



# **Bringing about Change in the Lives of Potentially Excluded Learners through Mentoring**

(Reflections from The South and East  
Forum's Pilot Project: Facilitating Black  
and Minority Ethnic Students in to  
Social Work)

**July 2008**



*“I am a perfectionist, which places a lot of pressure on me as I don’t give up and I want to achieve the highest standard. It has been a steep learning curve for me and I am glad I have done it. I feel I can give myself a pat on the back for doing that essay and I am now being trained by the CEC, my employers to do an SVQ in child care. This course has been very useful for my job. Child care is my field”*

*“This project helped me personally and intellectually ... my ambition to become a Social Worker is undimmed. All my life experiences negative and positive can be put to greater use. I think that is one of the reasons why I like Scotland so much because of the opportunities to achieve my ambitions, and to give something back”*

*“I thought the Distance Learning was perfect for me, I wouldn’t be embarrassed by not knowing some thing or saying it wrong in a class. I have done little courses before. I just write like I speak, I don’t know how to do ‘booky’ English ... I want to do more courses but not booky ones. I’m going to go to Telford College with my Language support tutor to find out about more courses ... I feel nervous about learning in a group but my Language support tutor will chum me there and I will get all the help I need just like in the OU course”*

Quotes from Learners

# Bringing about Change in the Lives of Potentially Excluded Learners through Mentoring

Reflections from the Pilot Project:  
Facilitating Black and Minority Ethnic Students in to Social Work

Funded by the



**South East Forum**

widening access to  
increase participation

**Dr Dina P. Sidhva**  
(Mentor on the Pilot Project  
& Service and Learning Manager  
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July 2008

## Acknowledgements

I am pleased to present this report of the ‘Facilitating Black and Minority Ethnic Students in to Social Work’ pilot project entitled “Bringing about Change in the Lives of Potentially Excluded Learners through Mentoring”. It brings together the reflections, understandings and written contributions of the Project Leader Mo McPhail (Open University in Scotland), the Project Worker Nasra Bibi (MCFB), the Language Support Tutor, Tisha Shaw, the Mentors Linda Douglas, Kasia Raszewska and myself, Dina Sidhva; and the Steering Group Cathy Macnaughton (MCFB), Wendy Paterson (University of Edinburgh and Co-ordinator, South East Scotland Learning Network) and Sue Broussine (Stevenson College)— who were positive about producing a report to share our learning from the project with the hope of disseminating what we have begun to understand. The feeling was that the project had touched the lives of some potentially excluded learners and that there was some deep learning from this experience. I gratefully acknowledge the contribution made by all of you, without you this pilot project and report would not have been possible. In particular, a special mention goes to Mo McPhail for her painstaking editing of this report.

I would like especially to thank Mo McPhail and Nasra Bibi for their leadership, hard work, vision and dedication for making it a meaningful experience for all who were involved; our funders the South and East Forum for making it possible for us to undertake this pilot and to disseminate and share the work that we have done; Dr Tuck-Chee Phung (The Robert Gordon University (RGU)) for his insights in the early stages and Helen Sinclair for her evaluation and insights during the pilot. And most significantly the learners in the pilot: for their enthusiasm, understanding, endeavour and collaboration throughout the varied cohorts of the pilot.

The report reflects on the journey of the project and offers an opportunity to listen to the voices of all whom were involved in the running of the project, but more specially, the voices and stories of two learners. The journey and gains made by learners are paramount. At the heart of the project is the passion for giving a voice to individuals from marginalised groups, and creating opportunities and pathways to participate in social-services/care education. Central to the success of the project is the understanding and awareness about barriers to learning brought by the knowledge and life-experience of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) practitioners, which they disseminated as project worker, language support tutor and mentors. This pilot evinces how evidenced-based research and creative links with practice can be utilised to foster and promote access to social services’ qualifying programmes to potentially excluded learners; through BME mentoring and language services.

The report also aims to disseminate the learning in relation to training, induction and continued support of potentially excluded learners through mentoring with key social services training and education providers and distribute it through the Scottish Social Services Council’s (SSSC) regional Learning Networks. It is hoped that this dissemination will encourage more BME tutors, mentors and students to be recruited and to embed this learning in wider mainstream provision.

**Dina Sidhva**

## Foreword

We are delighted to write a foreword for this report on the work of the Facilitating Black & Minority Ethnic Students into Social Work Pilot Project: 'Bringing about Change in the Lives of Potentially Excluded Learners through Mentoring'. The project was funded by the South East Forum (formerly known as the South East of Scotland Wider Access Forum).

The Open University in Scotland was the lead partner in this project which also involved Stevenson College, Edinburgh University and the Multi-Cultural Family Base (MCFB), a community-based voluntary agency providing support services to families. Nasra Bibi from MCFB provided a co-ordinating role as project worker.

The project built on earlier work offering mentoring support to BME social work students. Both projects are rooted in a recognition of the additional barriers which BME, new migrant and overseas people can face in accessing learning and the potential need for additional supports to ensure equality of opportunity.

This project sought to reach out to BME and new migrant people and to offer them study skills where required and mentoring support to enable them to undertake Openings courses with the Open University. The report details their struggles and their considerable achievements. The scale of the challenge is significant and those involved have become even more keenly aware of complex barriers and the difficulties of achieving institutional change.

MCFB is pleased to be able to continue and further develop some of this work through the new 'Facilitating Access to the Social Services Workforce' project funded for two years from October 2007 by the Scottish Government.

This report evaluates the work of the pilot project which ended in December 2007. We pay tribute to the passion and energy of all those involved and believe that these findings will contribute towards a better understanding of how education and training can become more inclusive.

**Wendy Paterson**  
Vice-Chair, MCFB  
and  
Member of Steering Group,  
University of Edinburgh

**Cathy Macnaughton**  
Chief Executive  
MCFB

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## Summary

This report presents the journey of a creative, inclusive, social services and social care education pilot project funded by the South and East Forum. It was developed as a partnership between the Open University in Scotland along with Multi-Cultural Family Base (MCFB) Edinburgh, a community-based, service-delivery organisation, Stevenson College and the University of Edinburgh—representatives from each of these organisations made-up the project Steering group.

The original aims were to facilitate and support access to social care and social work courses to people from BME communities. This aim was further broadened to facilitate access to a wider range of educational pathways through supported study of Open University short courses, Openings. These are short taster courses, 20 weeks long, supported by individual tutors via telephone contact. Students undertaking Openings courses, were recruited via the MCFB networks, were offered fee waivers, group and individual mentoring and language support where the need was identified. This was in addition to the usual individual telephone support provided by an OU tutor and access to the full range of the university's learning support resources.

The project also aimed to foster and promote access to social services' qualifying programmes to potentially excluded BME learners through:

- BME mentoring and language services
- Information events organised by the Steering Group to support students with their future study plans and
- Insights from an independent evaluation by the South and East Forum.

The learners were the essence of the project and providing them with an opportunity to bring about a change in their lives through learning was paramount. Underpinning all the work of this pilot is the need to listen carefully to the voices of learners —affording learners who had experienced marginalisation and other disadvantages through the trajectories of their lives a voice was at the fore of the project. The hope was to create opportunities that would allow learners to break through the barriers that they faced at the individual, social and structural levels, such that they could be facilitated into social work and other social services education.

The report presents the background of the project: the motive spring, widening access, aims and objectives, a brief look at its journey; key features, the barriers and challenges and outcomes. It includes an in-depth examination of the mentoring approach, through independent evaluation and identification of key learning about mentoring. It also shares the stories of two learners and presents the voices of all those involved in the project. It ends with some reflections and key learning from the project. It is hoped that this report will illumine the uniqueness of the project, contribute deeper analysis of the learning and consideration of future direction. The terms 'student' and 'learner' have been used interchangeably.

## Background

### The Motive spring of this pilot

Research undertaken by Satnam Singh (1999) a Black practice teacher (the term 'Black' is used in the wider political sense to mean those who are potentially discriminated on the basis of their skin colour; it is acknowledged this is a contested term), across Scotland and DipSW tutor with the Open University in Scotland from the mid 1990s provided a motive spring for this project. Singh undertook a study of access and support provision for BME students in social work across Scotland in 1999 demonstrating that, despite positive statements of commitment by providers, policy and practices 'were piecemeal, fragmented and uncoordinated'. Further research (Singh, 2005) identified the need for social work education providers to build relationships with local Black voluntary organisations and to provide mentoring support at an early point to facilitate access.

Informed by this action research, staff at the Open University in Scotland and MCFB who has expertise and experience in the area of widening access, decided to undertake an evidence based project. This action research recognised the importance of promoting better access for BME communities to social services education and hence to the wider social services workforce. A successful funding bid to a community forum for widening participation in Further and Higher Education (South and East Forum) over a two year period was made. This resulted in an innovative 2-year pilot project to facilitate and provide supported access to learners from BME communities into social services training and education at Higher Education level, along with other education providers; the University of Edinburgh and Stevenson College, Edinburgh. It endeavoured to achieve this aim by embedding the pilot project in mainstream practice through partnership working between the various organisations.

### Widening Access

The pilot project was committed to facilitate access to social work education for BME learners, based on a continuum of support, from the point of stimulating interest in social work as a possible career option; developing locally based partnerships with BME voluntary organisations; facilitating access and providing relevant support throughout social work training, through into employment. It focused on support for existing BME social work students and latterly on facilitating access to education in the general area of care.

The programme provided integrated one- to-one, group work and language support from experienced BME language support tutors and mentors for BME students, who had relevant experience of study at university level. The work was funded and supported on a professional rate of pay and conditions. The language used to describe the work of the project reflects the above principles and was one of building relationships of trust between social work providers and local communities and joint working with universities and colleges. Crucially it aimed to hear, support and give voice to potentially excluded learners, ensuring that their experiences were built into programmes of support which are modified on an on-going basis. At its heart was the moral imperative and collective response to the race relations legislation to ensure that social work education and as a profession is truly accessible to all sections of Scottish communities.

Its approach was underpinned by explicit principles. Firstly, the recognition and acknowledgement of the challenges faced by BME learners in undertaking professional study programmes in predominately white organisations, and the recognition of the strengths of students who may have experienced and developed strategies to deal with issues of cultural differences and discrimination in its many forms. A further principle is recognition of the challenges learners' face which are located in unique permutations of cultural, gender, age, disability, socio-economic factors, etc., in addition to the operation of racism at individual, institutional and societal levels. Moreover it drew on the principles of empowerment and capacity-building from the Black Community Development Model.

### Aims and Objectives

#### The aims of the project were to:

- To facilitate access and increase participation of Black and Minority Ethnic Students in social care and social work education.

- To raise awareness amongst further education providers and employers about the barriers BME people experience and to promote the development of good practice in recruitment and retention of BME learners.

### **The objectives of the project were to:**

#### **Partnership and Steering Group**

- To establish a steering group on a partnership basis between MCFB, the Open University in Scotland, the University of Edinburgh and Stevenson College to manage the project.
- Steering group members developed a programme of recruitment and induction for mentors and a safety code.

#### **Networking and Recruitment**

- To identify groups of students through MCFB networks of contacts and other BME voluntary organisations to identify learners with potential interest in developing a career in social care/social work education by recruiting a project worker to work alongside the steering group.

#### **Openings Courses**

- To offer an initial Open University course, 'Open to Change' to MCFB staff and other BME voluntary organisations for experiential learning and to identify potential mentors and role models for subsequent students.
- To follow this with two further groups of potential students.
- To offer Openings courses on a fee waiver basis to subsequent BME students with an interest in social care/social work.

#### **Mentoring**

- To establish a system of mentoring to offer support to potential BME social care/social work students from the point of initial interest through to a mutually agreed stage in the elected course/programme.
- This would be done by identifying and recruiting four mentors from within the BME communities who have experience of access to adult education; provision of induction and training and an ongoing support and supervision for mentors.
- To recruit, induct, train and support mentors for subsequent students. Mentors were encouraged to attend information events and arrangements were made to link up mentors and potential social care/social work students.

#### **Process**

- To provide accessible information, with the offer of continued support to facilitate access, to learners with potential interest in developing a career in social care/social work education from BME communities.
- To hold Information Events to highlight a range of training and education routes into social work or social care.
- To track students progress throughout the courses.
- To evaluate the project on an on-going basis.
- To disseminate learning from the project and develop a strategy for a sustainable widening access service.

## **The Pilot: A brief look at its journey**

### **Setting-up the Project: September 2005**

A Steering group was established in November 2005, consisting of representatives from the Open University in Scotland, MCFB, the University of Edinburgh and Stevenson College. The steering group facilitated the process and helped in furthering one of the outcomes, for institutions to understand the value of BME mentoring, to extrapolate institutional learning and embed elements of the pilot project in mainstream provision.

A project worker, Nasra Bibi (MCFB) was recruited, who worked with the Project Leader to manage the day to day work of the Project. This proved to be a resilient partnership, a reliable and consistent source of support and wisdom.

An Evaluation strategy was established with on-going evaluation built into the programme. The South and East Forum provided an independent researcher to evaluate the programme. Evaluation of each course by participating students was a rich source of learning to inform and modify the following support systems for the next cohort of BME students.

### **Beginning the Learning with 'Open to Change': October 2005**

The first group of nine students were recruited via the contacts and networks of the MCFB and started the Open University course 'Open to Change' on 1st November 2005. This course introduced students to change and included a project that ran for 20 weeks and most of the women undertook it on an experimental basis to allow them to provide support or mentoring for future groups of students. A challenge for the first Openings course was the diversity of expectations, motivations and educational backgrounds, the need to ensure that the course materials appealed to wide range of communities, and an attempt to have peer group support meetings. This course was internally evaluated at the end of March 2006 and resulted in an invitation by one of the 'Open to Change' managers for members of the group to contribute to the re-writing of the course. This re-writing has been delayed but the group are still keen to contribute. Of the nine students, seven completed the course and five passed.

From this group three mentors emerged and two additional mentors were recruited, 1 who was a previous Open University social work student and the other a student of social work from the University of Edinburgh. A programme of induction and peer support was established, drawing on support from a colleague at RGU. The mentors were of Asian, African American, and Polish cultural backgrounds and have developed and sustained a strong group identity, including the Language Support worker.

### **Reaching-out to potential Learners: May 2006**

On the 18th May 2006 a successful Information Event was held and as a result eleven students enrolled via the MCFB to a range of Open University Opening courses; 'Understanding Children', 'Understanding Society', 'Understanding Management' and 'Understanding Arts'.

### **The Second Cohort: September 2006**

The second Openings programme ran from September 2006 to January 2007. The cultural backgrounds of the students were Asian, Polish, North African and they were supported by the mentors and the Language support worker. From this group, 7 students completed the course and 5 students received a pass. All students received a detailed computer print out of their performance in aspects of their learning. From this group one student obtained work in child care, a further student expressed a strong desire to take up social work as a career when her children were older; another wished to take up a career as a residential social worker. A Polish student was able to speak in English on the telephone to his tutor for the first time. Another student developed strategies to continue the course despite occurrences of domestic violence. A further student was put in touch with an employer to discuss sponsorship on to the Open University social work degree.

### **Mentoring and Group Sessions: March 2007**

The mentors group continued to meet for peer support and helped to plan and offer a second Information Event in March 2007 held at Dr Bell's Centre in Leith. Crèche facilities and food were provided. Approximately 10 people participated in this event and subsequently 6 further students of predominately Asian cul-

tural backgrounds were registered to undertake the Openings courses. As a result of student and mentor feedback, three “Preparation to Study” group sessions were commissioned to take place from March to June 2007, facilitated by the project worker and the language tutor, though take up of this group was limited.

### **The Third Cohort: June 2007**

The third Openings courses began in June 2007 to October 2007. The children of the women studying the courses were all under school age so it was thought that a June start would not be too difficult as crèche facilities were provided for any group contact. Otherwise tutor support was provided by telephone. Two of the 6 students completed the courses.

### **Along the Journey...**

We reached out to a total of 26 learners, whose ethnic identities included North African, Asian and Polish.

### **Spreading the Learning**

The Project leader, worker and mentors presented learning from the project at 2 international conferences: Discourses of Diversity (Lulea, Sweden, 2007) and at the Practical Learning: Achieving Excellence in the Human Services 8th International PEPE Conference (Edinburgh, Scotland, 2008). One UK wide conference the 9th Joint Social Work Education Conference (JSWEC, Swansea, Wales, 2007) and a Scottish Workforce Unit’s Conference for workforce development in the voluntary sector (Stirling, Scotland, 2007).

Moreover, the paper presented at the Dilemmas Conference 2007 at Luleå, Sweden by the Project Leader and a mentor (Mo McPhail and Dina Sidhva) was published in the Conference Journal: ‘Discourses of Diversity: ‘Top down’ and grassroots approaches to recruitment and retention of Black and Minority Ethnic people in social work education’ (McPhail and Sidhva, 2008) .

The language support worker has been able to contribute as a critical reader to the development of the new introduction course in the Faculty of Health and Social Care, Introduction to Health and Social Care (K101). This course forms the core foundation to the OU’s social work and nursing programme. The reach of this influence is likely to exceed 50,000 students over a 10 year period. The project has now been further funded by the Scottish Social Services Council for two years as part of the implementation of ‘Changing Lives’ (Scottish Executive, 2006).

## The Pilot: Key Features and Learning

### Partnership and Steering Group

- Based on a unique, inclusive partnership between education providers and a community-based organisation demonstrating a joint-up approach.
- The project worker worked from a Black community development model. This approach along with MCFB's community networks and track record in working with BME communities provided access to individuals who might otherwise be excluded.

### Networking and Recruitment

- Information and supported access to the programme via a project worker and MCFB networks.
- Induction, training and ongoing support was built in for the BME mentors and the language support consultant.

### Openings Courses

- Free access to a range of Open University courses, Openings (10 credits at SCQF level 7) for students from BME backgrounds.
- An opportunity for Openings students and mentors to influence the re-write of the Openings courses and to contribute to a new 60 point course at SCQF, an introduction to Health and Social Care, as developmental testers and critical readers in the future.
- Careers and course choice support for BME Openings students at MCFB
- Involvement of students undertaking the Openings course and mentors in Evaluation of the courses: the continuous evaluation and adaptation in response to evaluation have been crucial to the success of this pilot project.

### Mentoring

- The pilot project encompassed a special understanding and awareness of the barriers to learning for individuals and communities who have little education or no core literacy skills or study skills and the appreciation of the different emotional and educational experiences by the language support tutor, mentors and MCFB.
- Provision of mentors from BME backgrounds to support BME students undertaking a range of Open University Openings courses to prepare students for distance learning and study at university level.

### Process

- Alongside the support offered by mentors there was a BME language tutor to deliver English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) literacy and study skill support where required.
- Information events to highlight the range of options available: routes to a degree and employment in Social Work; the range of support available- highlighting the role of the mentor.
- Preparation for study group sessions, including free computer access and child care support.
- Tracking of students through the various routes
- Evaluating the effectiveness of the mentoring system and emphasis on the role of the mentor in facilitating the student through their own learning journey.

All learners gained and all gains were equally valued, whether they consisted of achieving entry to professional qualifications or the development of life skills.

## Positive outcomes for all

Although there have inevitably been barriers and challenges along the way, the pilot project has had positive outcomes for all. The diversity of those that make up the Open University in Scotland and MCFB is quintessential to their partnership, and is marked by rich learning about barriers to education and the identification of structural and institutional practices which need to be dismantled and rebuilt. The provision of mentor and language support has helped to generate a deeper understanding of the experiences of potentially excluded learners.

### For the Learners

Apart from successful completion of the course by learners who would not have considered undertaking a first level university course, there have been visible changes in confidence and self-esteem; in particular some learners have been able to continue with education despite varied barriers posed by family opposition and domestic violence. A few learners have described feelings akin to self-actualisation because they have been able to continue with education despite family opposition and have commented that this pilot project has given them options for the future. One learner said: “the support and understanding I was given has helped me to feel I am somebody and that I am somebody and I can reach somewhere” Additionally, there are a growing number of role models providing a positive example of the ability to progress via educational achievement.

### For MCFB

For MCFB, the programme further enhanced the development of a learning culture between staff, volunteers and service users, reflecting Codes of Practice obligations.

For the Open University in Scotland

For the Open University in Scotland and other participating universities and colleges, the programme enabled rich, tangible opportunities for learning how to better meet the needs of BME students wishing to engage in professional training and education. This learning concerned the need for change in areas of organisational culture, curriculum content and systems, to better meet the needs of BME students wishing to engage in professional training and education.

### For Scotland

For Scotland, the programme contributes to wider governmental and professional aspirations to develop a social services workforce, which more comprehensively reflects the ethnic profile and needs of the wider community. Particularly in the light of *Changing Lives*, the report of the 21st Century Social Work Review that recognises that Scotland is becoming a more ethnically diverse country and that this diversity needs to be reflected in the social services workforce. To quote from the user and carer panel, “The workforce should reflect the diversity of the population. Social workers should come from all sections of the community, e.g. the deaf community and minority ethnic communities etc (Scottish Executive 2006 p.64).

Additionally, *Changing Lives* makes reference to demographic and economic factors as a rationale for this policy. It speaks explicitly of a ‘fresh talents’ policy, by which is meant a positive welcome to people from other countries to meet the current and projected gap in the care workforce. Whilst welcoming these statements we believe that it is vital to tackle underlying causes and factors which inhibit the development of a culturally diverse workforce in order to real and effective change to happen and last. The pilot project offers some understanding in relation to both supporting individual learners to achieve their aspirations and to begin to tackle the institutional racism and other underlying factors.

### An ongoing priority

An ongoing priority is to embed this learning and service provision for BME students in mainstream education services. It is expected that further learning derived from the evaluation of the programme and the reflections of this pilot project will significantly enhance the development of cultural diversity in the social services workforce in Scotland, and reflect the grassroots approaches to recruitment and retention of BME people in social work education.

## Mentoring

The pilot project provided integrated mentoring support from a group of BME mentors and a language support tutor. The mentors and language support tutor worked either in the statutory or community based social work, social care and early-years sector.

### The term mentor: what's in a name?

There was considerable discussion and deliberation about the use of the terminology 'mentor', 'supporter', 'consultant' and 'study-buddy'. The term 'study-buddy' was used for one cohort, but we reverted to the term mentor, as it was felt that this best described what we were trying to provide. I would briefly like to touch upon, our shared understanding of the term 'mentor'. The word Mentor, itself has its roots in Greek Mythology: Mentor was the name of a friend and trusted counsellor whom Odysseus entrusted with the education of his son Telemachus, however, the more common usage of the term is an experienced and trusted adviser.

### The mentor's role

In this pilot, the mentor was a role model, a motivator and a guide to the learner. The mentor was a person who would work alongside with them to enable them to get used to studying and help build their confidence, by pointing out strengths and areas for development, answering questions and at times providing views and/or guidance on personal matters.

As such this necessitated that the mentor was:

- that she was available and willing to spend time with the learner
- give appropriate guidance and feedback
- enjoyed supporting learners
- was open-minded
- flexible
- responsible
- encouraging
- had good communications skills
- encouraged and stimulated the learner's thinking and reflection
- supported a learner to set long-term career goals and short-term learning objectives
- recommended and/or created learning opportunities
- transferring knowledge in areas such as:
  - communication
  - critical thinking

The mentor also possessed a special understanding of BME and Learning Issues that made it possible to:

- provide students with an opportunity to discuss issues arising from the relationship between their cultural background and their course of study. This could include an exploration about the impact of racism and other forms of discrimination.

Moreover, the mentor necessarily possessed an empathic understanding and experience of studying as a BME student in predominately white colleges or universities. This enabled the mentor to:

- provide guidance about appropriate ways of making sure the needs of BME students were recognised by colleges and universities to the project worker, who in turn would pass this on to the steering group.

Additionally, the mentor was someone who had recent experience of learning, who could offer time to talk about the experience of learning, to help the learner to get the most out of the course.

### Role of language support tutor

A special mention must be made here in relation to the role of language support tutor who has been pivotal to this project. As an educator she provided language support, study skills, liaised with Open University tutors but most crucially fulfilled the role of a 'cultural friend and translator'.

The role of the language support tutor was distinct from the mentors' role. Where such a need was identified and resources permitted, the language support tutor helped to tackle assignments, develop confidence through study skills and prepare for presentations or exams. Her support to learners often extended to the mentors also.

## **Difference between mentor and tutor**

The mentoring role was additional to the individual telephone tutorial support provided by an Open University tutor and the range of learning support available to Open University students. The role of the mentor would be distinct from the University or College tutor, in that the tutor would provide teaching and tutor support by telephone or e-mail contact and this would generally be restricted to the course itself. The mentor would provide face-to-face support in addition to support by telephone or email, and the discussions were more to do with the paths and many questions that learning is associated with, rather than focusing on the substantive course material.

## **More about the mentoring process**

Over the course of the 20 weeks of the course, there were a total of three hours of mentor support. This was in addition to time with the Open University tutor and any language support mentees received. All the mentors were required to sign a contract to say they would protect their mentees' privacy and identity through confidentiality. Only if there was a risk of serious physical harm to the mentee or other people associated with the mentee would this be reconsidered. Accountability was paramount and in the event of a problem or a break down between the mentor and the mentee, the mentee could approach the Project worker, in the first instance, or the Project Leader, failing which the complaint would be looked at by the Steering group.

## **Information events**

Information events were held at different points in the year to provide BME people with guidance and information about different routes in to social work, social care and early years education and employment e.g. the different courses provided by colleges or universities. The mentors were also available at these events to talk to individuals who wanted to explore their options further.

## **Good practice**

To ensure good practice, the mentors and the language support tutor were expected to sign a contract with the Project Steering Group, which focused on aspects of accountability, confidentiality and record keeping, professional relationship and boundaries that needed to be upheld in line with the SSSC Code of Practice for social services workers. The mentors and the language support tutor were required to work with students in an empowering way, to facilitate increased student control and responsibility for their own learning. Equally, the mentee would be expected to attend at agreed times and to let the mentor know if they were unable to attend at the arranged time.

## **Safety**

Safety for both the mentees and the mentors was focused on, and mentors were expected to take all reasonable steps to ensure that both their own safety and the safety of students was not compromised in the process of the mentoring work. For example, meeting mentees in a café was discouraged due to the visibility of such places and issues for some women from South Asian communities. If there was a need for additional mentoring support for individual students, prior approval by the Project Leader was required. In some situations, students had the option to meet with together as a small group with the mentor and/or language support tutor, and allocated hours could be used in this flexible way.

## **The Mentoring Relationship: what we learnt**

### **Utilising a strengths- perspective**

The pilot project highlighted the value of a mentoring relationship that used a strengths- perspective, and the positive impact that it had on the process of learning for the mentee. It also emphasised the ultimate aim of widening access and participation for learners who are potentially excluded on the basis of their race, religion, ethnicity, gender and because of the related multiple oppressions that they faced on account of complexities of life.

### **Mentoring an emotionally labour intensive exercise**

It threw light on the experience that mentoring was an emotionally labour intensive exercise. As a group we all probably did a lot more than we were contracted to do for this project, and so we needed to be mindful of our boundaries, this was a pilot project and we wanted to get a true sense of the costs required to provide appropriate and effective support.

We needed to acknowledge that many mentees because of their unique and at times difficult situations such as, being back to learning after a considerable time gap, difficult home-study life balance, resistance from partners, lack of computer literacy (though this was not a requirement of the courses) etc. needed additional support if were to truly facilitate access. We felt that an on-going group mentoring/language support was worth exploring.

### **Complexities of communication**

It also threw light on the complexities of communication. Discussion took place about supporting first telephone contact with Open University tutor particularly when there are confidence and language issues. We also recognised that the Open University tutor/s would need to have skills in supporting adult learners who have English as an additional language. This highlighted the enhanced role of tutors due to complexity of issues that some BME learners will present.

It illumined the difficult issue of readiness for learning. We came to the understanding that it was important to assess readiness for learning at the first point of contact (usually on an Information day event), an ESOL language assessment, particularly for Polish students who had limited experience of spoken English. It was also important to assess other potential barriers that may not make this an appropriate point for the learner to access education.

### **Grassroots model**

It emphasised the importance of utilising a grassroots model that encompassed listening and hearing, supporting needs, encouraging access, challenging institutional barriers, providing a kaleidoscope to understand the interaction of the strands of equality, sexism, racism, that is, an in-depth understanding of the operation of racism and sexism .

### **Personalised model of one-to-one mentoring**

Finally, it pointed to the need for a personalised model of one-to-one mentoring sustained by the mentors— where the structures needed to be shifted and changed continually to provide: language, emotional and educational support and skills; be a ‘Cultural Interpreter and/or cultural friend’ and to understand the many existential issues that impinge on the lives of the learners such that through mentoring a positive change could be brought in the lives of the learners.

### **Evaluation**

To encourage good practice both mentees and mentors engaged in a process of evaluation that was set-up by the funding body. The evaluation with the mentees indicated the need for additional support and attention, face to face tuitions by a tutor from the community.

It also focused on the impact of: separation from families, bereavement, difficult situations in home country e.g. a learner from Africa, living with domestic violence issues, little access to computer and telephone, the crucial element of limited English language skills, the problems of distance learning for women who do not have any time for themselves and are pressured by needs of the home, partner and childcare; and the problems due to the lack of face to face contact with the course tutor and the need for practical support, such as crèche facilities.

Finally mentees evaluated the positive impact of mentoring, particularly the language support tutor who was a ‘cultural interpreter and friend’.

A report of the evaluation through a focus group with the mentors and language support tutor is given in the box and provides rich, qualitative data and an opportunity to hear the voices of the mentors.

## **Focus Group to Evaluate Project, conducted by Helen Sinclair, June 2007**

### **Introduction**

This project is funded by the South East Forum with considerable 'in kind' contribution from the Open University in Scotland, Multicultural Family Base (MCFB), South and East Scotland Learning Partnership/Edinburgh University and Stevenson College.

### **Method**

A focus group was arranged for the 6th June 2007 and was attended by the project manager, project worker, the language support worker and two mentors. The purpose of the meeting was outlined by the researcher and the attendees were asked their views on 3 questions:

- What has worked?
- What hasn't?
- What would you change?

Their responses gave an excellent record of the views and provided topics for the researcher to structure a group discussion.

### **Results**

#### **1. What has worked?**

##### **There were some general comments on the project as a whole:**

- "Having a Steering Group"
- "Being able to pay mentors a decent hourly rate."
- "We were able to use MCFB's client base as a starting point to engage potential learners"

##### **Then more specific points on the student's experience:**

- "Students feeling empowered by the whole experience"
- "Reduced isolation, Sense of achievement, confidence building"
- "Students – building confidence, achieving course, passing assignments, overcoming personal difficulties (huge)"
- "Having a cultural friend – 'translating'; a bridge between educational systems of different countries"
- "Contact with other women from BME background who have achieved educational success and have a commitment to learning"

##### **Comments on the difficulties faced by students as they phone the OU tutor:**

- "Phone tutorials very difficult at first but really beneficial as communication skills rapidly improved."
- "Being able to talk on the telephone for the first time in English. Achieving despite overwhelming anxiety."

##### **One mentor helped alleviate the anxiety of their students by:**

- "My personal contact with the (OU) Course Tutor by phone and e-mail."

##### **Comments on the mentoring aspect of the course:**

- "Mentoring simplified the whole experience – making things more clear"
- "Having mentors with a diverse skills base"
- "Having access to mentors from diverse backgrounds who have a clear and personal understanding of all issues for BME learners."
- "Having regular meetings with mentors and highlighting issues as they arise and a positive communication aid."
- "Facilitating students to follow the course guide/tips for writing essays."
- "Getting to know the students, finding out 'where they are at' re: reading, writing and oral communication."
- "Reading/Discussion with students about particular questions."
- "As a member of the Pilot Project Team – very interesting and rewarding"

### **The language support has been particularly appreciated:**

- “Language support seen as very useful.”
- “What’s worked for the students; face to face language/study skills workshops.”
- “Language support and mentor support – study buddy support.”

### **Comments on the benefits of the partnership nature of the work:**

- “Good partnership working- mentor network. Steering group- Edinburgh /Stevenson”
- “Being able to shape the project.”
- “Input re course content more relevant to BME communities. – workshop on project to launch Race Equality strategy.”
- “An understanding (albeit at a rudimentary level)of the educational processes involved.”
- “Our preparation workshops for Pilot 2”

### **The group are planning to disseminate the findings of this project at:**

- “JSWEC (Joint Social Work Education Conference), Human Dilemmas conference in Sweden, Scottish Social Services Learning Network (South and East Scotland).”

## **2. What hasn’t?**

### **There were several comments surrounding student support:**

- “Assessing student’s needs requires resources and time.”
- “Some students need more mentoring time.”
- “Not enough time to prepare students with little experience of distance learning.”
- “Not enough awareness of what distance learning means.”

### **Specifically the role of the OU tutor**

- “Tutor role has been inflexible.”
- “Having boundaries – have had to break the boundaries, take on the tutor role. This is leading to the redefining of the ‘mentor’ role in this pilot.”

### **And the OU telephone support:**

- “Telephone support very difficult at the beginning for some students.”
- “Awareness of the extent to which language is key to study.”

### **Selection process:**

- “Selection process was too loose at first – not enough awareness of what access means.”

### **Money:**

- “Not enough money for project development time.”

### **Final comment**

- “Lack of time, lack of admin support, lack of energy.”

## **3. What would you change?**

### **Comments on advice given before start of course:**

- “More extensive open days with workshops on all ACCESS issues and requirements for study.”
- “Pre-admission readmission session.”
- “Allow more time to assess students.”

### **Role definitions:**

- “Tutor role”
- “integration of roles of ‘mentor’ ‘language support’ & ‘tutor’

### **Assessment of progress:**

- "Methods of assessment."

### **Facilities issues:**

- "Childcare support built in + computer access.
- "Crèche, computer facilities."

## **4. Discussion**

The researcher then led discussions taken from the points raised under the three headings as previously described.

The mentors who had participated in the first course had found this a really useful exercise to have done. On the whole they were busy working people with family commitments and they found it difficult balancing all these roles. The OU learning materials pack was experienced as overwhelming when it arrived and previous educational experiences of undergraduate or tutor level study were called upon to cope. This all gave the mentors an empathy with the next cohort of students whom they would support.

One of the key points of the discussion was the support required to enable the students to phone the OU tutor. Many students were not confident speaking on the phone in English and this was a major barrier to them accessing the support they needed from the OU tutor. Another phone related issue was that many students did not have a land line and would welcome a move to use of mobiles or the preferred option of Skype which is a relatively cost free method of communication already used by students to contact family members around the world.

Another key issue covered was the mentoring process. This was initially supported by a colleague from RGU but did not include the language support tutor. It is now thought with hindsight that she should have been involved from the start.

The role of the mentor has led to much discussion as some have felt that they have had to over-support demanding students and this has led to a difficulty in finding the right balance.

The steering group have resolved many of these issues by their regular meetings and close knit support for each other and have redefined the mentor role as a 'study buddy' with clearly defined limits which will be carefully discussed with the next cohort of students.

## **5. Conclusion**

This project has undergone a significant journey to date; from the original concept of encouraging BME students to consider an access course which would lead to a social work course/employment. This has expanded to include other OU openings courses as outlined in the introduction and continues to attract students from under-represented groups into education.

It has also had to find and support the mentors who will in turn support the students on their educational journeys. The steering group provide reflective self evaluation which have resulted in the above changes and given them a reasoned logic.

The last group of students are about to start their course and the lessons learnt from the previous groups are already being put in place to support them; at the start a clear introduction of the course is given with realistic expectations of workload and commitment. The 'study buddy' system will be clearly defined and logistics of childcare and computers are being addressed.

More lessons will be learnt by the end of this process and plans are underway for dissemination of these to an international audience.

## **Key Learning about Mentoring**

### **Benefits for the mentees:**

- gaining new ideas and perspectives
- developing confidence
- reading, writing and applying themselves to the Course work
- receiving career guidance
- understanding how to study
- acquiring specific knowledge and skills
- being listened to, respected and treated as someone important

### **Experiences for the mentors:**

- encouraging mentees to think and work in creative ways
- enabled mentors to gain a wider perspective on mentoring and learning-
- enabled mentors to think about the needs of potentially excluded learners
- enabled mentors to support individual mentee's learning
- enabled mentors to contribute to the development of potentially excluded learners
- enabled mentors to respond flexibly and creatively and use a wide range of tools
- enabled mentors to utilise a reflective approach to practice

### **BOTH Mentees and Mentors should have:**

- Clear learning objectives
- A commitment to being honest and open
- An openness to understand, evaluate, think and review the mentor/mentoring process

## Voices

As human beings we continually story our experiences, and construct our world through different kinds of personal, community, institutional, political and other kinds of narratives. This section presents the voices of the many people involved along the journey of this pilot project, with the expectation of telling a part of their story. It is hoped that the synthesis of different voices will help the reader to develop a deeper insight.

As the learners are at the heart of this pilot project, I begin with vignettes from two learners. The learners were invited to share their stories and their experiences of being on the pilot project. Their narratives are moving and reflect strength and resoluteness; and both the learners appear to possess an insightful and powerful understanding of their own lives. The names and identifying details of the learners have been changed to ensure her anonymity

This is followed by a narrative from the Language support tutor—who reflects on her role; and the narratives of the three mentors—who reflect on their experiences of mentoring and the voice of the Project Worker—who reflects on some of the successful and unsuccessful elements of the pilot project.

These narratives are followed by the voices from the stakeholders of the pilot project: MCFB, the University of Edinburgh, Stevenson College who reflect on their experiences of the pilot project, with a particular emphasis on the pilot's contribution to the facilitation of widening access and concludes with the voice of the Project Leader from the Open University in Scotland, who summarises the learning from the pilot project and reflects on the issues raised and points for consideration for the Open University and other education providers.

## Vignettes from the learners

### Gita's Story

Gita is a 30 year old woman of Indian origin and was born and educated in India. Gita lives with her husband and 3 children, 2 are at school and 1 attends a children's centre part time. She was told about the community partnership pilot project by the development worker at MCFB and was encouraged to come along to the Open Day to find out about the Understanding Children course.

#### Here is her story:

*I wanted to learn all about children, how they develop and learn as I have 3 children less than 10 years of age, a daughter and 2 sons. My eldest son has Autism and I want to find out more about children with disabilities like my son. I want to be a good mother to all of my children and a best friend to my daughter. My ambition is to work with children who have Learning difficulties like my sister-in-law.*

*I don't have Standard grades as I left school to do all the housework because my mother was ill. I didn't have a good time in school, people used to take the 'micky' out of me. I thought the Distance Learning was perfect for me, I wouldn't be embarrassed by not knowing some thing or saying it wrong in a class. I have done little courses before. I just write like I speak, I don't know how to do 'booky' English.*

*I like to keep my house beautiful for my husband and kids. My husband tells me not to worry about keeping the house perfect as I have enough to do with my son, and reading for the course but I can't. I like to do it because that is the tradition in our community and I don't want my mother-in-law to criticize me.*

*I kept in touch with my Course Tutor by phone. The tutor said to use the book for evidence so I did but then she said you must put it in your own words! I don't understand what she was saying and her writing is difficult to read because it was too 'booky' not like easy school writing.*

*This project really helped me; I didn't have to go to college to study this was important because I didn't want to be in a classroom and I have 3 children to look after. This course was distance learning but I had a language support tutor who I could meet every week in MCFB. She helped me in many ways; she encouraged me; she took time to understand what I was saying; she helped me to understand what I was reading and how to write. My language support tutor also helped me to be brave enough and ask my OU tutor to type her comments because I couldn't read her handwriting, once I asked her she always typed her comments on my assignments which made things much easier for me. When I met with my language support tutor I could use the crèche for my kids so I don't have to worry about asking my mother-in-law to look after them –she thinks I should be looking after my children and I should be at home with them. I am very lucky because my husband really encouraged me, he helped me when I am stressed with the reading and I don't understand what the book is saying he sits down with me and explains it to me, he wants me to make something of my life and to be someone and do what makes me feel good.*

*I want to do more courses but not booky ones. I'm going to go to Telford College with my Language support tutor to find out about more courses which I can learn in a class because now all my children will be in school from August. I feel nervous about learning in a group but my Language support tutor will chum me there and I will get all the help I need just like in the OU course.*

### **Yasmin's Story**

Yasmin is 28 year old woman and was born and educated in Iran. She lives in Edinburgh with her husband and 2 year-old daughter. Yasmin was told about the pilot project by a member of MCFB staff and encouraged to come along to the Open Day to find out more about her future education options.

Here is her story:

*I was so excited to hear of this course Understanding Society because I want to be a Social Worker. I have a degree in Statistics, which is a very different subject, but when I was young I loved Mathematics and thought this was a good field for me but after University I set up a non-profit organisation for Children, providing essential literacy support and activities for disadvantaged children and families.*

*I love to learn and to keep my brain active as I miss working and being independent financially. I saw this opportunity as being made for me because I would like to help women like me.*

*Since I came to Scotland things have not been so good for me. My husband is an engineer but he was made redundant 7 years ago and has not been able to get another engineering position since. He now works in restaurants and suffers from depression from his loss of status. Life is very hard as he is not willing to discuss other options and he is very critical of me, the way I run the house, cook, and bring up our daughter. My mother is very progressive and is equal of my father. Now here I am, living like my grandmother, obedient to her husband. My mother is very disappointed in me so I feel like a failure without support from my family.*

*When the OU material arrived, I was shocked and scared because it looked so much all at once. I did not realize that Open Learning would mean studying at home and mostly on my own. Home is not a place where I can think or have a moment's peace as my daughter is very demanding and my husband was very sceptical of my abilities to do a degree course. The first 3 months of the course were very difficult as my husband accidentally on purpose threw my course materials in the bucket.*

*I am bilingual in Arabic and French but working in English is difficult even though I can understand the subject matter. I struggle to express my ideas in good English; for example how to reference, punctuate my sentences, write in paragraphs, plan an essay, gather evidence, interpret graphs and all of this is to be learnt in 3 months.*

*This project helped me personally and intellectually as I was also given a mentor who came to my house when my husband was out working, to talk about my issues. She was so kind and understanding it meant a lot to me as I am lonely at home. The other really helpful thing was having a Language support tutor, somebody face to face who helped to keep me reading and developing my skills to study. My own experience of university didn't really help, as I never got the hang of note taking, or essay writing so all that support was crucial to me.*

*By the time I got my second lot of materials I was pregnant which is wonderful but made life even more difficult—because I did not keep well at all and could not eat properly for the first 5 months. I was worried about the essay dead line getting closer. But somehow I became even more determined to complete the course and to do everything to submit the final assessment and to pass it. I had to prove to myself that I was capable. I felt I would get my confidence back if I succeeded.*

*My Course Tutor was very understanding and supportive; I knew that she kept in touch with the Language support tutor, which is why I was given a chance to have an extension to the essay dead line. I couldn't have done it without all the support but I did do it. I am bilingual in Arabic and French but working in English was difficult even though I did comprehend the subject matter. I found it harder to express my ideas in good English but I was pleased that I learnt how to reference/ punctuate my sentences/write in paragraphs/plan an essay/gather relevant evidence/interpret graphs and all in 3 months. When I completed the essay and sent it off that was the biggest milestone but when I got the results I was over the moon twice. My husband was so surprised and what was even more amazing he was proud of me. My baby is due in July and life will become even busier but my ambition to become a Social Worker is undimmed. All my life experiences negative and positive can be put to greater use. I think that is one of the reasons why I like Scotland so much because of the opportunities to achieve my ambitions, and to give something back.*

## **Vignettes from Language Support Tutor, Mentors and Project Worker**

### **Tisha Shaw, Language Support Tutor**

I would like to think that my role as Language support tutor for the OU pilot project is quite straight forward, in the sense that its main focus is the development of each student's confidence and ability to gain new knowledge by being shown the 'knack'. Language in my view is at the heart of all our relationships. Our facility to communicate in various registers gives us the means to enter different worlds and it is my job to break down the mystique or myths which surround each specialized area of knowledge/work or interest.

My approach is person-centred whereby each adult is encouraged to view their life experiences as relevant and valuable to all their learning. It involves going through a process which identifies their concerns and goals and being relevant to their needs at all times of our learning together.

It is my role to support each student's journey through change; changing attitudes, changing one's view of self. So when I provide language support I do it in context. I enable students to practice such skills as punctuation, grammar and spelling by using the activities within the course. I encourage students to think of ideas and examples in their own words. I facilitate an understanding of all the language skills necessary to complete the course from reading and note taking to comprehension, evidence gathering, mapping, essay writing.

I believe that Education is electrifying and empowering. I learn so much from each of my students and I love it.

### **Linda Douglas, Mentor**

Here is an outline of my experience of mentoring with the OU Openings students: after an initial selection process to recruit mentors that involved filling an application form, being interviewed and getting an enhanced disclosure check, all those involved met. The mentors, the project worker, language support tutor and project leader were involved in discussing what we thought mentoring means and how we wanted to work as mentors. This meant there was a consensus about the type of work we would be doing and its aims and therefore our role as mentors. This was important as we had to give the same message to all mentees that we were not tutors.

A leaflet was produced for the mentees to read that explained what to expect of us and why we were there to support them. I used this at first meetings with mentees; I took them through the leaflet and left it with them.

As a mentor I used my experience of studying with the OU (for some years) and therefore my familiarity with its structures and the concept of distance learning to support the mentees. Experience of learning with the OU (which all mentors had done) was quite crucial at the beginning of the course because students receive a lot of papers which can lead to confusion and feelings of being overwhelmed. Simply helping one student to look at her study calendar (which she didn't realise existed) helped her feel more in control as she wasn't as behind in her work as she thought she was. None of the mentees I worked with had studied with the OU and were not used to having to speak to a tutor over the phone instead of seeing the tutor in a class so I had to encourage mentees to use the tutors as much as possible, they were shy about using the phone to speak to someone they didn't know.

I had been mentored when I was studying for my DipSW with the OU, in fact I had to be persuaded to give it a try during my second placement. I found it very useful for general support and confidence building. Many of the issues mentees required support with were similar to what I had faced, for example pressure from family not to prioritise study, misunderstandings with the tutor, and general family pressures (from being a working mother that all women face). I used this experience to support the women and I mentored (who were all BME women), ensuring they knew that they were not alone and that they were entitled to space to do something for themselves.

I did as much as I could to ensure that the relationship I had with the mentees was as non-hierarchical as possible, that it was as much a peer relationship as I could make it. I was another student but with more experience.

The main issues that were addressed in the mentor/mentee relationship were:

- Confidence building - Once the women started the course they needed encouragement to see that they were good enough to continue and confidence to fight for time/peace to study in their home. I supported one woman to use the crèche that was put on for extra language support and use the time to go to the library. Therefore flexibility from the project was important.
- Language Support - the mentees I supported needed very little encouragement to take up the offer of language support. One woman I supported used it to great effect. She had a difficult home situation and I was able to confine my mentoring to general support and encouragement to do with her studies and strategies for studying at home.
- Explaining OU and distance learning - with all the mentees I tried to clarify their understanding of the above as all had previously studied in classes with tutors. They all felt that they were bothering their tutors if they called them outside of tutorial times and a lot of encouragement was needed for them to use their tutor effectively.
- Boundaries - despite being careful with my boundaries, i.e. that I was not seen as an additional tutor, I found that I had to be flexible in my role. I was shown draft essays and asked for my understanding of essay questions. I was able to check with other mentors about this at our regular meetings and I did give my opinion as an experienced student. Luckily this was a basic course but I tried to ensure that they checked out whatever we discussed with their tutor. I felt that was the role that was required of me at that time that was most useful to the student/mentee. I also passed on other OU materials regarding how to understand essay titles etc., which I had previously used.

The majority of the mentees finished their courses and passed; this gave the mentees and mentors a real sense of achievement as some of the mentees had succeeded against great odds. Finally, regular meetings as mentors together help us reflect of what we were doing and how helped me greatly, we built up a good sense of camaraderie.

### **Kasia Raszewska, Mentor**

As a Polish mentor for Polish students I shared with them the same language and culture. As I am a migrant woman, I understood the challenges and difficulties which are a part of the migration process: loss, anxiety, isolation, feeling of not-belonging, lack of resources and information. As students from Poland were not familiar with the role of a mentor, I explained the different ways in which I could support them. A lot of mentoring was focused on practical difficulties that students experienced: access to computer, registering with workers registration scheme, accessing benefits or medical services. I also provided emotional support

and guidance on how to best plan their work. I guided them through the learning process, provided support for them when they needed it most. I have answered their questions in relation to accessing education, work or any services. Students and I felt that a strong relationship between a mentor and a student who share the same cultural experiences can make studying an enriching experience.

### **Dina Sidhva, Mentor**

I have found the one-to-one professional support of learners through mentoring a rewarding experience both professionally and personally. I have felt privileged to be in a position where I could support, encourage and guide individual learners to aspire and achieve, and in a very small way help them to reach and to become what they hope to. I have at all times been mindful of treating my mentees with respect, dignity and in a way that empowers them. I have aimed to support them to develop their identity as a learner and to provide guidance about appropriate ways in which to do this. My unique bicultural perspective, based on my professional experiences in Scotland and in India, enabled me to provide meaningful mentoring.

There have been challenges (such as needing to speak to a mentee after 9pm at night, after her children were tucked in to bed, or on a Sunday evening, when she had managed to get a few minutes of respite, while her husband took their children to a corner-shop!) and many occasions to reflect on the process of mentoring. I have been struck by the need for fairly intensive, personalised, tailor-made attention that is needed by mentees to ensure that they were able to be sustained through the Course; and the value of one-on-one, face-to-face meetings in ensuring engagement and completion of the Course work by the mentee. I have also found that a small amount of personalised attention and an empathic understanding of the cultural background of the learners can go a long way in supporting individuals who for a variety of reasons that they feel/are potentially socially excluded. Having undertaken an Openings Course prior to becoming a mentor, has helped me to develop a deeper, empathic grasp of issues in relation to adult learners, in particular about balancing existential questions in relation home and work.

On a more personal note, I feel I was enabled to do the job because of the very solid support provided by the mentoring group (which included other mentors, the Project Worker, the Language Support Tutor and the Project Leader): it was educational, thought-provoking and sustaining. Working with mentees has been an interesting experience, often inspiring, but mostly an invaluable learning experience.

### **Nasra Bibi, Project Worker**

I believe that in terms of the pilot project providing supported access to BME learners into the OU the project was a success. The success was a direct result of the pilot recruiting BME mentors all of whom had prior experience of working in the BME social services sector. These mentors also had an acute awareness and insight into the issues that BME people face in accessing and progressing successfully within mainstream education as well as learner's vulnerabilities for example the expectations and community constraints placed upon the lives of some BME women which are additional complexities not always understood by service providers. Such awareness allowed the mentors to work with learners in a sensitive and flexible way.

In terms of the pilot project raising awareness amongst education providers about barriers and consequent needs; the pilot was able to raise awareness to a limited extent with Practice teachers in social work education via a seminar and workshops. The mentors and project worker contributed to the independent evaluation where similar issues were raised as were additional issues such as the in-appropriateness of OU curriculum for some BME learners, the rigidity and lack of sensitivity to the needs of BME learners that was displayed by some OU tutors.

The pilot project however was unsuccessful in securing institutional change which was perhaps an ambitious aim given the timescales that the project worked with as well as the resource limitations. In order to embed and bring about a shift in attitudes and commitment

from institutions the project would need to seek to buy in at a more senior and strategic level, and would need to agree systems for monitoring and evidencing institutional changes and these should be owned by the relevant institutions.

## **Vignettes from our stakeholders**

### **Cathy Macnaughton, Multi-Cultural Family Base**

When I came to MCFB in November 2006 I was fascinated to start to learn about the work that had been done by the Open University, MCFB and other partners in developing mentoring and study skills support to BME people wishing to undertake OU Openings courses. It was really exciting and moving to hear about learners' journeys, the extraordinary challenges and barriers that some people faced in getting access to education and the creativity and commitment which all those involved in this pilot displayed in their determination to support people to achieve their aims. The success stories were also many. The growing confidence that this was a special project and that the co-ordinator, mentors and tutors involved really had something special to share with others about supporting BME people in education and about challenging barriers, (although there is also a sad realisation that progress in this aspect is slow and uncertain) was reflected in the submission of a paper to the Joint Social Work Education Conference in Swansea in the summer of 2007 and I was honoured to accompany Nasra, Dina and Mo to this conference and hear and support their work. The next step was to try to broaden and to sustain this work, and an application for 2 years funding from the Scottish Government via the Changing Lives workforce workstream was successful and began in November 2007. This uses a similar model but as well as OU courses will develop a range of other education and training options for BME and new migrant people who have an interest in joining or progressing their careers in the social services workforce. With our increasingly diverse society it is of course imperative that the social services workforce reflects that diversity. We also know that the need for mentoring and other supports will be a long-term one, so will be seeing during this 2-year project to establish sustainability for this model.

### **Wendy Paterson, University of Edinburgh**

It has been a privilege to be part of the pilot through a role on the steering group and to join with others to think about the opportunities, but also the barriers to involving people who may not have thought it possible to access this learning. I believe we understand, a little better the challenges which need to be addressed. In trying to meet the aims, we have seen real success, but there is a long way to go and I am so pleased that we have been granted further opportunity to support it.

### **Sue Broussine, Stevenson College**

Stevenson College was involved in the pilot from its inception. It was clear from being involved in developing the project and from speaking to potential social and child care students in the community that the support and opportunities which the pilot offered were absolutely vital in helping these individuals to take the first steps towards training and employment in the field, particularly in terms of building confidence. From a college perspective it was important to be reminded of the supports necessary to enable black and ethnic minority students to embark on training, particularly the role of the mentors in this process. In these ways the pilot has made a significant contribution to the facilitation of widening access.

## **Reflections from the Project Leader: Key Learning and points for consideration for the Open University and other education providers**

### **Mo McPhail, Open University, Scotland**

#### **1. Vital importance of building relationships, partnerships in communities of excluded learners :**

The early research by Singh (2005) points to the importance of universities and colleges making contact and building solid relationships with community based Black and Minority Ethnic agencies, based on mutual respect and trust. Each agency involved in this project made clear their expectations and contributions at the start. In hindsight this was more rushed than it should have been, if we wanted to ensure clarity across individuals and the community groups involved. As is often the case the timing was dictated by the funding timescale. The involvement of the manager and the deputy manager of MCFB in the first Openings course was pivotal in providing leadership and lending authority to the project. This leadership was maintained and

public support made visible when there was a change of management of the agency. The involvement of another university and college also helped to give legitimacy to the project. Although colleges and universities are often in positions of competition for student business, there was a strong agreement in the project management group, that facilitating access to social service training and education was indeed 'everyone's business'. For potential learners, the partnership approach meant meeting and discussing potential career development and training and education in a culturally and psychologically safe setting, with familiar and trusted faces. This sense of safety should not be underestimated. The co-hosted, community based information networking meant that there was access to potential learners, on their own terms, which was unlikely to have occurred without the project support.

## **2. A community education and strengths based approach to working with people in potentially socially excluded groups**

From the very beginning of the project, and drawing on the work of Singh (2005), there was an explicit and shared approach to recognise the strengths and resilience of potentially excluded learners, rather than to see people as 'deficient' in some way and in 'need of help'. Rather, an approach was adopted which acknowledged the challenges and potential barriers to training and education, taking into account the 'lived experience' of the Black and Minority Ethnic learners and the institutional context of barriers to learning in a predominately white learning context.

## **3. Staff development about the range of support needs**

The very essence of the Open University is to provide learning opportunities for potentially disadvantaged individuals and groups and has recently re-launched a race equality strategy in the context of a widening participation as a major university objective. The study of minutiae of learners' experiences can enhance this learning and inform these strategies on an operational level. This project has provided additional information about learning and development of support services for potentially excluded learners and groups in Black and Minority Ethnic communities. Two areas seemed particularly noteworthy.

There was some excellent tutoring practice identified from tutors who were able to tune into the learning needs of particular learners, and provide effective personalised tutoring. This seemed to work best when the project leader was able to make personal contact with the tutor about the nature of the project and the individual circumstances of the learner and the tutor had pre-existing knowledge and experience of working with potentially excluded Black and Minority ethnic learners. This worked less well when there was a reliance on a third party to transmit information electronically. This may indicate a need for more extensive induction and staff development around specific issues around potentially excluded Black and Minority Ethnic learners, to ensure greater consistency of practice in race equality work as experienced by learners.

The other area for mention is the issue of an inclusive curriculum. This issue has a high profile in the university. Examples were highlighted where there appeared to be an ethnic bias in fundamental concepts on courses, which did not fully take account of more group or community based approaches to health and well being in some communities. Reference to 'our community' may have suggested that the author/s were speaking to only a section of the multicultural communities in contemporary Britain. There was an invitation for the group to be involved in a re-write of one of the Openings courses. This has not yet come to pass. However one member of the original group has participated in a first level course introducing health and social care as a developmental tester. The previous course at this level was studied by over 50,000 learners in a 10 year period – so this represents considerable influence and potential effect.

## **4. Greater personalisation of learning support which takes account of the complex needs of potentially excluded learners in Black and Minority Ethnic communities – on an individual and group/community basis**

Challenges learners faced through the project include issues of bereavement, mental health, domestic violence, lack of confidence as a learner, some traditional attitudes to gender and domestic responsibility and lack of clarity around the nature of supported open learning. All of these and many other issues are experienced by white learners, however for some Black and Minority Ethnic learners these challenges were experienced through the context of an

institution which was culturally and socially different from their own.

Other challenges which were particular to some Black and Minority learners were language issues, the need for 'cultural translation' in the education system and in the learning materials. The Open University acknowledges that as with any large institution, it reflects patterns of inequality and disadvantage generally and attempts to take steps to redress this. Issues of retention, progression and levels of achievement of BME students need further attention (Richardson, 2005). This project has identified some issues in terms of tutor/learner interaction, the complexity of the lives of some excluded learners and the need for the curriculum to 'speak' to all in the community.

#### **5. The availability of BME mentors and language support– for positive role models, cultural interpretation, navigation of new educational systems and support in dealing with predominately white learning organisations**

One of the particular problems of the project was that learners were introduced to a range of people and roles which was confusing. Unless a scholar of ancient Greece, people do not automatically understand the concept of a 'mentor' and indeed how this role differed from the language support was unclear to learners. What was more important it seemed, was the visibility and quality of the relationship that developed. In some ways, the label of 'language support' was much more accessible to learners than the language of 'mentor'. One learner described the combined role of 'mentor' and 'language support as my 'cultural friend', without which she would not have completed the course. A recommendation stemming from this is that for straightforward language in description of support services, language that people can relate to and makes sense to them.

#### **6. Tutor telephone support is not always appropriate**

An issue, which emerged, particularly for one Polish learner was that tutor telephone support was not always appropriate: the student felt relatively comfortable with written English but felt anxious about talking in English on the telephone for the first time ever, which was very daunting. One solution offered was to communicate on-line. The student persevered and gained a tremendous sense of personal achievement by speaking in English, with the tutor, by phone for the first time. Another learner did not have access to a landline. Their mobile phone was the only means of communication, which at the time proved a much more expensive mode of communication for the tutors. Yet another, lived in a shared house with no telephone. She had to speak to her tutor from the public phone outside the house. This posed considerable difficulties in the winter months. There was a difficulty for one learner that she and her tutor's telephone availability often did not coincide. A special request for a female tutor was made by one Sikh learner as she was worried what her husband would think if there was a strange male phoning her at the family home.

Some, not all of these issues may be experienced by other learners and are not exclusive to Black and Minority Ethnic learners. However, there is an added dimension, that issues like these add a further potential barrier to learners who may be experiencing a multitude of obstacles to their learning.

#### **7. Although the courses are based on a distance learning approach, there are barriers to time and place for study based on cultural expectations, domestic situations and caring responsibilities**

The same caveat applies, that there are external and internal demands on learners across all ethnic groups because of domestic duties and caring responsibilities. There are additional pressures in some cultures because of extended family expectations and the strong internalisation of these expectations by some women. The provision of a 'safe' place to learn in the community was a strong factor in the continuing study of one female learner. Her husband 'accidentally lost' her study materials and she was denied access to the household computer. Arrangements were made for a new set of learning materials to be delivered to the community agency, and facilities located, which provided child care and computer access. Without this flexibility and the unswerving support of her mentor and language support tutor, she would not have continued. Indeed she went on to pass the course. Her commitment to continue to study to become a social worker is undiminished, indeed fortified by the experience.

#### **8. Importance of on-going evaluation, strong systems to ensure learner experience can be taken into account as issues emerge.**

The project team sought to ensure that the voices of 'potentially excluded learners' were heard at every step of the journey. As a result of feedback from the cohort of learners, feedback was given to one of the course teams about the ethno-centric assumptions in one of the courses, a series of 'preparation to study' workshops were arranged and enhanced peer group support with child care provision in an accessible community location was provided.

## Reflections: what learning can we take forward?

The Facilitating Black and Minority Ethnic Students in to Social Work project has had a real impact on the lives of potentially excluded learners and has brought a change in their lives by creating opportunities and pathways to participate in a social services workforce better equipped to meet the needs of culturally diverse communities.

These are significant achievements and several steps have been taken in the right direction. However, it is imperative that we take the learning forward. To do this, we need to showcase and crystallise the unique aspects of the pilot project such as:

- a model for good practice in relation to increasing access to social service education to inform workforce development strategies of government and professional bodies
- a model of mentoring that reflects principles of anti-oppressive practice, facilitating a learner's self-esteem and providing leadership that eventually encourages and empowers learners, such that they gain the skills and confidence necessary to bring about change in their lives.
- an approach to mentoring that utilises a strengths perspective and the language of grassroots-up approach.
- the value of the mentoring model utilised that encompassed various intangible, yet pivotal elements of:
  - > support
  - > constructive observations
  - > honesty
  - > mutual trust
  - > respect
  - > a willingness to
    - » learn and share
    - » communicate
    - » engaging in positive, non-judgemental relationships
  - > patience and commitment to the growth and development of a learner's potential and > capacity, such that, it includes
    - » the ability to access and disseminate information
    - » a critical awareness of self: both personal and professional
    - » an ability to prioritise
    - » be flexible
    - » cope with pressure
    - » maintain a sense of humour and understanding.
- the added value of a language support tutor who provided mentoring in her role as a 'cultural friend and translator' is recognised.
- the value of evidence-based practice and how the synergy between research and practice provided the impetus for providing an opportunity for learning to individuals who were potentially excluded, such that they are able to bring about some change in their lives

In closing, we suggest it is of critical importance to embed this learning within institutions, such as universities and colleges, which have a key role in ensuring wider access, retention of BME students, and increasing numbers of BME tutors. There is a clearly identified need to engage social service employers in such initiatives, for them to be involved in the management of such work and to consider support and sponsorship to BME learners.

This needs to be done, by moving the narrow gates of widening access and by making porous the strong filters within them, by providing the right support to potentially excluded learners so that they can participate meaningfully and optimally.

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