Learning from African students

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Abstract

In response to the growing numbers of African students on the social work qualifying programme at the University of Northampton, three senior lecturers undertook a small-scale study in 2008 to evaluate African students' particular learning experiences. This trend of increasing student numbers reflects the national picture as indicated by the General Social Care Council (GSCC, 2009). The African student experience is different and therefore different strategies are needed to ensure that learning and subsequent employability are maximised. The research identified two significant outcomes. The first was the need for a peer support group, which was set up in September 2008. The group named itself PADARE, a Zimbabwean term which means: *meeting place*. The second was the need for a qualified social worker as a mentor to support the students' transition from academic learning into work-based learning and practice. This paper will focus mainly on the rationale and potential of these two initiatives from both an educator's perspective and that of the students themselves drawing on relevant contemporary literature in the areas of Mentoring and Peer support groups.

Key Words: **mentoring, international students, social work, African students, support group, peer support, transitions.**

Introduction

This paper is presented as on-going evaluative study and is therefore largely descriptive at this stage. The General Social Care Council (GSCC), the regulatory body for social care workers in England and Wales published a study in 2007 in which they identified African students as being the second largest group enrolling onto social work qualifying programmes. This has since been confirmed by a more recent study by the GSCC (2009) which calculated that the "notable increase in African students" entering social work education has risen to 14.2 per cent. (GSCC 2009: iv)

Whilst many universities enrol students from Africa onto social work programmes, little has been written or published about how this particular group of students are supported to complete successfully. Even fewer studies have focused on the transition from social work student to qualified social worker status.

In 2008, the authors, all of whom are at the University of Northampton, embarked on an evaluation study to understand the experiences of African students on the qualifying social work programme (Bartoli, Kennedy & Tedam 2008). At the time of writing, there are twenty-two (22) students of African origin studying social work at this University, some of whom are not classed under the term 'international student'.

The authors have argued elsewhere that the term 'international student' does not reflect the entire Black African student population on the social work programme at the University of Northampton. From the enrolment data at the university in 2008, it was estimated that Black African students

make up between 9 to 10 percent of the social work student population. Of these students 3 were considered 'international' students. The other 12 students deemed 'home' students due to their period of residency within the UK, and therefore qualify for a GSCC bursary and are of Black African origin. However it is debatable whether these 12 students consider the UK to be their 'home', instead seeing themselves as 'african students' and not particularly defining themselves as 'home' or 'international' students. (Bartoli et al 2008).

The experiences of this group of students offer a broader learning opportunity for us all, as the tendency to have a one size fits all policy undermines individuality and uniqueness and robs us of the opportunity to learn from difference. The distinct nature of social work as a profession and the increasing demand for social workers to reflect the ethnic and cultural communities which they serve means that social work programmes across the country should seek to recruit and train social workers from many different backgrounds and ethnicities.

The social work division at the University of Northampton has experienced a steady increase of African students over the last four years. In the academic year 2007/2008, seven Black African students were enrolled onto the social work programme, compared to three Black African students in 2006/2007. The GSCC, in a recent report confirmed that over the last three years there has been a significant increase in students of African heritage enrolling on the social work degree and that this group make up about 14.2 percent of social work students in the country (GSCC 2009). The study further suggests that African students are the second largest group studying social work in England, after British students who make up 65.7%.

A number of themes arose from the original study conducted in 2008 and these have been explored in depth by the authors elsewhere (Bartoli et al 2008). The themes which highlighted the African students particular needs, which impacted variably on their learning experiences on the social work programme included- cultural diversity, feeling homesick, lack of practice experience, financial difficulties, gender and role expectations within the family (particularly female students) and health difficulties.

Context

Student Profile

There are currently around 116 students studying on the undergraduate degree in social work at the University of Northampton. The diversity of the student group is characterised by differences in gender, age, race and nationality, with a small proportion of part-time employer sponsored students and the majority full time students.

Of the whole student population studying for the BA (Hons) in Social work, there are eighteen (18) males and ninety-eight (98) females as depicted in the diagram below.
In terms of the African student's gender, 25% are male and 75% female. This mirrors the overall picture of the gender mix on the Social work programme as a whole.

There are a larger proportion of students over 25 years of age than students below 25 years. This is different for the African students because a smaller percentage of the total (i.e. 6%) is deemed to be below the age of 25 years.

Peer Support Group

The peer support group was established in April 2008 to facilitate meetings, mutual support, guidance and discussion for social work students from Africa. The initial intention was the coming together of students for the purpose of providing academic and mutual support to each other. Two female students have taken on the 'organising role' that includes liaising with lecturers to book suitable rooms, identifying and inviting guest speakers from within and outside the University, taking and distributing minutes from the meetings and organising occasional social activities.

Outside formal meeting times, students are engaged in ongoing relationships aimed at supporting each other with the range of demands and stresses faced by students in higher education. Study support and signposting each other to relevant course text books and resources is a feature of this peer support group.

Over time, the students are contemplating opening the group's membership to include other black students within the School of Health at the University of Northampton. The students have considered the benefits and challenges associated with the expansion of the group and have delayed this move for at least another year. This, they argue is because they would like to provide further direction and structure for the group, prior to extending it to other students within the School of Health and across the University as a whole.

A dedicated page on the University's Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment (known locally as NILE) site is set up to enable students to engage in a wide range of discussions from remote locations.

The 'Padare' notice board, set up within the Division, is a convenient source of information for members of the group and other interested people. The notice board is updated regularly with relevant research, literature and announcements that may be of interest to members of the group. Dates and times for meetings are also posted on this notice board.

An ongoing evaluation of the effectiveness of this group is taking place and the groups' participants are keen to ensure the successes and widespread benefits of this group are disseminated and shared throughout the University and beyond.

In June 2009, a preliminary evaluation was undertaken with the African social work students who described some of the current benefits as 'a celebration and acknowledgement of African identity', 'providing emotional support' and as having 'created openness between students and lecturers'. Again in September 2009, a previous student and pioneer of the 'Padare' group, together with a Senior lecturer involved in this ongoing study, presented a paper, at a Groupwork Symposium in York and which is being considered for publication. This student described her experience as

having been made possible through her involvement in and ongoing support for this peer support group.

Mentoring Scheme

Mentoring is a well known concept both historically and globally. Schemes have taken shape either informally and more recently, influenced by the US, in more formal structured programmes with an emphasis on standards and evaluations based on effectiveness. According to Bennetts (1994) a mentor aims to achieve a one to one relationship with a learner, which is developmental in nature and results in the learner achieving growth and change. Parsloe (1992) describes mentoring as supporting and helping people manage their own learning in order that their skills become more developed and their potential maximised.

The interest in mentoring for our African students arose from the recognition that additional support, guidance and personal development, outside the university and independent of the staff within the Social Work division, is an important means for achieving and maximising their skills, knowledge and practice in the area of social work. In addition to this, the input from a practicing African social worker was seen as an opportunity to expose and link students with professional positive role models, as a further strategy to encourage and enhance their employability post-qualification. Through recommendations and informal discussions, a number of potential mentors have been identified including 4 previous students from the social work programme.

The importance of mentoring cannot be overemphasised. There is a growing body of research that suggests that mentoring can influence the life cycle of a person (Lucas 2001). A mentoring programme can be structured, unstructured, mandatory or optional and at this time the intention is for a structured and optional mentoring arrangement.

Advantages of mentoring

Arguably anyone can mentor, if the definition is that one individual with more experience partners another individual with less experience. This is a simplistic approach. A formal mentoring scheme is one that goes beyond just 'befriending' but stops short of line management, and in this instance does not act as an assessor. Instead the mentor would offer a "personal reflective space" to consider issues from a different perspective, be a role model and "provide a safe haven in which to discuss difficult issues" (Clutterbuck, 2005a, online).

Challenges of mentoring

There is a plethora of literature about the challenges associated with mentoring and a number of these will be highlighted within this paper. The idea of 'toxic mentors', coined by Darling (1985) suggests that some mentors will avoid work and avoid supporting mentees, others will seek to destroy or criticise mentees self esteem and development.

Another challenge associated with mentoring is linked to the mentors' self worth and level of self esteem. A mentor who is not confident of their own knowledge base, skills and abilities could do more harm than good to their mentee and could jeopardise the essence of the mentoring relationship. Boundary setting and mutual respect for each other is an important ingredient in any mentoring relationship. Where boundaries are blurred and where there is a lack of respect, the mentoring relationship is unlikely to succeed.

Recruitment and Selection of Mentors

According to Clutterbuck (2005) mentors bring to the relationship their experience, with the emphasis being on the mentor developing the mentee's wisdom rather than merely sharing their own. From the evaluation study already undertaken by the authors, a recurring theme from the African students was a sense that their lived experience was irrelevant or not valued. A fundamental underpinning principle of mentoring is to extend the development and wisdom of the mentee. Mentoring is well placed to support African Students in validating and building upon their own experience within an unfamiliar and new social work context.

A recruitment campaign was initiated via 'word of mouth' in and around the Northamptonshire and Milton Keynes area, seeking qualified social workers of African origin who would consider becoming mentors to the growing numbers of African students at the University of Northampton. The campaign to date has been successful and has attracted over 15 interested social work practitioners, four of whom are previous graduates from the University of Northampton, who feel the initiative is worthwhile and regret nor having the opportunity to benefit from such a scheme themselves.

A key social work value requires practitioners and students to have a non-judgemental attitude towards their colleagues and people who use services.
This complements Morton's view of mentoring as a non-judgmental and developmental relationship (Morton, 2003). Another fundamental principle of a mentoring relationship is that it is not based on hierarchical status. This is reflective of social work values, where service users are deemed to be the experts of their own lives and experiences. In this instance, the African student is the expert in her/his own learning and so would be encouraged to drive the mentoring relationship.

Training and preparation of Mentors

The aforementioned support group, *Padare*, has been important for the African students in developing their own group identity and strength. A mentoring scheme would build upon this in a more private and individual sense. Clutterbuck (2005a) views this as a form of Personal Reflective Space (PRS) where one is engaged in a private and internal dialogue. "In mentoring, the mentee invites a trusted outsider to join in this dialogue" (Clutterbuck 2005a online).

A training programme for mentors has been discussed by the authors and there are plans in place to deliver some training to mentors in the months of June and July 2009. The students' views on the content of the training programme will be sought and incorporated into the training. One of the authors, who is also Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) qualified, will lead

the training, supported by colleagues from within the social work division. It is envisaged that the mentors will undertake a one day training session, prior to being matched with the student and thereafter attend bi-annual refresher and mentor support sessions at a convenient location.

It is crucial that students (mentees) are also provided with some training about the structure, roles and responsibilities of the mentoring relationship. Given the African students apparent reluctance to include their own experience and past learning, probably due to institutional racism and feelings of inferiority, it is likely that they will need to be supported in accepting that the relationship will be driven by the mentees and not necessarily by the mentor.

Mentee allocation

Allocation of mentees is an area that is likely to be quite complex. The expressions of interest so far from potential mentors have been specific to nationalities such as Zimbabwe, Ghana and Nigeria. There is therefore the need to explore the possibility of attracting mentors from some of the other countries represented in our student group such as – Cameroon and Uganda.
Mentors will be asked to provide CV's and a careful matching process will be undertaken.

The matching of mentors and mentee could mirror the process already used in the matching of students and placement providers. The mentors will be asked to provide curriculum vitae and students will be asked to provide a personal profile. Matching will need to take into account gender and practical considerations such as location and travel. Lee (2007:339) identifies that 'matching a mentor to a mentee can be an imperative of geography and an accident of time' and so in this regard, the matching process will have to take into consideration mentor's time, place of work, home and other commitments.

It may also be possible for some mentors to take on more than one student, which is also an important aspect worthy of consideration.
The roles and responsibilities of the mentor and mentee will be developed, discussed and agreed by the mentees, mentors and staff within the social work division. The development of these roles and responsibilities will be informed by existing literature on the development of mentoring schemes (Clutterbuck 2005, Orly 2008, Lucas 2001) and underpinned by the social work values of respect, non- discrimination and confidentiality.

Remuneration and Support

Lee (2007:337) suggests that 'most mentors undertake this work without seeking or expecting payment' because mentors benefit from the experience and from the personal development that is associated with mentoring.
Whilst this might be true to some extent, the complex nature of the social work profession, involving protecting and supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our society, it is important that any mentoring scheme is formal and professional. The scheme cannot rely on individuals' sense of 'goodwill' or personal responsibility to support other black colleagues. In order to succeed this scheme will need the support (including time and finances) of white institutions like universities and employers to avoid tokenistic gestures and at worst, time – limited funding where year upon year the scheme will be financially bidding for its survival.

The authors are currently seeking funds to enable the re-imbursement of out of pocket expenses associated with the mentoring of the student. In time, it is hoped that regular funding sourced from a number of organisations will become a reality, in order to continue to provide this support and to be able to extend it to all students.

Transitions to work

The experience from the peer support group indicates that it is a useful support system for the members of the 'Padare' group. Following the recent death in the UK of 'Baby P', further changes to the training and education of social work students are being contemplated. Of particular relevance is a scheme (already being piloted in a number of local authorities) of a Newly Qualified Social Worker role, for students who are within their first year of employment, post qualification (CWDC 2008). This scheme is supported by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) and the General Social Care Council (GSCC).

A recent graduate who is currently being supported under this scheme spoke positively of her experience to date. This experience is characterised by a reduced and manageable caseload, regular supervision, shadowing opportunities and the allocation of a named mentor (who is not the direct line manager) to the newly qualified social work practitioner. The practitioner is then able to grow and develop the expertise required for the complex social work task for the years ahead. This is an innovative strategy, and mirrors what is being considered for members of the Padare group during their time as students at this university.

Benefits of mentoring

The mentoring scheme possesses many benefits for the student, employer, mentor and the university.

The student

There are obvious benefits for students who take part in the mentoring scheme during their undergraduate learning and these benefits go beyond the duration of their studies. These benefits include: working with an experienced practitioner who may offer guidance and direction to the student in terms of developing their career, provide an alternative and should compliment 'formal', academic personal tutor support, much of which focuses on the students progression and academic development. Students are also likely to benefit from the exposure to wider professional networks which will further enhance their employability and transitions to work.

An important benefit of the mentoring scheme for African students will be the sharing and understanding of mentors' own experiences and reflections about their training and subsequent employment, which could be similar to the African student's own experiences.

The employer

The employers of social workers, who were supported by mentors during the course of their undergraduate degree, will benefit from the knowledge these students bring with them. Mentors

would hopefully have supported students until the point of employment and possibly beyond. Employers then benefit from newly qualified social workers who have an enhanced understanding of the complex nature of the role and having been guided and supported by a qualified and practicing social worker. Kram (1985) talks about the life of a mentoring relationship being anywhere between two and five years in order to be effective. Employers may decide to maintain the mentor perhaps until after a successful probationary period.

What is interesting is that of the recently graduated African students, all were offered permanent employment with the Agencies and organisations in which they completed their 100- day practice learning requirements.

The mentor

Mentoring will form a part of the requirement for the 'Enabling Others' module within the Post Qualifying Social Work award. The skills, knowledge and ability to enabling the learning of another is central to contemporary social work practice and so mentors will benefit from this scheme, in that it will provide them with some of the theoretical and practical knowledge necessary for future study, training and professional development.
In addition to this, mentors may view the process of sharing and imparting knowledge as enjoyable and an opportunity for reflection on their own practice as social workers and can also 'learn' from the mentee.

The university

The University of Northampton stands to gain from the success of this project in a number of areas.
1) The mentoring scheme will extend the University's networks among groups and communities with whom they have traditionally not been involved.
2) Mentors may develop an interest in training to become practice teachers/assessors, providing them with the skills to supervise, support and assess social work students on placement.
3) The mentoring scheme could be showcased as an example of good practice with African and BME students generally, which would enhance the image of the University and also lead to an increase in applications and enrolment.
4) Ongoing research, evaluations and publications about the experiences of this project could be disseminated across the country and funding accessed from the GSCC and CWDC to share good practice.
5) The University of Northampton's strategic plan for 2005-2010 is focussing on 'Internationalisation' in terms of student recruitment and curriculum development and so the mentoring scheme will support this strategy.
6) In addition to the above, the University of Northampton has been selected as one of the fifteen Universities in the country to work on a BME attainment strategy in Higher Education which the mentoring programme within the Social work division will enhance and contribute to.

Conclusion

The peer support group, *Padare*, despite being in its infancy, is showing promise and benefits for all involved. The strategy to launch and develop the mentoring scheme is underway, the vision being that the 2009/2010 cohort of students is matched at the university induction week with appropriate mentors.

The view of Lee (2007:339) that 'in mentoring we want growth, challenge and achievements for both parties' is very much one that resonates with the authors who see this as the way forward in social work- a method of inclusion of the usually excluded and through the training of mentors offers career development for social work practitioners who may otherwise not be sponsored to undertake post-qualifying training and learning.

The two initiatives discussed in this paper will contribute to knowledge in the field of the learner experience in higher education and form part of ongoing research into the experiences of African social work students on the social work programme.

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