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## Experienced teachers supporting women to access teacher education in Malawi

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## 56<sup>th</sup> ICET World assembly: Paper submission

### “The Changing Global Perspective on the Role of Teacher and Teacher education”

#### **Title: Experienced teachers supporting women to access teacher education in Malawi**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The presence of women teachers in primary schools in Sub Saharan Africa is low and more pronounced in rural areas. Working with colleagues from the Forum for African Women Educationalists in Malawi (FAWEMA), the Open University in the UK (OU) has developed an access to teaching scholarship programme for women from rural areas of Malawi which combines academic distance study with practical work experience. The Scholarship offers women supported study towards the national exam, the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE), and a period of school experience as ‘learning assistants’ in primary schools in their local community. The success of the programme depends in part on the expertise and experience of practising primary and secondary teachers from Malawi who support the Scholars to develop their confidence and to study for MSCE exams.

This paper examines how the conceptual design of the project was developed, what has needed to be addressed or adapted to suit the reality and environment encountered in the rural areas of Malawi where it is being delivered, and the progress of the Scholars from the first cohort. It focuses on the role and support provided to Scholars by the experienced primary teachers who act as mentors, as well as secondary teachers (tutors) who support the women in their study towards resitting the MSCE using open educational resources provided by the OU. The paper concludes by considering the role experienced teachers can play in mentoring and supporting future and newly qualified teachers in developing a sustainable teacher education provision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Experienced teachers supporting women to access teacher education in Malawi**

### **Introduction**

‘When you educate a girl, you educate a nation/community’, so the saying goes. However many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have a very low female teacher population. The lack of women teachers in schools signifies a lack of role models for girls at the early stages of their education which can affect the development of these future women and the whole nation in such countries.

Free primary education was introduced in Malawi in 1994. Education is not compulsory in Malawi, however the abolition of fees produced an immediate rise in enrolment from 1.8 million to 3 million pupils (Malawi Government, 1998 and UNESCO, 2011). With the increase in enrolments there is a requirement for more teachers. Unfortunately this is an issue that will take time to tackle and there is still currently a lack of sufficient qualified teachers to support these pupils, which entails a pupil:teacher ratio of up to 200 to 1 in the lower primary classes in some rural areas of Malawi. There are a number of teacher training programmes in Malawi supported by the Malawi Government but these do not have the capacity to cover the actual requirement the country faces. Another aspect affecting the implementation of free education in Malawi is the shortage of female teachers who can act as role models for girls, particularly in rural areas of Malawi. Like many others, Malawi is a country that suffers from low female recruitment to the teaching profession. Many rural primary schools in Malawi only have one or have no female teachers, only around 10% of children have access to a female primary teacher in rural areas of Malawi, and throughout Malawi only a third of pupils have access to a female primary teacher (Malawi Government, 2008).

In 2009 the OU Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>1</sup> (TESSA) programme conducted a feasibility study funded by the Scottish Government concerned with exploring how the number of women teachers in rural areas in Malawi could be increased. This analysis indicated a need to recruit women into teaching *from their own rural communities* and identified a key constraint on recruitment to be a lack of the necessary academic qualifications required for admittance to teacher education programmes. In 2010 the Open University, UK (OU) embarked on a partnership with FAWEMA (Forum for Women Educationalists in Malawi) and the Departments for Basic Education and for Teacher Education in Malawi to develop a programme to support women from rural areas of Malawi into the teaching profession: the Malawi Access to Teaching Saltire Scholarship (MATSS) programme<sup>2</sup>. The programme has been funded by the Scottish Government Development Fund for three years to provide one thousand scholarships to support women who aspire to become primary school teachers in their local community. These women completed secondary education but, due to a variety of circumstances, failed to achieve the grades required for entry into teacher education programmes, so the programme will give them a second opportunity to progress in life and education. The first cohort of Scholars embarked on their scholarship in April 2011 and sat their exams in June/July 2012, with the second cohort having started the scholarship in April 2012.

The MATSS programme is providing pathways for rural women into teaching whilst allowing them to remain in their community. The Scholarship design uniquely combines *structured study to upgrade academic qualifications* to the required level (Malawi School Certificate of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.tessafrica.net/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.tessafrica.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=223&Itemid=245](http://www.tessafrica.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=223&Itemid=245).

Education - MSCE) and *supported induction into teaching through school experience as a Learning Assistant*, supporting pupil learning in their own community. The women benefitting from the Scholarship (Scholars) are supported by open educational distance learning resources to prepare for MSCE exams in four main subjects (Maths, Biology, Physical Science and English), as well as a structured school experience handbook with activities, case studies and readings to help them develop their skills as a Learning Assistant working alongside a qualified primary teacher. The resources developed for the MATSS programme are available as Open Educational Resources (OER) on the TESSA website indicated above. As well as these resources, the Scholars are supported by two qualified secondary teachers who act as Tutors in their MSCE study (one for English and one for Maths and Science) and a qualified primary teacher who acts as their mentor during their school experience. As part of the scholarship, Scholars receive a modest bursary, to help them with travel to study centres, to buy stationary or personal hygiene items, as well as support for their registration to MSCE exams and guidance for teacher training applications.

The importance of collaboration between experienced teachers and entrants to the teaching profession is recognised throughout the world. For example, in 2009-10 a teacher education review took place in Scotland led by Mr Graham Donaldson with its final report "Teaching Scotland's Future"<sup>3</sup> being published in December 2010. In its response to this report "Continuing to build excellence in teaching"<sup>4</sup> the Scottish Government highlighted the role experienced teachers should play in supporting student teachers or newly qualified teachers in their initial years of practice.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/01/13092132/0>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Education/Schools/Teaching/SGresponse09032011>

This paper examines how the conceptual design of the project was developed, what has needed to be addressed or adapted to suit the reality and environment encountered in the rural areas of Malawi where it is being delivered, and the progress of the Scholars from the first cohort. It focuses on the role and support provided to Scholars by the experienced primary teachers who act as mentors, as well as secondary teachers (tutors) who support the women in their study towards resitting the MSCE using open educational resources provided by the OU. The paper concludes by considering the role experienced teachers can play in mentoring and supporting future and newly qualified teachers in developing a sustainable teacher education provision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **CONCEPTUAL DESIGN OF THE MATSS PROGRAMME**

In 2009 the OU/TESSA conducted a feasibility study for the Scottish Government which identified that one of the factors affecting recruitment of women to the teaching profession was a lack of the required qualifications to enter teacher training programmes in Malawi. In order to enter a teacher training college in Malawi, applicants need to have obtained a full Malawi School Certificate of Education, with a credit grade in English. At the same time as providing supported study to achieve these entry qualifications, the MATSS programme developers thought it was important to give women an opportunity to work alongside qualified teachers to prepare for what it would be like to be a teacher and to explore whether this would be a career they would want to pursue. Offering Scholars the opportunity to work in a primary school would also have benefits for the class teachers, the school and the community itself. The teacher in a large class would have the support of another adult who could help him or her with non-teaching but time consuming tasks such as taking the register, helping with minor discipline issues or working with small groups. The

school would benefit from this adult's support and other teachers could benefit from the experiences and resources the Scholar brings to the school. The presence of an additional female adult in the school and classroom is also particularly beneficial in schools with typically low female representation on the staff. For the community, young girls and other women would see the Scholar as a role model who was taking a second opportunity to achieve her goals of completing her qualifications to progress to further study.

The Scholarship programme lasts from the beginning of April until June the following year when the Scholars sit their MSCE exams. Between April and March Scholars spend four days each week in school experience in a local primary school working alongside a teacher in a Standard 1 or 2 class. During this time they meet once a week with their mentor, who is an experienced qualified primary teacher, to discuss their progress, to reflect on their learning in the school and to prepare activities for the following week. The activities the Scholars are engaged in during their school experience help them to understand the role of the teacher supporting the children's learning, but also to reflect on the teacher's skills and the learners' progress and development throughout the year. Initially Scholars are mainly involved in observations of the teacher and children in action and reflections on the teaching and learning taking place in the lessons. As the programme progresses, the Scholars are involved in working alongside the class teacher in specific tasks or with small groups always under the supervision of the teacher. The idea of reflection on the practice of the teacher or themselves as learners is embedded throughout the programme.

It was felt important to provide a structure to the Scholar's attachment to primary school, and a framework for them to work through with their respective mentor. The School Experience Handbook comprises 3 Themes (Working with others and learning from them;

Children learning; Classroom activities and learners' subject knowledge), each of which comprises several units. The resources and activities included in each unit are designed to introduce Scholars to the theory behind children's development in a very practical way, and to enable them to track their own progress and changing identity as they gain confidence and competence as an adult helper in the classroom. Each week the Scholar is encouraged to undertake specific tasks (for example, observation of children engaged in group work) and to then reflect in their workbook on what they have observed and learnt. The mentor receives guidelines on how to guide the Scholar through the School Experience, conducts weekly reflection meetings with the Scholar, and signs the Scholar's workbook. At the end of the year, the workbook will form part of a portfolio which the Scholar takes with her and can use to demonstrate her commitment to a teaching career when she applies to teacher training.

There are usually two Scholars in each school, with some larger schools having up to five Scholars. The programme emphasises the importance of peer support and collaborative learning but always encouraging Scholars to take responsibility for their own study and progress in the programme. As well as the class teacher and the mentor (who could be the same person in some cases), the Scholar is encouraged to work with, discuss and learn from her peer Scholars and other adults in the school, either teachers, head teachers or others in the community.

The MSCE resources have been developed based on the Malawi National Examination Board (MANEB) specifications and drawing on expertise from the OU of developing distance learning materials and the experience of Malawi teachers involved in preparing learners for MSCE exams and marking them. It is a requirement of the Scholarship that the Scholars

have already attempted MSCE exams in a number of subjects and have at least passed the English exam (One of the requirements for entry into teacher training is to have a credit in English). Between April and March, Scholars meet in study support groups of about 20 Scholars once a week in a local Teacher Development Centre (TDC) or local secondary school to support each other in their study and revision. It is expected that following the peer support and collaborative learning strategies used in the school experience, Scholars will have a range of experiences of MSCE study and will be able to support each other on some subjects or topics. Apart from the support of their peers and the distance learning resources offered in the programme, every other week, the groups of Scholars are joined by their tutors who are qualified secondary teachers who facilitate their learning and clarify aspects they might have difficulties with.

Covering the whole secondary syllabus in one year is not possible. In order to develop the distance learning resources for MSCE study in the programme, experienced teachers and examiners from Malawi were asked to identify the topics that are included in exams more regularly and those that present most difficulties to learners. Six topics were identified for each of the subjects and Scholars were also given access to MSCE study resources for other topics and subjects in the TDCs. For the practical subjects of Biology and Physical Sciences, as well as the resources provided by the programme, Scholars from Cohort 1 attended a 2 day residential school in April 2012 where they had access to labs in secondary schools and practiced some of the experiments and practical activities they might encounter in their practical MSCE exam. During the month of May 2012, revision tutorials were held by tutors to identify main aspects for each subject area, to share revision skills as well as to provide practical advice for the Scholars on the exams. The project team is considering increasing

the access of MATSS Scholars to Science labs for Cohort 2 but this is dependent on the availability of labs in local secondary schools and the availability of further funding.

The MATSS programme is currently being implemented in four districts in Malawi. Two are situated in the South: Mwanza and Chikwawa, and the other two in the centre: Dedza and Ntchisi. These are all rural districts with at times difficult access and with long distances to travel between schools or villages. The selection of the districts was based on a number of factors such as the number of trained female teachers with MSCE, pupil:teacher ratio for trained primary teachers, MSCE pass rates for females, drop-out rates for females in primary education, and adult female literacy rates (Wolfenden et al, 2011). As well as this data, the district education and social priorities as well as the support of district officers towards the programme were also taken into account. It is hoped that further funding will be available to expand the programme to other districts.

### **LESSONS FROM COHORT 1**

Within a short period of time, the presence of the MATSS programme in Malawi has been able to influence the awareness in local communities, among women and other community members including local leaders of the importance of girls' education. This was evident during the Community sensitization meetings for Cohort 2 held at the beginning of 2012. More parents in the target districts are encouraging girls to remain in or return to school.

The reality and the environments in which the project is being delivered mean that a number of aspects of the original programme design have been reviewed and adapted based on our experiences with the first cohort.

The main aspect that had to be reviewed was the participation of experienced female teachers in the programme to support Scholars. Originally it was deemed important that the mentor supporting Scholars in their school experience should be a qualified female primary teacher who could provide a supportive, safe and secure learning and working relationship for the Scholar. However, this has not always been possible as some of the schools in the rural areas where the programme is delivered do not have qualified female teachers. A question arose in the programme team on whether it was more important for the mentor to be a 'qualified teacher' or a 'female member of staff' in the school who might not be qualified to teach. It was agreed that the important aspect of the mentoring role was to be an experienced qualified teacher who would be able to support the Scholar in her pathway to be a teacher and who could provide advice to the Scholar based on their own experience. A similar issue arose with MSCE tutors, where only two out of the original forty tutors were female. Unfortunately the shortage of female teachers in rural areas is the reality of teacher provision in Malawi and in its implementation the programme was actually affected by one of the aspects it aims to address.

Another aspect the programme has had to adapt based on our experience with cohort 1 is the circle of support for both scholars and mentors in the primary schools where Scholars are placed for their school experience. Head Teachers and Primary Education Advisers (PEAs, an existing role in each District Education Office) have now been brought into the programme with specific roles. Both have quality assurance roles in terms of ensuring the Scholars attend schools regularly and the mentors and scholars meetings take place, but they also have a pastoral care role in terms of supporting both scholars and mentors when faced with difficulties. Examples of these difficulties could involve Scholars' family members

or the larger community who might not understand the programme and the importance of allowing the Scholar time to study or to go to school. In such cases head teachers have had an important role to play in supporting the Scholars in front of their family and in clarifying the understanding of the programme with members of the family and community at times. As part of the improvements for Cohort 2 and based on the experience of Head Teachers of had Scholars in their school in Cohort 1, a support document has been designed with information for them about the role of the Scholars and the tasks they undertake in the classroom, as well as advice on how to support the Scholars and the teachers working with them in the school.

An aspect the programme team has particularly worked on throughout cohort 1 is supporting the MSCE tutors and school experience mentors in their roles as distance learning tutors and mentors respectively. At the beginning of cohort 1 in April 2011 there was a delay in recruiting tutors and mentors in some areas which meant that they could not receive full training before embarking on the project in April. This was addressed offering tutor and mentor workshops throughout year 1 and at the beginning of year 2 of the project. Half way through the first year, tutors attended a two day residential training workshop in October. The aims of the workshop were to develop the tutors' understanding of the MATSS programme, of Open Distance Learning (ODL), of the role of the tutor in ODL, of the backgrounds, prior educational experiences and needs of the Scholars. It also aimed to explore ideas for supporting successful learning for the Scholars as well as to create a community of support among MSCE tutors by sharing experiences with other tutors, and working with other tutors to plan and prepare MSCE tutorial meetings. The emphasis of this workshop was on understanding the difference between the role of the class teacher as

opposed to that of the distance learning tutor in the MATSS programme where the tutor is the facilitator of learning and the importance of student centred and participative tutorial meetings were discussed and addressed. This workshop was followed by a second one at the beginning of cohort 2 based on the same strategy the project uses with Scholars of peer support and collaborative learning, where experienced tutors supported and shared their experiences and learning with new tutors. For mentors, an initial half day session was included at the Scholars' induction residential followed by a two day workshop in April and May 2012 where the role of the mentor was explored and the experiences of cohort 1 mentors were shared with new mentors. The objectives of the mentor workshops were to reflect on the progress of the MATSS programme, to arrive at a common understanding of the programme in general and the school experience aspect in particular for the Scholars, to learn from the experiences of cohort 1 mentors, to induct new mentors in their role in the programme and to arrive at a common understanding of the mentoring role in the MATSS programme.

Feedback gathered at these workshops is used later in this paper to illustrate some of the views of experienced teachers in their roles as tutors and mentors in the programme.

### **ISSUES COMING OUT OF THE PROJECT REVIEWS**

In August 2011 a number of review meetings were held in the four districts where the programme is based with Scholars, tutors and mentors. The aims of the review meetings were to work with all those involved in the MATSS programme to prepare for the second term of school experience and MSCE study, to share experiences from the first term and to raise any issues or difficulties participants were encountering in using the resources, in the school placements or in the MSCE study.

An important aspect that emerged from the review meetings was the enthusiasm and Participation of Scholars in the programme. In the tutors workshop held in Zomba in October 2011, tutors were asked about the strengths the Scholars showed in their MSCE learning. The majority of the Scholars have displayed enthusiasm and eagerness to learn both in their role as Learning Assistants in their school experience and in their MSCE study. An English tutor from Chikwawa wrote: "High concentration is being shown. They have an interest of being employed as teachers after being motivated" (C5E, October 2011 questionnaire). There is also a high sense of hard work amongst them frequently asking for assistance in the school or to other Scholars when needed and rarely missing their fortnightly tutorials with their MSCE tutor. The scholars have also portrayed the will and determination to succeed coupled with a mature attitude to the work. One of the Mathematics tutors from Ntchisi wrote: "Hardworking, ready to discuss issues with others in school, asking where they don't understand. [Scholars] doing the work assigned to them as part of assessment" (N11M, October 2011 questionnaire). The scholars are also resourceful as is expected in the design of the programme as they become more independent in their role as learning assistants and in their MSCE study. They have interest in learning new things. There is a general high level of participation by the learners in their tutorial classes.

Every two weeks, tutors meet with a group of Scholars in a local TDC to support them in their MSCE study. As the programme develops, the tutors report that as they progress in the year most of the Scholars become more active and interact freely in these tutorials displaying an ability to analyse issues from the learning resources developed for them in the programme. An English tutor from Mwanza states that "They are able to ask questions

when they don't understand. They are able to ask a tutor if he could provide them with additional materials for MSCE level" (M6E, October 2011 questionnaire). This could be partly attributed to the tutors' positive reinforcement and feedback thus encouraging the Scholars to ask questions to the tutor or to their peers when they find a difficulty in their study.

Despite the positive progress highlighted above, Scholars still face a number of challenges such as absenteeism, pressure from relatives or community, studying from a new syllabus, lack of confidence, language skills, studying from distance learning resources, and distances to travel for tutorials.

During Cohort 1 there have been some sporadic cases of absenteeism when Scholars failed to attend school for their school experience or go to their MSCE tutorials. Scholars are required to inform the school or their tutor if they are going to be absent. At the same time the project team in Malawi aims to contact Scholars who are absent regularly to assess the level of absenteeism and to discuss options to resolve the issue when possible. Reasons for absenteeism have included: the Scholar's or a relative's ill health or other responsibilities the Scholar has to attend to at home.

There have also been a few cases of pressure from Scholars' husbands or relatives which have forced Scholars to drop out of the programme. At times relatives have not fully understood the Scholarship the Scholar was receiving and the programme of study the Scholar was involved in. There have been cases where a husband or parents believed the Scholar was receiving a teacher's salary so would not continue to give them money to buy food for children, or asked them to leave the family home as they could now live independently. In another case the husband of one of the Scholar would not allow her to

study at home as he felt she was wasting time when she should be involved in household chores. In many of these cases the mentors and head teachers from the local primary school have had to intervene to explain the programme to the relatives and allow the Scholar to continue in the programme.

Some Scholars seem to be struggling with their MSCE study because they fail to grasp some concepts. Reasons for this could be due to a lack of background knowledge as they might not have studied the subject before due to a lack of teacher when they were in school (in the case of Physical Science or Biology), or the fact that the curriculum in Malawi has recently changed e.g. in English literature. Given that some of the scholars last sat the MSCE exam a number of years ago, they now face a new syllabus and so find it difficult to comprehend the changes in the syllabus and are struggling to cope with pressure exerted by academic study. When asked why they thought Scholars might have not succeeded previously with their MSCE, one of the English tutors wrote: “inadequacy of resources and qualified teachers; most of our scholars attended schools in their villages which have no adequate resources, as well as [a lack of] qualified teachers” (N4E).

Some Scholars seem to lack confidence and are shy to ask questions or to contribute at tutorial meetings. Some of the scholars are apprehensive about the MSCE exams because of previous failure in these exams. This seems to be common among older and married scholars. Strategies to build the Scholars’ confidence are embedded throughout the school experience resources and the MSCE resources developed for the programme. Scholars are often asked to look back at previous experiences and identify their achievements to allow them some time to recap and reflect on how far they have come in the programme. The

role of the MSCE tutor, the School Experience mentor and the other Scholars are also important in building the Scholars' confidence.

One obstacle for some scholars is the issue of language. One Physical Science tutor from Ntchisi indicated that the Scholars' problems to comprehend English language affect their appreciation of concepts in science (N9P, October 2011 questionnaire). All the resources in the MATSS programme are written in English. This was an aspect that was discussed at length in the initial stages of the programme with members of the team from Malawi and the UK. Based on the facts that the MSCE exams were in English, and that teacher training colleges deliver their training in English it was deemed necessary that English would be the sole language of the resources. However tutors and mentors supporting Scholars are encouraged to use their local language in discussions with the Scholars to facilitate communication and learning when required.

In the MATSS programme, Scholars have to become accustomed to distance learning study for their MSCE. In many cases this means that the Scholars have to be independent learners and study on their own for most of the week, apart from the times when they meet weekly with their peers or fortnightly with their tutors at the TDCs. However, some scholars - especially those where there are 3 or 4 placed in the same school - have taken up the habit of meeting in small groups each day after school to study together before going home, hence avoiding the competing priorities for their time once they reach home. Some tutors have noted that the materials provided are good and user friendly, however they recognise that they do not cover the whole syllabus as explained earlier. In order to mitigate this, the project has delivered resources to the TDCs for Scholars to use to supplement their study for the MSCE exams. Some Scholars are also known to have used some of their financial

support provided by the Scholarship to pay for some extra support to prepare for their MSCE exams.

The aim of the programme was to locate Scholars in a local primary school for their school experience and to ask them to go to a local TDC for their MSCE tutorial meetings every two weeks. For the most part this has worked well. However, for a few Scholars this has not been possible and in some instances they have to walk long distances to attend their school or the TDCS. This has increased absenteeism in some cases and has reduced the time the Scholars can meet with their tutors in others. This is an aspect the programme team is aware of and has tried to address for cohort 2.

### **PROGRESS OF COHORT 1 SCHOLARS**

Cohort 1 recruited the targeted 500 scholars and has registered very good progress to date. The retention in the programme has been high with only a modest 14% of the Scholars who embarked on the programme in April 2011 not staying in the programme until the end of the school experience in March 2012. Reasons for Scholars leaving the programme have been varied with some being due to ill health of the Scholar or relatives, Scholars moving to new districts due to their husband's work, maternity or in some instances Scholars having started employment soon after registering for the scholarship. An important aspect that the steering group discussed in June 2012, was that Scholars who had to leave the programme due to illness, moving to new districts or taking up employment, should be accounted for differently than those who had left the programme with no stated reason and should not be counted as 'drop out'. So taking these differences into account, the actual drop out rate

would be considerably lower than 14%<sup>5</sup>. Given that this was a pilot year, this is an encouraging retention rate. In general there has been positive progression in the way the scholars have applied themselves to both the school experience and study programme.

The presence of the Scholars in their Learning Assistants role in the local primary schools has also had an impact on the teaching and learning especially in Standards 1 and 2 classes.

These classes have a higher number of learners (up to 250 in some of the schools the Scholars are working in) and for one teacher to handle them is a challenge. The presence of the Learning Assistants has therefore helped the class teacher in managing the learners in such classes and thus made the teaching and learning process more manageable for the qualified class teacher. This is evidenced by the words of one of the MATSS District

Coordinator in an interview with the OU coordinator in June 2012: "The scholars have really taken some of the load from the regular class teachers - for example taking the register in a class of more than 200 children can take so much time that some teachers neglect to do it each day - but with a Scholar in the classroom, it can easily be done at the same time as something else. Also if a particular child needs individual attention, this is never possible for the regular teacher in a large class, but the Scholar can help".

The Scholars feel motivated because most of the school management teams and other staff treat them as part of the staff and the learners show respect towards them calling them "Madam". Some Scholars have also started to experience a different attitude from others in the community showing them respect for the new opportunity they are taking on and for the new role they have in the local school. This reinforces their interest and motivation to

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<sup>5</sup> This data is not available at the time of writing this article (June 2012).

join the teaching profession and has made up for some of those who had no confidence in their ability to work or study again.

As part of the programme, Scholars from Cohort 1 were preparing to sit MSCE exams in July 2012. At the time of writing this paper, there was no data in terms of MSCE results or exams sat by Scholars.

### **THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCED TEACHERS SUPPORTING SCHOLARS**

The project combines MSCE study and the school experience and involves experienced teachers to support the Scholars in both aspects: mentors support Scholars in their school experience, and tutors in their MSCE study.

For the school experience, the scholars work alongside the class teacher in a local primary school four days in a week and are attached to a classroom. At the same time they are assigned a mentor who is a qualified primary teacher with whom they meet regularly to discuss their progress and to work through guided activities in their School Experience workbook. The mentor is selected by the Head Teacher. In Malawi there is not an established culture of peer support among practitioners in Education. Being engaged in the MATSS programme might influence the school's attitude and culture towards the benefits that peer support among teachers can bring to the school, the teachers themselves and the learners.

Most of the mentors have played an instrumental role in encouraging the scholars on this pathway. They provide the guidance required and discuss with them the tasks they do in class as indicated in the school experience handbook. They have also often given them

encouragement and served as role models in terms of dress, professional conduct, teaching and class management skills.

In the first cohort, some mentors had difficulties fully understanding their role in the project and thus were less helpful than others to the scholars. In order to overcome this issue with cohort 2, experienced mentors from cohort 1 and new mentors in cohort 2 attended a joint workshop at the beginning of cohort 2 programme to reflect on the 1<sup>st</sup> year experiences and to learn from each other in preparation for their role in supporting Scholars in cohort 2.

Some mentors seem to lack interest to assist the scholars in the project because there is no monetary gain attached. However the majority see it as an experience that enhances their teaching practice and their own development as teachers providing them with new skills.

When asked what was the best thing about being a mentor, a female mentor from Ntchisi indicated that “I have improved myself through reading case studies, gained some new skills in teaching and how to assist learners with difficulties” (EMN25 August 2011), a male mentor from Dedza that “You learn a lot thereby improving professionalism. One can also become a good advisor” (EMD13, August 2011), and a female mentor from Dedza highlighted that “You learn more from each other when sharing experiences with scholars” (EMD14, August 2011). In a visit to Malawi in June 2012, a female mentor from Chikwawa (EMC11) indicated to the project coordinator that her involvement in the MATSS project had prompted her to reconsider her own potential and personal and professional development and she had decided to resit her own MSCE exams this year.

In the April/May 2012 workshops, mentors were asked what their participation in the MATSS programme had added to their practice and experience as teachers. As well as the development of leadership and mentoring skills, mentors indicated that the resources

Scholars used also helped them in their own practice as experienced teachers. A mentor from Chikwawa indicated that “I have enjoyed the roleplays because they helped me a lot in how to handle problems in my school as a mentor” (EMC3). Another mentor indicated how they had to apply themselves to ensure their practice was a good role model for the Scholars “I have been encouraged to work extra hard when teaching learners since I had to be exemplary to the Scholars” (EMC5).

Many primary teachers are struggling with the large class sizes and therefore are giving more tasks than prescribed in the mentor handbook to the Scholars, or are asking them to do tasks that are not suitable for Scholars who are just embarking on an exploration of what teaching actually entails. When these instances occur and if the Scholar has raised awareness of this with her mentor, the local PEA or the district coordinator, they will take time to discuss this with the class teacher and clarify the types of tasks expected of Scholars in their role as Learning Assistants. However, the recently introduced Mentor Review meetings are a strategy to improve their participation and engagement in the programme.

Progress reports show that the interface between study and school experience has benefitted the shy unconfident Scholars. Information from Feedback forms attests that scholars assist class teachers with activities like singing songs with the learners, marking exercises as well as cleaning the chalk board and many others. Through this, scholars’ confidence has increased as they are able to assist the Class teachers in managing the learners so well.

For the MSCE study, experienced secondary school teachers have been recruited as tutors to assist the scholars in their study in the subjects for English, Mathematics, Biology and Physical Sciences. To facilitate their access to Scholars and to the TDCS where the tutorial

meetings take place fortnightly, the tutors are recruited and attached to a cluster within their education zone or from a neighbouring zone. The Tutors are expected to meet with the scholars once every fortnight usually at a Teacher Development Centre (TDC), and receive a monthly payment to cover their travel to the TDCs and their role in the programme.

The roles of the tutors include but are not limited to: Preparing tutorials; facilitating study and practice of exam questions; Assessing the development and performance of the scholars; Encouraging the scholars (acting as their 'cheer leaders') to motivate them to go on despite any challenges; Instilling confidence; Coaching them on how to study effectively and how to answer exam questions, among others.

Although the tutors are expected to offer tutorial support, practice shows that they have had to combine both teaching and tutorial support when meeting Scholars for their fortnightly tutorial. This has been necessitated by the challenges facing the scholars in using the distance learning resources and to the fact that some scholars have also faced problems to adjust to study after some years of leaving school. Therefore tutors are encouraged to provide fervent and constant support to the Scholars in the first few months of the project to ensure that all scholars adjust to the new form of study required in the MATSS programme.

The project provides a MSCE handbook for Scholars with 6 units in each of the four subjects. The resources are designed as distance learning materials which assist the Scholar in revising and studying main aspects in each topic. In these units, Scholars are provided with study skills advice as well as being engaged in practical activities to help them in their MSCE study. Tutors are also provided with these resources as well as with some guidance on how

to use them with the Scholars in tutorial meetings. In recent review meetings some tutors expressed some concerns related to the fact that resources did not cover the whole syllabus. The selection of units was explained to them and emphasis placed on the fact that they should also use their experience in supporting their own learners for MSCE exams to support the Scholars.

Three of the MSCE subjects in the MATSS resources are Maths, Physical Science and Biology. There seems to be a persistent feeling among tutors that maths and sciences are difficult particularly for women. One Physical Science teacher from Dedza holds the view that “mostly boys are able to understand while many girls fail to grasp and understand Fusion, differences in radioactivity, electromagnetism, theories and practical work” (D6P, October 2011 questionnaire). The inclusion of these subjects as part of the MSCE study supported by the distance learning resources provided in the MATSS programme aims to challenge / refute the myth among the scholars that sciences are for boys and humanities for girls. Some of the tutors are already using resources such as TALULAR (Teaching and Learning Using Locally Available Resources) and benefiting from SMASSE (Strengthening of Mathematics and Science in Secondary Education) in their own class teaching. The MSCE and the School Experience resources prepared for the MATSS programme also take this into account and encourage Scholars to make use of these. The use of TALULAR could also aim to instil a positive attitude towards science.

In isolated cases, some scholars have displayed a casual attitude to work or have not been sure about how to study without the support of a teacher, as was the case when they were in school. Some scholars are also struggling because they fail to grasp concepts due to poor English language skills or a lack of background knowledge coupled with changes in the

curriculum e.g. in English literature. Although Science residential schools have been introduced in the programme as indicated earlier, the lack of local practical facilities for some scholars particularly to support science studies remains a challenge.

While a learner centred approach is used and promoted in tutorials, most of the tutors use a blend of tutoring and teaching in their tutorial meetings with Scholars. This allows tutors to cater for some learners who might have difficulties understanding specific topics or concepts but it also allows Scholars to teach each other and share the learning they have completed individually.

Tutors are beginning to benefit from being part of a community of practice and learning from other experienced teachers and to use some of the ideas from their experience in the MATSS programme and from the materials provided in their own practice in school. In the workshop held in Zomba in April 2012, a Mathematics tutor from Ntchisi indicated that his participation in the programme had helped him “a lot because the methods of tutoring shared amongst the tutors is also being used in my profession as a teacher, thereby I am applying them in classroom situations so students at my school are also benefitting” (N11M, April 2012 questionnaire). An English tutor from Mwanza also acknowledged that being part of a community of tutors had added to his experience as a teacher “Meeting different tutors and sharing new ideas has added something to my practice and experience as a teacher in Malawi” (M3E, April 2012 questionnaire).

In terms of their own practice as teachers, some tutors identified that they used more group work, more student centred teaching and more participative activities in their school lessons as a result of their experience in the MATSS programme. A science tutor from Dedza stated that “I’ve realised that group activities, individual tasks and working in pairs also

works even among the regular students in the school. At the same time I encourage my school students to have a study timetable” (D3S, April 2012 questionnaire). An English tutor from Ntchisi also indicates that “I have gained and acquired new skills. For example I am able to plan my work using different approaches such as group work which is yielding best results in my teaching progression. This is because I have seen my students and scholars participation being accelerated” (N3E).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This paper has attempted to illustrate the role experienced teachers can play in mentoring and supporting future and newly qualified teachers in developing a sustainable teacher education provision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has described the conceptual design of the Open University’s “Malawi Access into Teaching Saltire Scholarship” project and how the project has been adapted and shaped by the lessons learned as the first cohort of Scholars have progressed through the first year. In particular, it has focused on the role and support provided to Scholars by the experienced primary teachers who act as mentors, as well as secondary teachers (tutors) who support the women in their study towards resitting the MSCE using open educational resources provided by the OU. In essence, the MATSS programme has offered experienced primary and secondary teachers an opportunity to give a second chance to women who have not achieved secondary school qualifications and are interested in becoming primary teachers in their first steps in a future teaching career. Tutors and mentors have worked closely with the MATSS Scholars to support them in acquiring the required grades to enter teacher training by preparing for their MSCE exams, and in offering them an insight into the teaching and learning that takes place in a local primary school. At the same time, the role of experienced teachers in the MATSS

programme has enhanced their own professional status and practice as classroom teachers, providing them with skills to support new entrants to the profession and has stimulated their own ambition. It is the view of the authors of this paper that this principle of drawing on existing professional experience to support and inspire new and prospective members of the profession is a potentially significant resource which is currently largely untapped. Experienced teachers throughout the world and particularly in developing countries are an asset that governments should be using more as they have skills and experiences that are valuable for newly qualified, student and aspiring teachers.

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