



The Commonwealth Education Fund (CEF) Gender Equality in Education Project (GEEP)

Experience of Mentoring to Mainstream Gender in Education in CEF GEEP countries

GEEP was initiated in September 2006 and is planned to run for two years. Its focus is upon capacity building on gender in the partner organisations by using a mentoring approach to achieve this. Mentoring was intended to provide consistent long term support to partners in order to facilitate learning, enthusiasm, and confidence on gender issues among staff – the relationship was intended to be one similar to that of ‘teacher-pupil’. Mentoring differs from advisory support in that the mentor is not supposed to provide the answers, follow through with implementation or even set the agenda, instead the mentor is there to help staff within the partners to do these things themselves. In so doing, the approach aims to help the partners mainstream gender throughout their structures and ways of working; to develop and implement good quality gender equitable strategies and plans, carry out high quality monitoring and evaluation work on gender equality in education; as well as document the process and outcomes for learning and sharing. The mentor provides ‘process support’ whereby the capacity and competency of partners and their staff on gender is built up through a range of means including sustained one to one support, group gender training and discussion, as well as by the mentor acting as a catalyst and driver for change in the organisation. Such ‘process support’ is a long term approach to mainstreaming that does not intend to see immediate results in certain projects but more general sea-change in the way an organisation and its staff do think about, plan and implement their work. The Gender Mentors in each of the four countries because were all highly experienced and qualified in their field (with Masters to PhD level knowledge of gender in education). The mentors included both university professors and a retired minister.

The initial experience of mentoring proved to be problematic in the four CEF partners. Firstly, the concept of mentoring was not understood by the partners (and to some extent by the mentors) at the beginning of the process. Partners were comfortable with the approach whereby a specialist consultant came in and ‘built capacity’ (within the context of a training workshop) or told them exactly why and how to do something. In the beginning the mentors were treated (and to some extent saw themselves) like advisors, being called in to provide analysis, build ‘capacity’, fill gaps in knowledge, or implement the ‘gender element’. This was a problem as the mentors became over-burdened with work demands that they often could not do and also did not really fulfil their role of guiding long term capacity building among staff in the organisation. This problem was discussed among the mentors during a GEEP team meeting in September 2007. Through this meeting it became clearer to the mentors exactly what they roles were and what they shouldn’t be doing. It was also agreed, that upon return, the mentors would provide the partners with a contract of their duties and responsibilities to the organisations to really help clarify what they were supposed to do. This proved to be a key turning point in the relationship with both sides accepting and becoming much more comfortable with the process. Both the mentors and the partners came to realise that it was important for staff in the organisations to be supported to come up with their own questions about and implications for gender equality in their work rather than be told what they are and how to implement them. The partners really began to understand and accept that a process of self-realisation and awareness was the key to developing confidence among staff in their own ability to

recognise and act on gender equality issues, and thus the key to creating long term sustainable change in the organisations.

Secondly, finding an entry point to help mentor partners was a challenge. Most of these partners already had developed their own agenda and work plans as they had already been involved with the CEF for over two years. As a result, the mentors decided to look at different strategies to address this challenge. An initial gender training of partners was conducted in each of the four countries (as much to assess needs of the partner as to build capacity) followed by continuous group mentoring. Whilst most of the partners welcomed the idea of the GEEP project coming on board, the results were not initially reflected in their work-plan. The Mentors therefore also started off by going through with them their plans and, in the process, helped them self-identify the gender gaps in their activities.

It is worth noting that overcoming some of the challenges faced by the mentors was significantly helped by the GEEP team review meeting in the UK in September 2007. All four mentors came together for the first time to exchange their lessons learned to-date, have a one day course on mentoring approaches as well as look at ways in which they could use reflective diaries for their own learning and understanding of the processes, challenges and lessons learned in mentoring education partners around the issue of gender. The mentoring session looked at the role of the mentor highlighting that it is about learning and growth, and that growth sometimes means discomfort. The spectrum of learning was also highlighted (trainer-directed to learner-directed) and noted that the style of the mentor should be at the latter end. At the end of the session a consensus on the role of the mentor was agreed and understood by all. This event proved to be a particularly important mechanism for supporting the mentors who felt the need to share their experiences and learn from others in the same role. As a consequence, following the meeting, a private blog was set up for the mentors to use as a forum to continue to share their experiences and provide support to each other when required. In addition bi-weekly teleconferences and regular email communications were arranged between the Gender Project Manager and the Mentors. This bi-weekly teleconference provides ongoing support and advice to the mentors and is useful for encouraging dialogue between mentors and the project manager.

A mentoring approach to mainstreaming is a long-term one and, as a result, the initiative is still in the very early stages of it. However, there have already been a number of noticeable positive shifts among the partners. For instance, the partners have now altered their plans to include gender equality issues as well as included gender issues within their monitoring and reporting exercises. Furthermore, discussions with the partners (as well as their outputs) have shown a consistently improved understanding of gender ideas and concepts as well as a more fluid engagement of these concepts and ideas with their work on education. But perhaps most importantly, has been their response to mentoring. As the mentors have built up trust with the partners, the partners themselves have become increasingly excited about the benefits a mentoring approach has brought them. The partners are looking forward to continuing their relationship with their mentors and are actively looking for opportunities to use the approach in their own work.

Lessons Learned

Feedback from the GEEP team, mentors and partners have all been positive on the experience of mentoring as an effective approach to mainstreaming gender. As a result of the activities of GEEP a number of lessons have been learned as to how a mentoring approach can significantly deliver on gender mainstreaming in organisations:

1. *Ensure the 'Process of Learning'* – The benefit of mentoring is that it develops the confidence and ability of staff to deliver on gender equality issues in their organisation's work themselves using their own knowledge and capacity on gender. This benefit can only be achieved if mentors focus their attention on nurturing staff learning and familiarity with gender over and above actually achieving instant readily visible results either in policy or in projects. This may mean moving at a much slower pace than could be achieved by using a gender consultant to incorporate gender into a particular piece of work. However, encouraging self-realisation and awareness on gender among staff through a process of 'student' directed learning has the ability to create a much broader and far more sustainable impact for mainstreaming gender. Spelling out the difference between mentoring and advising, possibly in the form of a written contract, can be a useful way of beginning the process.
2. *Select and Support Mentors Appropriately* – Picking gender mentors carefully was a key issue. Firstly, having mentors that could be seen as role models to which both partners and participants in projects would look up to and respect was important for inspiring change on gender and getting staff on side. For this reason, the mentors picked in GEEP tended to be older and come from professionally relevant backgrounds, such as university faculty or government/civil service positions dealing with education and gender. Secondly, mentors need to be able to invest a significant amount of time to mentoring in their chosen organisation as well as have the patience to move the organisation and its staff at their own speed. Providing this level of commitment and patience is important for building up strong personal relationships with staff in the organisation. Such personal relationships are key to gaining trust and nurturing the confidence of staff to put into practice their (often pre-existing) knowledge and capacity on gender. And finally, recruiting male mentors can be a real bonus as gender in many organisations is often pigeonholed as a 'women's issue'. Recruiting male mentors would have been important to challenge stereotypes within partner organisations and among participants of its projects.

In addition to selecting mentors carefully it is also important to provide them with appropriate support to enable them to do their job better. Initial training should be provided that explicitly develops an understanding of what mentoring is, what it involves, techniques on delivering it and how it differs from gender advising/consulting. Beyond this, mentoring can also be quite isolating for the mentor and so it is important to provide spaces for mentors to share experiences and lessons learnt.

3. *Take Your Time* – Mentoring on gender should be considered a long-term approach to change. The mentor's most powerful asset for creating change in an organisation and for helping staff realise their potential is the personal relationship, based on trust, they build up with the organisation/staff. Building up this personal relationship takes time (both in terms of the amount of time invested as well as the period over which it is invested). However, the value of this personal relationship should not be underestimated. It both allows the mentor to understand the needs of the staff and what styles of learning is most effective for them (e.g. one-to-one meetings, group sessions, workshops, etc) as well as creates a sense of personal commitment among the staff to the mentor and the idea of gender mainstreaming.