

Centre *for* Social Justice and Change

Research Report 1

# 'A kinder sort of contract':

## A research study with the Migrants Resource Centre in London looking at holistic service provision

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# Introduction

The Migrants Resource Centre was established in 1984 to respond to the need for a community centre for migrants and refugees in London. Based in Pimlico, it currently has 18 paid members of staff (10 of whom are part time), as well as about 40 volunteers who are crucial to the functioning of the centre. The loss of a number of funding sources in recent years has forced the centre to rely more heavily on volunteers due to a reduction in paid staff. The MRC runs a wide range of courses and activities, including English classes, computer classes, job support workshops, wellbeing activities such as yoga, and creative activities such as jewellery making. The centre also provides a legal advice service and guidance for migrants who need to access health services. In addition, there is a nursery, offering pre-school provision to centre users and the wider community.

Services are provided free of charge to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers living in London. Currently, 50% of users are residents of the Borough of Westminster and 20% are residents of the Borough of Camden, with the rest coming from other areas of the capital. The centre operates out of a building in Churton Street (SW1) gifted to them by the GLC in 1992, which provides free accommodation but has certain limitations in terms of the space available for teaching and other activities.

## **The ethos of the centre**

The MRC website describes the centre as having ‘a vision of Britain in which migrants and refugees are valued for their contribution to society’. Consequently, its ethos is strikingly different from the currently prevailing processes of ‘othering’ immigrants in general and refugees in particular. At a time when the dehumanizing of migrants continue to be at the heart of political discourses and practices, valuing migrants for the human capital they bring, as well as their determination to become active citizens of this country is a sound challenge to the dominant disempowering structures that regulate immigration and immigrant integration. The MRC sees its role as twofold: assisting migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in their attempts towards integration into British society, as well as ‘initiating and participating in campaigns, networks and partnerships to improve the lives of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees’.

The MRC provides: specialist immigration and asylum advice; general information and advice; employment, education and training advice and support; and information on accessing health services. These services are provided by staff and volunteers at the centre, as well as in partnership with external individuals and agencies.

In accord with its ethos the MRC aims to be more than a training or advice centre. To achieve this it adopts a migrant-centred approach to the provision of its services, by taking a holistic view of the needs of those who arrive at the centre. Valuing immigrants and their contribution to Britain implies also a concern for their wellbeing. As a result, the MRC endeavors to provide ‘a safe place in which users are able to learn, to meet with others, to speak out for a better world and to move on feeling stronger’. Its commitment to ‘improve the image and perception of migrants and refugees in the UK’; is also its quest to ‘promote social justice’. The MRC’s work and approach aims to ‘enable and encourage two-way integration through dialogue, mutual acceptance and respect’.

## **The aim of the research study**

The aim of this small-scale study was to examine the range of the centre’s provision and activities and to explore their effect and impact on the lives of immigrants who have used the centre. The

study particularly focused on the education and employment support services. The MRC has a long-term relationship with many of its service users and the study wanted to find out what first brought migrants to the centre and why they kept coming, as well as to ascertain how successful the centre was in meeting the diverse needs of its users. The provision of tailor-made services, alongside more predictable provision, was of interest as an innovative and potentially productive strategy. Taking into account the MRC's holistic approach, the study also sought to ascertain to what extent the centre was successful at improving the wellbeing and self-confidence of those using its services, so that not only had they acquired or refined their skills but also had developed the resilience required to place themselves into British society with the aim of economic integration as well as full social inclusion.

The holistic approach being taken by the Migrants Resource Centre recognizes the importance of health, happiness, confidence and social interaction, alongside the very real need to be proficient in English and update qualifications and job search skills. Those coming to the centre range from the highly-skilled to individuals with more basic levels of education. Some speak little English when they arrive, while others are fluent. They may have been forced to migrate as a result of war or persecution, have chosen to move to seek new challenges, or felt compelled to come to Britain due to economic instability at home. This study focuses on the ways in which the MRC is facilitating their transition towards settlement.

## **Theoretical background**

### **Wellbeing**

The importance of wellbeing in the context of migration was recognized by the International Organization for Migration, whose latest annual report focused on wellbeing as a key measurement of social progress (IOM 2013). A notion of subjective wellbeing takes into account personal relationships, social networks and community alongside factors such as career, finance and physical wellbeing. This holistic approach is central to understanding the barriers migrants may face when trying to integrate into British society.

UK government agencies recognize the need for English language proficiency and favour migrants who are seen as 'exceptionally talented and highly skilled' because of their perceived contribution to the economy (UKBA 2013a; UKBA 2013b). There is less awareness, however, about the importance of social networks and social capital in the integration and social inclusion of immigrants (Korac 2003; 2009). The lack of understanding of the importance of personal relationships that shape 'the social world' (Marx 1990) of immigrants and refugees in their successful settlement is evidenced, for example, in new restrictions placed on family reunion (UKBA 2013c). Family networks, however, are central elements of social capital as well as of the individual wellbeing of immigrants. Left without a possibility of family reunification, immigrants' wellbeing is seriously undermined, affecting all aspects of their integration, ranging from economic to social, cultural, and political.

### **Social networks**

Migrants who continue a tradition of 'chain migration' or are part of a 'migration network' may migrate to cities or particular neighbourhoods in countries where there is already a significant number of people known to them or their extended family (Castles 2002). This brings with it a level of 'migratory cultural capital' which, while it does not eradicate the difficulties of settling in a new

country, learning a new language and finding employment, at least eases the transition (Van Hear 1998). For others, political or personal circumstances may mean that they arrive with few contacts. Refugees, in particular, are often faced with the loss of social networks and as a result a reduction in social capital. Cernea sees this as a form of poverty brought about by forced migration and describes it as 'social disarticulation', which manifests itself as the dismantling of social structures and the dispersal of networks (Cernea 1996: 22). Those migrating to Britain to find work who arrive alone or with few resources, may also lack extensive networks.

Social capital is produced by effective forms of social organization, so that trust is built up and networks established over time, allowing individuals to make productive use of their skills for their own and society's benefit (Coleman 1990; Putnam 1992). However, the loss of social capital and a lack of familiarity with the way things are done in a new country may make a migrant feel like a fish out of water while they try to build new social networks (Taylor 2009: 230). The instinctive understanding of how society works has to be adapted to a different context, so that everyday tasks such as going to the doctor or filling in a form become difficult rather than commonplace. For those with family or friends to guide them through this process, the transition is easier. For others, establishments such as the Migrants Resource Centre become invaluable; and for some they can be a life-support system.

## **Community**

A sense of community is necessary in order for people to feel at home. The multicultural model of integration has generally anticipated the establishment of communities along ethnic lines, which help to facilitate the transition of newly-arrived migrants into a host society (Kelly 2003: 38). However, community does not have to be defined in ethnic or cultural terms but may instead refer to people with whom one feels at ease (Hage 1997: 103), including local and native populations in receiving societies (Korac 2009). The idea of community is important because it suggests the possibility of belonging, but belonging may be based on shared experience and common understanding as well as ethnicity (Burrell 2006: 142; Korac 2009; Taylor 2013). This report demonstrates that the work of the Migrants Resource Centre is contributing to the establishment of a community based on mutual support, reciprocity, safety and trust. For some this is a temporary community, which facilitates the transition towards integration. For others, however, it has become a longer lasting support network, which adapts to their changing needs.

## **Research-design and methodology**

The study was funded by the Centre for Social Justice and Change at the School of Law and Social Sciences (LSS), University of East London (UEL). The Centre's commitment to social justice, inclusion of marginalized people and communities, and the acknowledgement of migration as a positive force of social change have guided its interest in researching migrant-centred approaches to support for the integration and inclusion of immigrants. Moreover, the LSS at UEL runs a cluster of successful refugee-related Masters programmes, which are refugee and people-centred. This approach to the understanding of the lived experience of migrants and refugees, their integration, as well as their contribution to the receiving societies led to this study.

Initial contact was made by Dr Maja Korac, Co-Director of the Centre for Social Justice and Change and Co-Leader of the MA in Refugee Studies, at UEL, with Laura Marziale, Community Education and Employment Team Coordinator at the MRC. Dr Helen Taylor, who was employed to conduct the study, held further meetings at the MRC to establish the ethos of the centre and the range of services it provided. Fieldwork was conducted in July 2013, and consisted of one focus

group with seven participants, as well as four one-to-one interviews. A semi-structured interview schedule for both the focus group and the interviews was drawn up in consultation with staff at the centre and Dr Korac. The focus group and interviews were tape-recorded and informed consent sought from all participants (who have been given pseudonyms in this report).

The data obtained through the research process were coded to enable thematic analysis to determine emerging trends and patterns in the interviews and focus group. In this study we were interested in factual information concerning the use, effectiveness and impact of support provided by the MRC, such as which services were being accessed and how long people had attended the centre. Equally important was information on the subjective aspects of betterment and integration, such as feelings of participants towards the centre and its role in their lives in London and Britain, which reflects the holistic approach of the MRC. Consequently, the lived experience of the migrants using the centre was seen as being just as important as measurable outcomes, such as the number of classes taken.

**Questions explored the following key areas:**

- First encounters with MRC
- Experience of services at MRC
- How MRC meets the needs of its service users
- How the MRC has helped service users in their daily life (e.g. assisting in job search, increasing confidence and sense of wellbeing)
- Reasons for continued use of the centre
- Levels of satisfaction
- Positive aspects of the centre
- Suggestions for improvement

## **Focus group**

Participants for the focus group were chosen to reflect a range of ages (from 25 to 67), a balance of genders, a variety of countries of birth, as well as different lengths of time as users of the centre (from 8 months to more than 3 years). The ability to speak English was necessary for this study, as the focus group was conducted without interpreters. This may have excluded some users of the centre who have arrived more recently in Britain or are potentially more isolated as a result of their limited English language skills. A larger study could explore the specific needs and experiences of these individuals.

The focus group was held at the MRC building in Pimlico, a safe and familiar space for all those attending. The session began with an opening circle giving all participants the opportunity to introduce themselves and explain what attracted them to the centre. It then moved on through the interview schedule, also allowing participants to contribute their own ideas and thoughts. Those attending were also asked to fill in a short questionnaire, providing basic biographical details and indicating the services they had used at the MRC.

## Focus group participants

| Name      | Country of birth  | Time in UK | Age | Time at MRC  |
|-----------|-------------------|------------|-----|--------------|
| Ibrahim   | Sudan             | 2 Years    | 25  | 8 months     |
| Florence  | Nigeria           | 27 years   | 55  | 18 months    |
| Stephanie | Trinidad & Tobago | 3 years    | 37  | 2 years      |
| Antonio   | Angola            | 10 years   | 67  | 2 years      |
| Benjamin  | Ivory Coast       | 21 years   | 47  | 2 years      |
| Pablo     | Chile             | 3 years    | 56  | Over 2 years |
| Behruz    | Iran              | 4 years    | 50  | Over 3 years |

## Interviews

Four people were selected for in-depth one-to-one interviews, all of whom had a long-term and close relationship with the centre. They were chosen to reflect the diverse needs of those coming to the MRC and the range of services used by migrants over a period of time. Three were female and one male (to rectify the slight imbalance in the focus group) and ages ranged from 33 to 65. As with the focus group, all participants spoke English well enough to converse without interpretation and interviews were conducted at the MRC.

## Interview participants

| Name      | Country of birth | Time in UK       | Age | Time at MRC |
|-----------|------------------|------------------|-----|-------------|
| Maria     | Spain            | 4 years          | 36  | 3 years     |
| Gabriela  | Portugal         | 4 years 6 months | 53  | 4 years     |
| Kingsley  | Sri Lanka        | 8 years          | 65  | 5 years     |
| Valentina | Colombia         | 3 years 4 months | 33  | 3 years     |

## Findings

### Services used

Participants in the study were asked about the services they used at the centre. Skill-based classes such as English language and computers were the most commonly accessed, as well as practical sessions on conducting a job search and CV writing. The health advice service was also very popular and a number of respondents mentioned the importance of being guided through the process of finding a GP and a dentist by staff at the centre when they were newly arrived. In addition, several said that they came to the MRC when they needed help filling in forms. The wide variety of other services accessed demonstrates the range of courses, training and assistance available to those coming to the centre. Some of these are one-off events, such as the radio-presenting workshop. Others are one-to-one sessions with external professionals working in partnership with the centre, such as the career counseling and drama therapy. Some courses mentioned continue to run (like yoga), while others were on offer for a period of time at the centre but are no longer available (Italian and dance classes, for example).

| Services used             | No. of participants | Services used              | No. of participants |
|---------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Computer class            | 8                   | Career counseling (1-to-1) | 1                   |
| Job support               | 7                   | Community interpreting     | 1                   |
| English (various levels)  | 7                   | IELTS                      | 1                   |
| Health advice service     | 5                   | Mental wellbeing           | 1                   |
| CV workshop               | 4                   | Tax advice workshop        | 1                   |
| Legal advice              | 3                   | First Aid                  | 1                   |
| Creative writing          | 3                   | Yoga                       | 1                   |
| Mentoring                 | 2                   | Dance class                | 1                   |
| Preparation for interview | 2                   | Conversation class         | 1                   |
| Italian language class    | 1                   | ESOL on the internet       | 1                   |
| Psychologist (1-to-1)     | 1                   | New Londoners              | 1                   |
| Counseling (1-to-1)       | 1                   | Film-making workshop       | 1                   |
| Drama therapy (1-to-1)    | 1                   | Radio-presenting           | 1                   |

### Voluntary placements and paid work

An important service provided by the centre is that of securing voluntary placements with organizations or employers outside the MRC. This is seen as an important step towards paid work, as it familiarizes migrants with the British working environment, as well as improving their confidence and their English language skills. A number of participants had been found such placements by the centre and had found them useful. For example, The MRC organized a voluntary work placement in the NHS for Valentina, while she was studying medical administration.

The centre also assists users in their job search by providing them with information about available jobs, either by email or on the centre's noticeboard. For many who come to the centre, finding suitable work is the ultimate goal, but there are many obstacles preventing them finding paid work at the right level. The most significant barrier for many is limited proficiency in English and, as a result, language classes are offered at a variety of levels and in diverse formats at the centre. Other barriers include lack of recognition for overseas qualifications, lack of references,

unfamiliarity with the British job market and discrimination against migrant workers. The MRC devotes a lot of effort towards combatting these obstacles but it is clearly an uphill struggle. Valentina, for example, has been unable to find work in the NHS since finishing her course and instead has a temporary position as cleaner in a gym. Out of those involved in the study, one had been found paid work by the centre teaching English for Westminster council, but the job was temporary and terminated once funding ran out. When asked if anyone had found a paid job, Pablo summed up the frustrations of his peers saying, “Paid job? That’s a miracle!”

Another crucial way in which those coming to the centre gain work experience is by volunteering at the centre and five of those in the study now work as volunteers at the MRC. The centre has been forced to use more volunteers to deliver services as funding has been reduced, but this strategy has obvious benefits not only for the MRC but also for individuals involved who gain experience and increased confidence.

#### **Participants found voluntary or paid work by the MRC**

| <b>Nature of work</b>      | <b>Number of participants (out of 11 in the study)</b> |
|----------------------------|--|
| Volunteers at MRC          | 5  |
| Voluntary work outside MRC | 4  |
| Paid work outside MRC      | 1  |

#### **Highly-skilled migrants**

A significant number of those who attend the centre and nearly half of those in the study can be described as highly-skilled or highly-educated. This is not surprising, given that contrary to popular opinion on the low human capital of immigrants, especially refugees, many have good levels of education as well as professional experience in their countries of origin. One of the greatest challenges faced by the MRC is how to assist these migrants into suitable work. A number of respondents expressed frustration that their language skills, the current economic climate in Britain or difficulties in having their qualifications recognized provided obstacles to their finding suitable work.

Kingsley recounted that, ‘sometimes we apply for jobs according to our experience and of course we are not even called for an interview’. While Valentina was also demoralized by her inability to find suitable work: ‘I have skills in administration, in research, and here I can’t work as a cleaner. It’s impossible for me.’ The centre has used a number of strategies to address this problem, such as: CV and interview skills workshops, organizing voluntary or work experience placements, finding mentors within the appropriate industry, securing short-term paid work, and one-to-one career-counselling sessions. Pablo has just found voluntary work in his profession as a result of the centre pairing him with a mentor in his industry. He knows it is ‘a first step’ in a difficult journey: ‘I am returning to my profession as a Quantity Surveyor, an Engineer... I found this one contact through Migrants Resource Centre. I was looking for that for two and a half years. It’s not easy for me, to look for a job and apply. The language is not easy.’

The capricious nature of the job market means that it has been difficult for those coming to the centre to find permanent paid work. The particular frustrations felt by those who have high-levels of qualifications or have worked at a high level in their chosen sector before migrating demonstrate a wasted resource in the British economy. The MRC will not be able to address this problem alone,



without outside assistance and a step change in attitude from employers and politicians. However, the fact that they have identified the problem and made attempts to tackle it is noteworthy.

### **Case Study – Kingsley**

Kingsley is a 65-year-old from Sri Lanka who has been in Britain for 8 years. Educated to Masters level in economics, he worked in banking before making the reluctant decision to leave his country when escalating violence threatened the safety of his family. After narrowly avoiding death three times he came to the UK, with his wife and young daughter, under the highly-skilled migrants programme. Shortly after he arrived he feared that his status in the country was under threat when the government introduced a new requirement for those on the programme to earn at least £40,000 a year. Along with thousands of others he fought his case in court and the Home Office was forced to back down.

He and his family now have permanent residency. He feels much safer in Britain than he did in Sri Lanka, but admits that the family has experienced a drop in their standard of living. His daughter is doing well at secondary school, although has on occasion experienced racism, while his wife has been working as a school secretary since shortly after their arrival.

Kingsley initially came to MRC looking for help with his job search, but in spite of his English language proficiency, high levels of education and work experience he has struggled to find paid employment. The MRC has organized volunteer placements for him, both at the MRC and with other organizations, and also helped him find short-term paid work as an English teacher for Westminster council. Unfortunately, funding ended and his contract was not renewed. He was accepted for a PGCE teaching course, but withdrew as he couldn't afford the fees, because he was still classified as a foreign student at the time. He also spent four years as a Governor of two London primary schools.

Kingsley now teaches English as a volunteer at the MRC at lower intermediate and elementary level, as well as mentoring individual students. Now he is 65 he has decided to put his job search on hold and is instead dedicating his energy to his work at the MRC, where he is a valued member of the team. He says that the centre has given him a sense of purpose and a feeling of community, restoring his self-esteem. He thinks it is important that the centre is run by migrants who can empathize with its users, adding that he always finds someone to talk to there.

### **Levels of satisfaction**

Centre users found out about the centre after seeing an advert or poster, by searching on the internet, through referral from another organization or advice service, or because they had been told about it by a friend. Those in the latter group said they came after personal recommendation that the MRC was a safe and supportive place. Similarly, many of those now interviewed said that they make a point of introducing their friends to the MRC, which indicates the level of satisfaction with the centre.

Most of those using the centre are resident in Westminster or the neighbouring borough of Camden, but others travel significant distances to use the services because they are seen as unique. For example, two of those in the study came from the north London boroughs of Barnet and Enfield on a regular basis. The fact that services were open to all, regardless of their borough of residence, was welcomed.

All participants in the study expressed high levels of satisfaction with services and staff at the MRC. The centre was praised for its professionalism and the quality of the teachers (many of whom are volunteers). At the same time, most talked of a relationship with the centre that went beyond that of clients or service users, and was more suggestive of a feeling of belonging to a community. None of the participants in the study expressed dissatisfaction with the centre and all suggestions for improvement were based on a desire for extra resources, rather than the quality of service provision.

The centre attracts users from a range of countries of origin, who speak many languages. Both young and old make use of the centre and their previous qualifications range from basic levels of schooling to the doctoral level. Many of those interviewed referred to this diversity as a strength of the centre.

Typical comments about levels of satisfaction were:

*"I am happy with my experience here. All the people working here are friendly. They tell you anything you need to know."*

*"It's a very good organization and they are very patient. They pay attention to us, they care about us and they are very professional. That's why I keep coming back."*

*"I think they are so friendly and so willing to help and they are so patient. If you think you need something or you don't know something, they are willing to repeat it and repeat it. It's a very relaxed atmosphere to learn, so you feel you want to come back again and again and again."*

*"They offer an exceptional service, a friendly service also."*

*"Every service is best really, the facilities they have and how they help. They are doing their best on everything. Everything is at a high level."*

Five words recurred during the research when participants were asked to describe their experience at the MRC, the quality of the services and the approach of the staff. These were 'professional', 'patient', 'kind', 'friendly' and 'free'. This demonstrates that centre users feel that they are receiving a high-quality service, which is crucially free for all migrants to use. But at the same time, they are being treated with kindness and consideration by staff and volunteers who are prepared to take time to explain things. Stephanie described it as a 'homely corporate' adding that 'they really strike the right tone here', while Valentina talked of 'a kinder sort of contact'. For Behruz, the disempowering impact of being unable to make himself understood in many situations, was mitigated by the kindness and patience of the staff at MRC: 'Our English is not good enough to understand and to talk with someone. When we come here, they are very kind and they listen very carefully and explain very well.'

The fact that services offered at the MRC are free to all users, is obviously an attraction for many who come to the centre. Stephanie spoke for many when she said that, 'It's unbelievable that these things are free and they're high quality.' Most of those in the study had limited income as a result of ongoing difficulty in finding employment. Some mentioned the means-testing used by other centres offering similar services and the fact that this wasn't the case at the MRC was seen as important. As Gabriela pointed out, 'The best thing is it's free for everyone... When I first came here I didn't have money, I didn't have benefits and they accepted me... I didn't pay anything.'

## **Key themes emerging from the study**

### **A migrant-run centre**

The MRC is largely run by people who themselves have migrated to Britain. The benefits of this are perceived to be an understanding of the difficulties faced on arrival in a new and unfamiliar country, as well as the availability of people who can speak a range of languages. A number of interviewees referred to the empathetic and helpful nature of advisers and volunteer teachers at the centre. For Valentina, the compassion of the advisers at the centre was partnered with their awareness about the needs of migrants, so that interactions are both productive and personal: 'They ask you what happened and they hear you. You can speak and the other person listens.' Kingsley also felt that the fact that the centre was run by migrants who understand migrants' problems was central to its success. 'This makes it unique,' he said 'so that they build these relationships, and in some cases they become life-long relationships.'

### **The MRC as family or community**

A number of interviewees talked of the centre fulfilling the role family might have previously filled. This is especially important for those who have migrated alone. Behruz, among others, expressed this sentiment saying, 'I feel like I am part of this organization, I look at them like my family. I know there is someone I can rely on, I can go and talk to and I can get advice from. It's very important.'

Workers, volunteers and other users of the centre are seen as trusted advisers, who care and have the migrants' best interests at heart. The loss of social networks through migration can place many migrants (especially refugees) at a disadvantage, in terms of their wellbeing and their ability to find jobs and housing. As a result, the supportive role played by the MRC is just as important as the provision of education and training.

The 'community spirit' at the MRC does not just come from those providing the services (staff and volunteers), but also appears to circulate between those who use the centre. Kingsley said, 'There is a sense of getting together and talking to each other. So it gives you a sense of community.' However, rather than a community based on ethnicity, shared language or religion, this is an emerging community built on common experience and mutual respect. Indeed, its very diversity is recognized as a strength, as Ibrahim explained: 'When I came here I met all these different people from different backgrounds and cultures. We share experiences, so I feel more confident.' The way in which the centre is facilitating the rebuilding of social networks and the creation of community could be seen as one of its most important functions.

Once again, the fact that many staff and volunteers share the experience of migration with those who come to the centre helps to contribute to this sense of common purpose. As Pablo exclaimed during the focus group: 'We are all migrants!' Similarly, the feeling of belonging may be one reason why many of the centre's service users become volunteers themselves. As Valentina explained: 'It's like a family. Many people are like you. And after you feel better, you can help them.'

The attention to detail and the kindness of the service providers at the centre was also noted by many of those interviewed. All those who attend the centre have an initial interview, which ascertains their qualifications, skills and what they hope to gain from the centre. They are then assigned a key worker who meets with them three times a year. Many newly arrived migrants need help with basic things such as finding a GP or filling in forms. A number of those in the study said that when they were applying for courses or voluntary jobs, or accessing services they were often guided through the process by staff at the MRC. The initial feeling of disorientation and the way that it had been overcome by the MRC was mentioned by a number of the interviewees including Maria, who said: 'When you start a new life here you need more help or more orientation. Especially when you are new and you don't know the system.'

### **Maria case study**

Maria is 36 and came to the UK from Madrid four years ago. She first visited the MRC with a friend and then started taking English classes. She likes the teachers and also the fact that the classes are in the evening so she can come after work. She has been coming to the centre for three years and has found the job search workshops very helpful. She also uses her one-to-one sessions with her personal advisor to get advice on improving her CV and interview techniques so that she can find a better job.

Maria wants to work in human resources and has a background in psychology. She currently works as a manager in a shop. She worked as a volunteer for a charity for three months but had to leave because she needed to find paid employment.

She has been going to the yoga class at the MRC for two years and thinks it's important to be able to do something for one hour a week that benefits her health and is, crucially, also free. She also has one-to-one drama therapy sessions and has been offered counseling in the past. She thinks arriving in a new country can be very hard and says the centre is able to help in many ways, such as telling you what to do in a dental emergency if you don't speak English, or showing you how to access services at the hospital.

She thinks the centre helps people feel like they are a part of something, especially if they have come to the country without any family. She finds it a friendly place and likes the fact that she is kept in touch through emails and phone calls about job opportunities, theatre trips and other useful information.

### **Changing roles**

Almost half of the participants in the study have become volunteers at the MRC since first coming into contact with the centre. This decision appeared to arise out of a feeling of being part of a community and wanting to 'give something back' after having received support themselves. For some, their primary role in the centre is now as a volunteer assisting in the provision of services. Others work as volunteer teachers or mentors, at the same time as continuing to access services and take part in activities.

Kingsley, who teaches English at the centre, explained how volunteering benefits those he teaches but has also had a big impact on his own wellbeing. 'When you are at home you feel so

unwanted. When you come here you don't get that feeling. You get an uplifted feeling... I feel that I am doing something, the results of which I can see by the students being able to converse in English and also it empowers them.' For Gabriela, too – who teaches jewellery making, crochet and knitting – there is a mutual benefit in volunteering. 'It's good not only for them but for me too, because I need to speak to people to teach them. And I need to speak to improve my English.'

Clearly the centre is pro-active in encouraging its users to become volunteers and this serves a number of purposes for the centre and the volunteers themselves. The MRC is able to strengthen the sense of community and reciprocity by recognizing the ability and desire of users to share their own skills and experiences. Due to funding shortages, the centre also benefits from having a pool of volunteer teachers and service providers who are able to expand the range of services provided. In return, volunteers feel a renewed sense of purpose, which helps to build their confidence and sense of self worth, as well as increasing their capacity to find paid work. In addition, they receive training from the centre to work as volunteers, which adds to their skills portfolio.

This fluidity of roles helps to break down barriers between 'service providers' and 'service users' and strengthens the perception of the MRC as a social network. Once again it is the sense of common experience which guides many who volunteer. Pablo volunteers as a befriender to help Spanish speakers who are depressed or anxious. He uses his own experience as a guide 'not to give advice, just explain, explain, explain. I have two and a half years here going through the same thing.' Valentina also empathizes with those she helps and sees their relationship as reciprocal. 'I help people like me when they arrive, which is very nice. I feel stronger. I have for example one lady from Africa and I try to teach her to write English. Because she speaks very well but she can't write. So it's good because when we start to talk she corrects me and I teach her how to write.'

## **A holistic approach**

The centre seems to be unusual in that, as well as offering the more usual English and computer classes, it takes a more holistic approach to migrants' needs. As a result, there appears to be as much emphasis placed on the wellbeing, creative expression and enjoyment of service users, as on their acquisition of skills. More than half of those in the study referred to experiencing depression, stress or anxiety since arriving in Britain. The root causes of these experiences are diverse – from clinical depression to anxiety about life in a new country, from missing their family to having no sense of purpose without employment. The MRC takes these issues seriously and uses a number of strategies to tackle them. From one-to-one sessions with medical and therapeutic professionals, to classes that encourage a sense of wellbeing, they understand the need for migrants to feel stronger in order to move on with their lives.

As well as receiving counseling or other forms of therapy, a number of respondents referred to attending Italian classes, while others did dance, creative writing and yoga. The provision of Italian language classes is an interesting indicator that the MRC values the personal advancement and enjoyment of those coming to the centre. While learning English is an essential life skill for those wanting to fully participate in British society, learning Italian is more about a sense of achievement, increased confidence or fun. Similarly the provision of classes such as yoga and dance show a commitment to the health and wellbeing of the centre's users, so that they are able to alleviate stress and increase their resilience. These classes were seen as pleasurable and beneficial by those who took them and were recognized as being above and beyond normal provision.

Stephanie, who had taken courses in creative writing, radio presenting and film making, as well as writing for the centre's online magazine *New Londoners*, felt that such classes recognized centre

users' need for personal development. She explained, 'I didn't need English classes or computer classes. What I needed was more like self-actualization... One course was radio training and after completing that, the station offered me the opportunity to run a radio series. And that in itself just really opens up a lot of contacts. For me that's a really key service that you just wouldn't find anywhere else.'

The message behind the provision of these services is that, alongside essential skills training and general advice, migrants and refugees are keen to access services that reflect their status as fully-rounded, creative individuals – just like all other members of British society.

### **Gabriela case study**

Gabriela is a 53 year old from Portugal who came to the UK nearly five years ago to find work. She struggled when she arrived because of her limited English and wasn't able to find a job with Spanish or Portuguese employers as she had anticipated. She first came to the MRC to learn English, after her friend recommended it.

She has been coming to the centre for four years and has used lots of different services, such as Italian and computer classes. Her favourite were the dance classes which made her feel more positive, when she was depressed. 'Even with no shoes you can dance. It doesn't make me tired,' she explained. The MRC also helped Gabriela find emergency accommodation when she had nowhere to live, found her a Spanish speaking dentist and guided her through the process of registering with a GP and claiming benefits

Gabriela has had some health problems since she arrived as she has bi-polar disorder. The MRC provided her with one-to-one sessions with a psychologist for a year, which has helped her to cope with her memories and feelings. She likes the friendly atmosphere at the centre and the fact that there are people from lots of different countries. She thinks it's very important that the services at the centre are free, so that they are accessible to everyone.

Once Gabriela started to feel more settled, she was encouraged to start volunteering at the MRC so that she could make use of her many creative skills. She has been teaching jewellery making, crochet and knitting to centre users for nearly two years. She loves teaching and now wants to teach jewellery as a job. She has been taking courses at Kensington and Chelsea college to make this happen and the next step is a teaching diploma, but she is worried that she might not qualify for a government loan to study.

### **Building confidence**

Many of those taking part in the study talked of their initial lack of confidence when finding themselves in a new country. The inability to make oneself understood clearly has a destabilizing effect, as Valentina described, 'When you come to this country and you can't express yourself and you can't say what you want, you feel like a stupid person. And this lack of confidence is very sad.'

A number of things contribute to the feeling of increased confidence. These include the acquisition of skills, a sense of belonging and of being understood, as well as pride in contributing to society and a familiarity with how to perform everyday activities. Many of these are being addressed by

the MRC so that those coming to the centre develop a sense of self worth, which enables them to seek suitable work and play a full part in society. Benjamin spoke of a great improvement since coming to the centre. 'Day after day, month after month, I am more confident than I used to be.'

As well as the acquisition of key skills such as being able to speak English, for many just knowing that the MRC was there to support them helped their confidence and enabled them to be more proactive. Behruz said, 'Whenever I am a little bit nervous or anxious about something I remember that I can go to MRC and I can ask for help. It makes me confident and gives me motivation to do things and to help myself.' Similarly, Kingsley felt that the support he had received had helped him to keep going. 'There was a time when I felt very low and depressed. The MRC has provided me with that sort of support and confidence. There was always someone available to talk about my problems.'

However, building confidence is a process and for many the lack of paid employment remains a key stumbling block. For Pablo, this remains the central problem. 'My first focus is to get back my job and the rest doesn't matter, even stress, or being anxious.'

### **Valentina case study**

Valentina, 33, is from Colombia and lived in Spain for a while, before coming to the UK with her Spanish husband two and a half years ago, after they both lost their jobs. She studied administration in Colombia and started a PhD in business while she was in Spain, but was unable to finish it. Her husband found work as soon as he arrived in the UK, but they didn't have enough money to rent a flat straight away and lived in a hostel for a while, which Valentina found hard. She couldn't find employment initially because the visa office kept her passport for seven months and she was unable to work without it.

Valentina was encouraged to come to the MRC by her husband and started taking English classes. She has had help with her CV and job search skills and has attended a variety of classes and workshops in subjects such as computer skills, community interpreting, creative writing and first aid. The MRC found her a voluntary job as an admin assistant for a charity for four months. The centre was able to write her a reference, without which she couldn't have taken up a voluntary position.

When Valentina struggled to find work, the MRC organized one-to-one sessions with a career coach which helped her decide to study medical administration at Lambeth college, which she has just completed. They also helped her find work-experience in the NHS so that she could improve her chances of finding a suitable job. She hasn't managed to find work as an NHS administrator yet, but is still looking. She currently has a casual job as a cleaner in a gym.

Valentina thinks the centre is different from other places because the staff really listen to her, rather than simply filling in forms. The fact that many of the staff are also migrants made her realize that if they have succeeded, then so can she. She now volunteers at the centre to help people who have had a similar experience.

## **Tailor-made services**

While the centre offers a wide-range of time-tabled classes and regular advice services, a number of respondents referred to assistance they had been given which was tailored to their needs. More than half of those included in the study made reference to the MRC going out of their way to bring in outside professionals or offer one-to-one tuition or support from staff or volunteers at the centre. These included mentoring from within the individual's chosen industry, one-to-one appointments with a psychologist, one-to-one career counseling, drama therapy and the creation of volunteer positions geared towards an individual's skills. For example, when one of the students in his class was struggling, Kingsley taught him English on a one-to-one basis for 6 months so that he could catch up.

The centre has established relationships with individual counselors and life coaches who are prepared to offer their services for free, as well as well as forming partnerships with other organizations and individuals. Gabriela was offered monthly sessions with a psychologist for a year, in order to help with her bi-polar disorder. 'It was good because I spoke about things, because sometimes memories are not good for me.' Meanwhile Pablo found that having a mentor who spoke his language and was from his industry was invaluable. 'I found this one contact through MRC. An engineer from Mexico. He speaks the same language. He improved my CV, refreshed it and gave a new view.'

This attention to individual need is highly valued by the centre's users who feel that they are being taken seriously and, as a result, are receiving professional advice and training. In addition, many felt that staff and volunteers at the centre went the extra mile and really cared about them. Valentina explained how this personal approach had helped her at a difficult time. 'In March I felt very down. I said, "I can't speak English again, I don't know why." And my keyworker started talking with me after 6pm in Café Nero and started some language exchange. I tried to teach her to speak Spanish but in the end she spoke with me in English [...] It was very nice. It was for one month. Now we are more like friends.'

## **Levels of contact**

As well as providing a menu of regular activities, which users of the centre are made aware of via a printed timetable and the website, the MRC also keeps in regular contact via phone or email with current and former users. This may be information about one-off events, special activities, job and volunteer opportunities and other outings or offers. It may also be personal contact congratulating individuals on their success. Although a simple enough gesture, this keeping in touch was highly valued by many of those interviewed for a number of reasons. It contributes to the feeling of self-worth (an individual merits a phone call) and sense of belonging to a community or network. As Pablo said, 'It is very important, a phone call sometimes.'

This contact serves as a way of keeping in touch with vulnerable users who may have missed regular classes due to depression or anxiety, but are encouraged to try something new or to attend a social gathering. It is also valuable in drawing in those who are busy and have perhaps moved beyond the regular menu of classes, but are interested in one-off training or special events. This is an important element of outreach for a centre whose users may fluctuate in the amount of time they spend at the centre but like to feel connected to its community. Valentina agrees, saying 'sometimes for two months I don't come here, or maybe every day I'm here. It depends if I have work or if I feel alone.'

Stephanie summed up the importance and uniqueness of the centre's role, which has gone beyond that of service provider and has become central to many people's lives: 'They have a very



good outreach, keeping up with people. I feel like MRC is almost like an institution in the community. Nobody goes to the library just once, or the bank just once. You come because they are providing a service that has become an integral part of your life. It's like one of the pillars of the community... There is a very strong continuity aspect. It's very dynamic. The variety is very good.'

## **Suggestions for improvement**

Most suggestions for improvement were based on the need for more resources – more classes, new computers, a bigger building, even more MRC centres in other areas. As these factors are dependent on funding, most are issues that the centre would be unable to act upon without increased financial support.

- Increase appointments with personal advisor from three to five times a year.
- Music or choir workshops.
- More IT teachers or smaller IT classes.
- More branches of the MRC in other locations.
- Advertise the centre more widely (in job centres, near the tube station)
- More English classes throughout the week (so that beginners could attend four times rather than twice a week).
- Increase open access to computers to three or four hours per session
- Invite guest speakers from specific industries (such as teaching, engineering, banking) explaining pathways for highly-skilled migrants
- More up-to-date computers
- Increase links with employers to help facilitate employment of migrants
- A bigger building with more rooms.

## **Recommendations**

The range of classes offered by MRC is often dependent on volunteers being available to deliver them. So, for example, respondents talked of classes such as dance and Italian, which are no longer available but had been enjoyed. This lack of continuity is beyond the centre's control and could only be addressed with additional funding for more members of paid staff. The continual change in classes could also be seen as a benefit in that it keeps users returning to the centre to try new things.

The MRC's identification of highly-skilled migrants as a group with particular and often neglected needs is worth further investigation. While government agencies focus on highly-skilled migrants with ample resources who are able to transition seamlessly into careers in Britain, there are others who arrive here in less favourable circumstances who nonetheless have extensive skills and work experience. The failure to move them into paid employment is a wasted resource for the British economy, a cost to taxpayers and is detrimental to the wellbeing of the individuals concerned. The MRC's work with these migrants should be further resourced and developed.

The provision of tailor-made services, the wide-range of outside individuals and organizations prepared to offer their services for free and the transition of service users to a volunteering role were all practices which had obvious benefits and could be replicated in other similar settings.

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