

Mentoring Project Boosts Student Confidence

This month sees the culmination of a 9 month pilot project designed to help students from Ethnic Minorities reach their full potentials and settle into student life. The Ethnic Minority Mentoring Project, led by Equality and Diversity Manager, Moira Mitchell and Senior Childhood Studies Lecturer, Mary Andall-Stanberry, has succeeded in bringing together students from diverse cultural backgrounds into a network of support and mutual learning.



A group of mentors and mentees with the project leads

In recent years Canterbury Christ Church University has increasingly attracted students from all over the world and in 2008 the student body consisted of approximately 13% ethnic minority students. Worryingly, statistics show that it is ethnic minority students who are more likely to fail or a repeat a year of study.

In 2007, following questionnaires and focus groups evaluating the quality of the student experience for ethnic minority students, it was recommended that the University set up a peer mentoring programme for students from ethnic minorities. The pilot project commenced in September 2009, supported by Pro-Vice Chancellor Professor Sue Piotrowski and funded by the Widening Participation budget, with the aims and objectives to:

- Support ethnic minority students into Higher Education
- Create a support network for ethnic minority students
- Increase students' positive contribution for university life
- Develop study skills/academic support
- Promote the benefits of mentoring and of Higher Education to the broader community

With 24 students recruited, the project was ready to go - 12 mentors, who received training and payment for their roles, and 12 mentees. Students of all different ethnic backgrounds such as Chinese, black African, white and Asian were paired on the basis of similar ethnic backgrounds, ages, hobbies and degree subjects. At the outset students were asked to state their expectations and goals for the mentoring relationship. Mentors had similar goals: to help their mentees both academically and personally and to establish a relationship based on mutual trust and friendship. One Mentor stated that she 'hoped to get to know [her] mentee...to understand her culture and point of view on the world.'

Mentees hoped that the mentoring relationship would help them get the most out of university life both academically and socially, providing a person to turn to and 'guide me when I'm lost.'

Participants embraced modern technology as a tool to build strong relationships, setting up a Facebook group, chatting on Skype, texting and emailing as well as meeting at the regular allocated times. By the end of the project many of the mentors and mentees considered the other a close friend and noted the unexpected benefits of learning about one another's cultures. One mentee said of her mentor "She's the best mentor anyone could ever have. She's now one of my closest friends." Further positive reactions to the project included an overwhelming increase in self-confidence and interpersonal skills in both mentee and mentor, and even an improvement in study skills. Many mentors went above and beyond the call of duty and helped their mentees in many aspects of day to day life, such as a finding accommodation and applying for jobs.



A mentee with her mentor

The Ethnic Minority Mentoring Project can be considered a great success and a wonderful asset to the university's endeavours to create an atmosphere of equality and diversity. Mentors gained as much as they had given, accruing valuable skills such as time-keeping, organisation, listening skills, self-confidence and interpersonal skills which stand them in good stead for the graduate job market. Furthermore, they gained new friends and an insight into different cultures. Mentees also felt they had grown as a result of the relationships and benefited in many ways – culturally, practically, personally and academically. The challenge in the future is for the project to reach those less confident students – they are the students who could benefit the most.