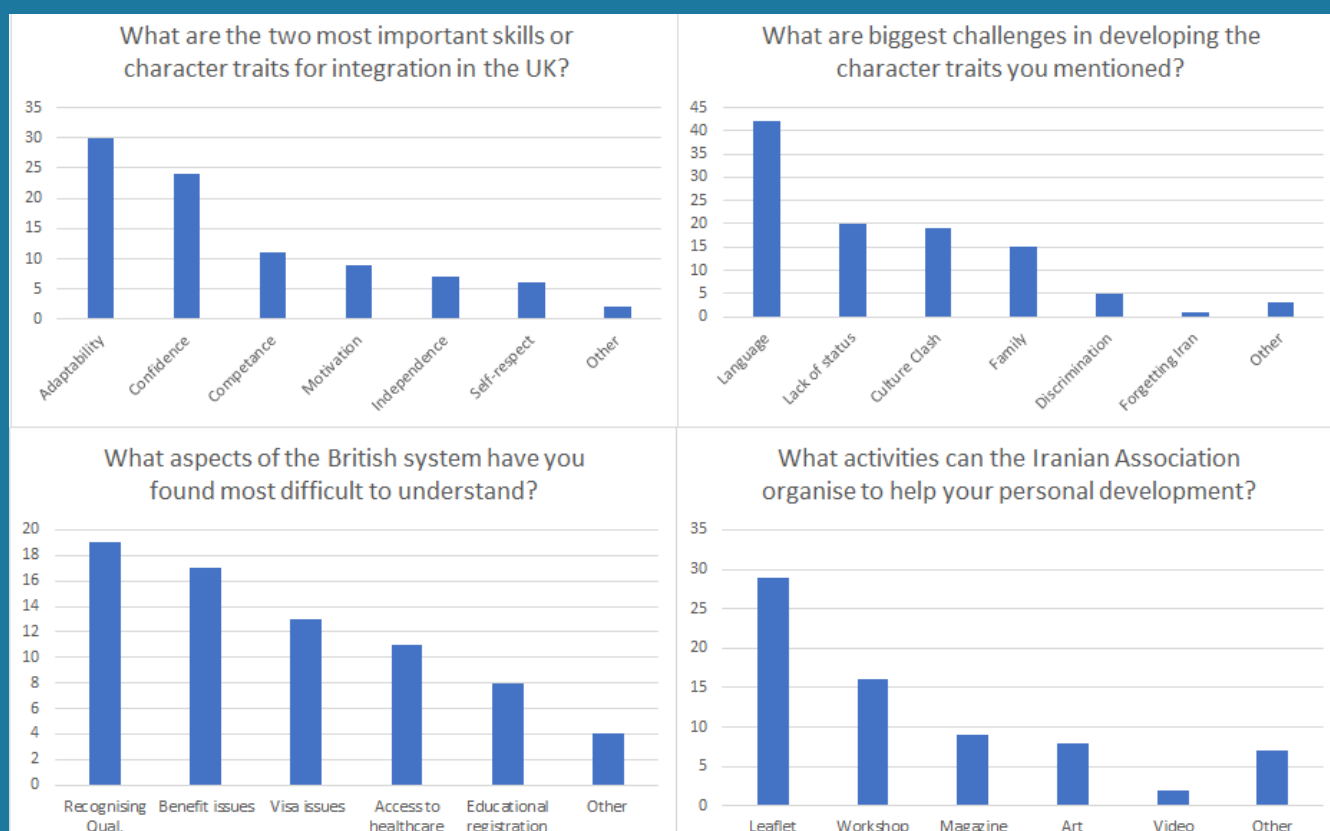

FIGURE 1.

Results from our survey of 61 IA service users.

There were three overriding themes arising from the focus group discussion: Feeling Alone in Old Age, Personal Growth, Hope and Education, and the Good and Bad of UK **(Figure 2)**. The three themes are described below. Under each of main theme were 4 to 5 smaller themes.

FIGURE 2.

A map of themes and how they relate to each other.
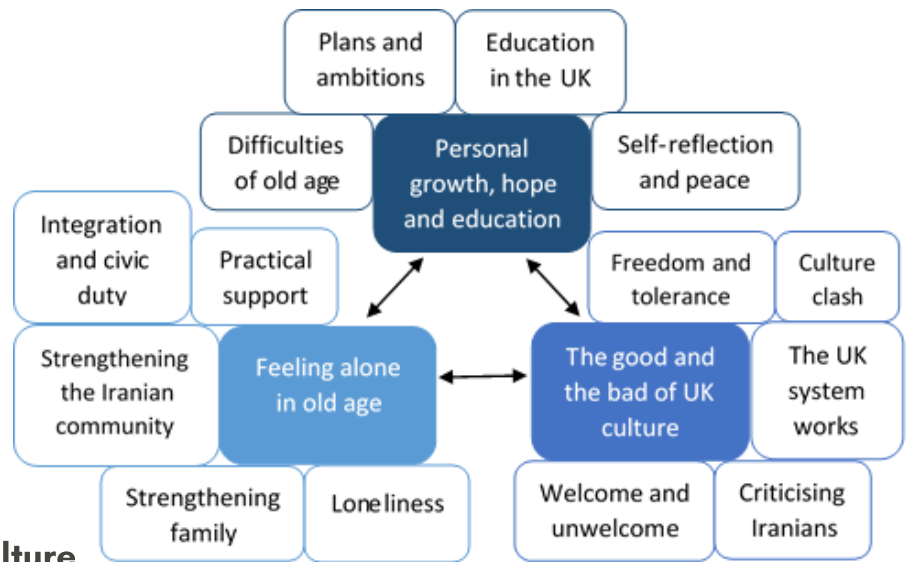
The good and the bad of UK culture

Participants felt that UK culture, system and values often encouraged their personal development. They felt that '*freedom of expression is very important [to personal development]*'and that '*culture and how people follow the rule of law has helped develop my thoughts*' (focus group 4 participants). Participants emphasised the law-abiding nature of the UK, how people were *'on time'* (focus group 1 participant) and that *'there were no liars'* (focus group 2 participant) or *'nosy neighbours' (focus group 1 participant)* in the UK.

Relatedly, participants continually praised the freedom they enjoyed in the UK, particularly in regards to women's rights '*supporting women's rights [is something amazing in British culture]*' (focus group 3 participant). On a social level, people were exceptionally grateful for the help, patience and welcome British people had given them. British people gave *'kindness without exception'* and had a *'culture of helping people out'* (participants from focus group 1).

However, this attitude felt a little exaggerated, with participants from focus group 4 claiming that nothing was difficult to understand about British culture. Similarly, participants wholeheartedly praised the perceived attitude of British culture which *'had the opinion that migrants and refugees were equal [to British citizens]'* (focus group 3 participant) even though racism and social exclusion were also mentioned. One participant (focus group 5) stated that the benefit system was difficult to navigate because the UK *'has too much migration'*.

The praise of British culture was bound up in criticisms of Iranians and Iran *'English culture is very high and different to Iranian culture'* (focus group 5 participant). People who had not fully assimilated and accepted British culture were harshly judged *'Lots of Iranians still don't accept English culture and live with their previous culture'*. This affected how people approached

personal development, with one participant saying that 'matching English culture' (focus group 5) was. There was pressure to conform and keep quiet about negative experiences 'Don't go creating problems in society' (focus group 4 participant). People who spoke about difficulties were castigated 'It's not hard to get work experience if you want. I've never seen someone who deserved it, not get it' (focus group 6 participant).

Buried in the praise of the UK, some criticisms emerged. People didn't feel entirely welcome '*There is too much racism in the UK*' (focus group 3 participant) and *'English people don't smile*' (focus group 6 participant). The system was particularly distrusted, one participant lamenting *'the unfeeling and cold nature of English politics'* (focus group 2). Other systemic criticisms were of the benefit system *'the government doesn't pay attention to our job prospects or welfare needs*' (focus group 2 participant) and the *'We had to get qualifications here, this was difficult and they didn't accept Iranian qualifications'* (focus group 1 participant).

Feeling alone in old age
There was a feeling of loneliness which pervaded many of the responses and addressing this was key to personal development '*feeling lonely [has hindered my personal development]* ', '*having good friends helps*' (focus group 2 participants). This was partly related to migration, '*distance from family is negative for personal development*' (focus group 5 participant). People's loneliness was perhaps accentuated due cultural differences *'the English don't have close relationships with their neighbours*' (focus group 1 participant) and issues integrating despite a strong sense of civic duty '*Expanding my mind helps my society*' (focus group 4 participant).

There was a sense that personal development might be improved if the Iranian community were stronger '*Mother Tongue Day was really useful [for my personal development] but Iranians didn't really participate*' (focus group 2 participant). Relatedly, participants overwhelmingly suggested the IA run more social activities to encourage personal development '*Museum trips and filed trips very helpful*' (focus group 6 participant), '*Group field trips*' (focus group 1 participant), '*Field trips to see England*' (focus group 2 participant).

Another facet of loneliness were family ties, a factor participants felt crucial to personal development, '*Marriage and family have an important role*' (focus group 2 participant). Accordingly, family connections also played a crucial role in integration to the UK '*My kids filled it out the benefits application for me, it was very useful*' (Focus group 6 participant). Those with weaker family bonds struggled, '*I feel I can't cask them for help, my kid a wife and busy life*' (focus group 6 participant). Participants implied that British culture might be negatively affecting family ties '*[It is difficult to understand] the way they [British people] raise and discipline children*' (focus group 5 participant).

Personal growth, hope and education

Focus group participants had many hopes and plans for the future including '*studying and growing*' *(focus group 3 participant),* '*getting a loan for a house*' *(focus group 2 participant),* '*travelling*' and just '*to try and have a better life*' *(focus group 1 participants).* Some participants felt the UK had a '*culture of training*' (focus group 1 participant) and were pleased by the '*training opportunities for all levels*' (focus group 3 participant).

People were not simply hoping for material or educational growth, but personal development as well. Participants defined personal development as independence, self-understanding, confidence, positivity and calmness. They stated that 'we want to understand ourselves' (focus group 4 participant) and '*become more independent in life*' (focus group 1 participant). They were very conscious that personal development was essential to achieving their dreams.

Underlying everything, was learning the English language. It was important for jobs '*English lessons have helped us advance in this society*' (focus group 2 participant), social integration '*It's very important for improving my relationships*' (focus group 1 participant) and practical support from the state '*good for going to the hospital and explaining my situation*' (focus group 4 participant). Crucially, people felt that English was important to personal development '*it is in necessary for self-confidence*' (focus group 3 participant), '*not having English language and understanding hinders personal development*' (focus group 5 participant). People went further, making the link between English language, personal development and well-being '*Without English, life is very difficult and depression could begin*' (focus group 2 participant).

Participant dreams were tempered, however, by the difficulties of old age. It made learning English more difficult '*Its easier to learn English the younger you are*' (focus group 3 participant), as well as some of the practical skills required for personal growth '*To learn history and culture, technology, it's hard to learn in old age*' (focus group 6 participant).

DISCUSSION

We explored what areas of personal development were important to IA service users, how they relate to integration in the UK and how they can be improved. We did so by conducted a survey with 61 IA service users on personal development and integration, exploring responses in greater depth through 6 focus group discussions. The questionnaire found that adaptability and confidence were the most important traits for integration into the UK. Language, status and culture clash were the main barriers to the development of these traits. Focus groups provided richness and nuance to this data, with three interrelating main themes identified: Feeling alone in old age, personal growth and hopes, and the good and the bad of UK culture.

Participants from the IA were eager to work on their personal development and integrate into UK society, with confidence and adaptability key traits emphasised in both the focus groups and questionnaire. Linked to this was a desire to be independent and competent, to be a success in their adopted society and a burden to no one. Focus group participants were very ambitious, and there a feeling of hope that personal development has occurred and is possible. People wanted to explore themselves and their new country.

In some senses, participants had already proved themselves adaptable. For example, in their total acceptance of perceived British values. Participants emphasised how grateful they are to the UK and its people for welcoming them. They were also effusive about the perceived British values of freedom of expression and feminism, with these factors positively impacting personal growth. However, there was a sense that some of this praise was for show. A point emphasised by the frequent yet camouflaged nature of criticisms towards the UK. It may have partly been a way of expressing frustrations about Iran; praise for the UK was almost always made in direct, or implied, opposition to Iran and Iranians.

Focus group participants spent a great deal of time criticising Iranians and Iranian culture. The norm was to praise the UK, and then criticise Iranians for not taking the opportunities available in the UK or to admonish the Iranian system for its inferiority. Personal criticism was directed at an Iranian Straw Man, a lazy immigrant, unwilling to learn English and uninterested in integrating into British society. He is a straw man because he does not exist; the questionnaire results and focus group themes suggest that people are eager to integrate, desperate to learn English and have a strong sense of civic duty. The Iranian Straw Man is, perhaps, a way of sidestepping more challenging issues, such as distrust and isolation in the Iranian community.

Criticism of the Iranian Straw Man were potentially unhelpful to personal development. It meant that people were sometimes unwilling to speak of problems in their lives. There was often an immediate judgement that people were being ungrateful or lazy when they brought up criticisms *'It's not hard to get experience if you want. I've never someone who deserved it not have'* (focus group 6 participant). This judgement perpetuates a dangerous atmosphere of silence and sham *'if we are negative [about our personal development], there is no need to share this with everyone else'* (focus group 4 participant). Hence, even though visa issues were a key problem for people in the questionnaires, almost no one spoke of it in focus groups.

Criticism of the Iranian Straw Man may also be related to a lack of confidence and solidarity among the Iranian community. Partly, in order to dissociated themselves from the Iranian Straw Man, participants were forced to keep criticising themselves and their culture. This was in stark contrast to the questionnaires results, which showed that people are very proud of Iranian culture. The Iranian Straw Man might be also be a barrier to a stronger Iranian community as it could undermine trust between people. It is particularly unfortunate as people suggested that having a more positive outlook on their lives was important to personal development.

It would be difficult to improve people's personal development without tackling the myth of the Iranian Straw Man. Community building activities are important here, but so are cross–cultural activities helping people move past their inferiority complex and encourage an open celebration of their culture. It would be beneficial to confirm to people that they are welcome in the UK and that they deserve to be here.

> **Recommendation 1**
> Encourage the involvement and presence of IA services users at local public gatherings, particularly those celebrating migration, such as the Migrant Connections Festival, Refugee Week, the Migration Museum or International Mother Tongue Day. This will boost people's condifdence, pride and acceptance at being a migrant, provide opportunities for cross–cultural networking and help improve English language skills.

People's confidence and independence was also affected by the marginalisation they felt from the UK system. Accessing welfare and medical care, as well as finding job experience, was highly dependent on language ability. Partly because of people's older age and their distance from UK society, learning English was difficult. This was despite the fact that it was recognised as crucial to integration and life in the UK. This suggests that language should be learned while working and integrating in the UK, instead of being prerequisite for entry to these areas.

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Recommendation 2

More social ways of learning English, moving away from the classroom, making learning a mutual process. This could include a film club where younger Iranians and non-Iranians are also invited, with a space is made to discuss the film afterwards. This would improve language ability, confidence and help bridge the intergenerational divide and encourage integration on a more equal level with British people.

Recommendation 3

A simple and accessible newsletter on getting qualifications recognised, finding work experience and obtaining work. Include tips on CV writing, cover letters and referees.

Loneliness was another key barrier to improving personal development. Loneliness stemmed from family issues, particularly difficulties relating to the younger generation, a perceived weakness in the Iranian community, and issues integrating into UK society. There was a sense of intergenerational difficulties. The disconnection with the new generation was perhaps because children were integrating into British culture, perceived by participants to produce disrespectful kids. This disconnection is worrying as it affects participant loneliness and independence, damaging integration prospects *'I feel I can't cask them for help [with my benefits application], my kid a wife and busy life'* (focus group 6 participant).

Recommendation 4

More intergenerational activities could help bridge the divide between generations. These could include the field trips requested by participants, possibly in collaboration with an organisation such as Walk and Talk migrant welcome tours.

Lastly, culture clash was cited as the third biggest challenge to personal development. Culture clash involves a range of complex factors, only some of which were apparent in discussions. These include a tension around women's rights and an intergenerational divide as the younger generation assimilates into UK culture. It helps explain the dual nature of participants in welcoming and criticising Western values. These are difficult issues which people were keen to discuss. Confronting these tensions may be crucial to personal development and integration.

> **Recommendation 5**
> A series of workshops to identify areas of culture clash and provide a forum where people can discuss this. Iranians from a variety of backgrounds can help organise these. This may help the intergenerational divide, as some issues are linked to different cultural attitudes.

A major limitation of our work was related to social pressure and judgement. As focus groups were conducted primarily by staff, participants may have moderated their answers to avoid judgement. Similarly, participants were wary of the judgement of other people in the focus group, particularly those long settled in the UK. These issues were partly mitigated by the anonymous questionnaire. We used these in focus groups to help validate people's concerns. Future work could comprise of one to one interviews conducted away from IA premises, where perhaps when people might feel a little more free to feel to say what they feel.

The participatory nature of the project was both an advantage and a limitation. It meant that recruitment was seamless and a relatively small charity was able to produce research on a level publishable in academic journals. However, there was limited time for training which meant some threads in focus group discussions were left unexplored, that quieter people didn't always have a chance to contribute and that it was sometime unclear in the notes who said what.

We also acknowledge that the likely demographics of our sample, mainly women over 50 years old, affected our results. Certain issues, such as those involving age, gained particular prominence. Though this demographic does reflect IA service users, it means that it is difficult to generalise our findings to the wider Iranian community.

Lastly, there is not a culture of survey filling in Iran, with some people asking the Charity Research Team what to write and how to answer. The anonymity, however, will have helped produce more honest answers. It is encouraging that around a third of questionnaires had extra comments as it suggests that people gave time and thought to their answers.

CONCLUSION

This report looks at personal development among IA services users, and its relationship with integration. It demonstrates that there is a strong desire to be more confident, competent and independent. However, there are several barriers facing people's personal development, most notably a continual criticism of Iran and Iranian culture, and the judgement associated with the Iranian Straw Man. Guided by our participants, this report offers several clear and practical recommendations in how to overcome these barriers.