

**LSC Lancashire  
ESF Co-Finance  
PROJECT EVALUATION**

**Project Name:** Action Research Project: Developing Practical Mechanisms to Overcome Barriers

**Project Ref No:** ESF/0203/230

**Lead Organisation:** St Martin's College Business and Community Enterprise Unit

Connecting Communities is part of the Business and Community Enterprise Unit at St Martin's College, Lancaster. It has two women's projects based in Lancaster and Blackburn which serve to support minority ethnic women who aspire to be in employment but have failed to achieve their goals, for a variety of reasons.

Connecting Communities is a partnership project with Lancashire County Council's Youth and Community Service, Lancaster and Blackburn Districts Council for Voluntary Services and St Martin's College. St Martin's College are the lead agents and provide administration, management, access to all college facilities including academic support when required. The other partners provide transport, accommodation and professional support when required. All partners disseminate information gleaned by the work of the projects, throughout Lancashire and across many different agencies, about the issues relevant to the needs of minority ethnic women in relation to education, employment, increasing participation and accessing services.

The projects were originally funded by the Home Office and achieved an excellent evaluation at the end of the funding period. Current funding lies with ESF, SRB and Lancashire Children's Fund. Their core business includes identifying learning needs, individual needs, personal needs, community issues and outside influences that minority ethnic women need to address in order to fulfil their aspirations to work, train or study. Courses and training, along with personal information, guidance and counselling are delivered to the women, whilst work with other agencies to increase their awareness of equality and diversity issues is undertaken in parallel. We also have an educational development worker who works with the children of our beneficiaries to increase their confidence, self esteem, educational achievements as well as encouraging them to access sports and creative leisure activities.

The achievements of the Research project include;

- 50 women from minority ethnic communities completed and passed Sociology ONCW stage A. This equipped them with action research skills. They composed a questionnaire and delivered it to 200 women, in Preston, Blackburn and Lancaster. The research team facilitated an analysis of the findings and wrote a report in order to disseminate the information. The women also participated in focus interviews and group discussions which also provided data included in the report.
- The research team wrote a research report and employers handbook containing practical information on how the barriers identified by the research can be tackled.
- 9 women from the project, formed a group called Sharara and worked with the research team to organise a county conference where the report and the handbook were delivered to 130 delegates from a variety of different agencies across Lancashire, please find attached details of the conference.
- The Sharara group facilitated by the research team made a video called 'Beyond the Veil', which explores barriers they face as young Muslim women. They used this video as part of a workshop which they delivered at the research conference. They have also been invited by Hilton Dawson MP to show the video at the Houses of Parliament on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2004 in order to raise the awareness of his parliamentary colleagues about the barriers to employment and education experienced by some minority ethnic women along with equality and diversity issues in general. The role the LSC Lancashire ESF Co-Finance will be highlighted.
- The Sharara group have also been invited by Lancaster City Council and Lancashire County Council to deliver the same workshop and one of our long term targets for this group is to help them establish and run a small training consultancy delivering equality and diversity training.
- The conference held on the 21<sup>st</sup> January 2004 has generated a lot of interest nationally. We have been busy sending out information on the research and anticipate that this will increase.

#### **Areas of Innovation:**

Whilst evidence is available relating to the needs of Lancashire's minority ethnic communities in general, there is lack of hard evidence regarding the needs of women from within these groups. For example, the statistics provided in the Lancashire LSC Co-finance Plan identify high levels of unemployment amongst minority ethnic communities and the fact that 1 in 3 members of Lancashire's ethnic minority communities possess no level 2 NVQ's. Similarly, the East Lancs. Work Development Survey also showed that 48% of employers do not employ anyone from an ethnic minority community. However, neither the Plan nor the Survey provides details of levels of unemployment amongst ethnic minority women. This is due to the fact that this section of the community is under researched. Minority ethnic women do not often appear in unemployment figures and they are less likely to access mainstream agencies. They are more likely to become 'invisible' in society and therefore not considered for employment and training. Our success at gaining 50 passes at NVQ level

2 sociology is evidence that our beneficiaries do aspire to increase their learning and have the ability and commitment to acquire qualifications. Our individual needs analysis undertaken with project beneficiaries also identifies the employment aspirations that women have, this suggests that these women do want to be in employment, and should therefore be included in unemployment figures. These facts alone show the innovative nature of connecting communities in addressing the issues identified above.

- We are innovative in the way we outreach women. This is achieved by building on the close and trusting relationships that our partner organisation, the Youth and Community Service, have developed over a period of twenty years.
- We are innovative in the way we deliver our courses. They include a perspective relative to the student's experience, in our case an Islamic perspective.
- We deliver courses in an appropriate environment, e.g. situated in the heart of the Muslim community; we provide crèche facilities, ablution, prayer and hallal food facilities, a women only class, a female teacher.
- We provide individual support, advice, information and guidance that is relevant to the women's lives and future aspirations.
- We deliver our work at flexible times that fits in with the women's cultural calendar and takes into account prayer times, religious festivals and mosque teaching sessions. For example, the most popular time we found, for Muslim women to study is a twilight session 5-8pm, when their children attend mosque sessions.
- Our project has identified the needs of Muslim women in Lancashire and the barriers some of them experience in terms of gaining employment and educational opportunities. We believe that this information is unique and innovative to our project and that it provides important and innovative information relevant to the criteria outlined in the Race Relations Amendment Act and the new employment discrimination law dealing with religion and faith, which came into effect in December 2003.

#### **Areas of Good Practice:**

As well as the above we feel that an important aspect of good practice is the respectful and co-operative relationships we have forged with a variety of agencies including, colleges of further education in Lancaster and Blackburn, the Youth and Community Service, the Police, Social Services, the Health Authority, City and Borough Councils, Life Long Learning, the Councils for Voluntary Service, and the Islamic College for women, Jamea Al Kauther.

This aspect of good practice has contributed to the projects success because interagency work that is competitive and not 'not joined up', creates huge barriers for women. Too often individual agencies target the same groups with a sense of competitiveness, this is confusing for the targeted beneficiaries and a gross waste of limited resources dedicated to this area of work. One of the major aspirations of the research team is that our report and handbook will encourage public services in Lancashire to work positively together in partnerships that will enhance service provision to local minority ethnic communities and individuals.

### **Lessons learnt**

Unfortunately, the Director of the Business and Community Enterprise Unit who had overall responsibility for the research project was seconded from St Martin's College to London for one year. He left the project at a critical stage of its development and Sue Doherty had to assume this responsibility as the new director appointed had no knowledge of the subject. As Sue was heading up the research process this put severe stress on her and she felt very isolated and over worked and that her management of the research team could have been better if she had more time to devote to this part of the project. A serious consequence for our work, due to Mr Doherty's absence, was the fact that a bid into the next round of LSC funding was not put together, as Sue Doherty was too busy undertaking the research and preparing for the conference.

We also felt that the questionnaire that was devised by the respondents could have been much better had we allowed more time for a consensus between the three groups of women to be reached.

Considerable stress was generated by not allowing enough time for the printing. This was compounded by the fact that the copy did not reach the printers until just before Christmas and the extended holiday period. As a consequence the conference material was not delivered until the day before the event, as it needed compiling this put a lot of extra work on the research team who worked half the night in order to be ready for the conference. Only good will on their part prevented what could have been a catastrophe on the day.

Also one of the conference trainers decided to travel from London on the morning of the event. She was delayed and barely made it in time to deliver her workshop. This caused stress on the day which could have been avoided if she had travelled the night before.

### **Dissemination of Good Practice**

The conference 'Beyond Face Value' that launched the research findings was attended by 134 delegates from a wide range of agencies. We will be contacting them within the next two months to encourage

them to disseminate the findings within their organisations including practical suggestions about how. I would like to draw attention to the Handbook that we have produced which is intended to disseminate the good practice identified in the report. We have already been asked to present the report and handbook to employees of Lancaster City Council, Lancashire County Council and to the Home Office Minister, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Race equality, community policy and civil renewal, Fiona MacTaggart. The national guardian has also showed interest in disseminating the good practice through an article in their newspaper. We continue to work with and support a group called Sharara who participated in the research project it is our aim to help them set up a training consultancy that can deliver workshops based on the research findings and thereby disseminate good practice.

### **Details of Publicity Undertaken**

St Martin's college ran a detailed and high quality article in their magazine, which recorded part of the early research process, please see enclosed copy. They will also undertake coverage of the conference which launched the research report and handbook. I have sent the Lancashire Learning and Skills Council a detailed press release along with photographs to enable them to publicise the project extensively. As mentioned above the National Guardian Newspaper has shown interest in covering the project. Fiona MacTaggart's press secretary has asked for a press release which I have provided. We did not use publicity to outreach female beneficiaries. As mentioned earlier we used the Youth and Community Services contacts to enrol women onto the project. Local publicising is seldom used in our work which we regard as sensitive and discrete.

### **Case Studies**

Many case studies are cited in the report and the employers/educators handbook. The following one is included in the Press Release;

Our research respondents had a range of positive and negative experiences as the following two quotes from focus interviews demonstrate;

Janinne said, "With Ramadan and fasting, people find it so absurd thinking that I'm inflicting pain upon myself and treating me like a weirdo and really humouring me just because I'm fasting."

Johara said, "I worked in hospital for like over a year and we were actually given time to pray and that was really good. We also had our own prayer room."

Another woman said, "Unfortunately, there is considerable prejudice against Muslims and Muslim women in particular. This is due to misinformation and ignorance about Islam and Muslims....I believe that unless the media takes a more responsible stance and strives to

portray the correct image of Islam – the myth of the oppressed Muslim woman will never be quashed.”

### **Photographs:**

We employed a professional photographer to record the Sharara group’s involvement in the research project. This will form a visual exhibition to accompany us when we disseminate the research findings and deliver the conference pack to interested organisations. We are also covering the trip to London and the meeting with Home Office minister Fiona MacTaggart. We also intend to produce positive image posters of young Muslim women using the images we have, this will be achieved when we identify further funding.

### **Views of Customers**

Member of the Sharara young women’s group made the following comments during an evaluation of their involvement in the research project;

“I gained a lot of confidence being involved in the project.”

“It was good being able to organise the trip to London, making the phone calls and bookings. My parents are allowing me to go and this makes me feel that they trust me and giving us some freedom.”

“I learnt that working with so many different strong personalities in a group, it is very difficult to communicate properly.”

“It was a challenge we loved it.”

“I improved my skills in working as a member of a group and realised that taking other peoples opinions on board is very important.”

“I really enjoyed the group work, building our relationships and working towards such a wonderful project. Personally I enjoyed the organisation of the event and even though it was stressful it was great to no that we could accomplish such a lot in a short period.”

### **The Sustainability of the Activity**

The women involved in the research are still part of the Connecting Communities project which has ESF funding until December 2004. We are at present seeking longer term funding to sustain our work beyond this time.

### **How the project dealt with Equal Opportunities**

Equal opportunities and diversity issues are at the heart of all of the work that connecting communities undertakes. All courses include a component of raising awareness about equal opportunities and relating issues to the life experiences of beneficiaries, many of whom have

experienced oppression, prejudice and discrimination at some point in their lives. This includes exploring what help is available in terms of challenging discrimination and developing an understanding of the law in relation to equality of opportunity and diversity.

**Tools which have been used to evaluate the project**

We evaluate with individuals and groups throughout the process of the project, using evaluation sheets and via discussions. The Sharara group are undertaking a more in- depth evaluation which identifies and demonstrates the different skills they have acquired. This information will provide the evidence for their level 3 qualification they are working towards and will be finalised after the residential to London.

**Progression information regarding soft outcomes e.g. interpersonal skills, coping with authority, organisational skills, confidence self esteem;**

Soft outcomes have been immense and life transforming for many women. They include raising self esteem and confidence levels, addressing basic skills needs, developing IT proficiency and organisations and communication skills etc., as can be seen from the above testimonies. Because of the public presentations that we have organised, including the research conference, beneficiaries have been involved in negotiating with faculty heads at St Martin's college along with the many delegates from a variety of agencies this has developed their ability to 'cope with authority'. This has included familiarisation and negotiation with health and safety issues.