**Crossing Borders - East, West, Southern Africa and Central Africa**

Success strategy: *Crossing Borders* is a cross-cultural distance learning scheme linking young African writers to experienced UK mentors and developing their work through email tutorials. We try to get them to hear, identify and develop their voices as writers. We operate in Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Southern Africa, Ghana and Cameroon. Over 100 African writers are enrolled, working in poetry, fiction and children’s literature with around 30 mentors drawn from a wider range of cultural backgrounds in the UK.

The website of the initiative is a kind of a crossroads on the information super-highway, which allows participants to do that uniquely human thing - talk. The website has also been developing long-term resources. The first step is a feature in which contemporary writers from varied cultural backgrounds discuss the genesis, technique and cultural context of a piece of their own creative work. Instead of a pedagogically narrow or orthodox approach to writing, mentors and project people create a flexible and heterogeneous resource reflecting a multiplicity of literary practice and cultural influence. The purpose is to publish further the work of participants themselves, creating a sense of celebratory exchange across Africa.

The programme operates in Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. This project draws on the creation of cross-cultural mentoring relationships using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to bridge geographical, digital and mental divides.

The cross-cultural developmental dialogue between Africa and the English-speaking world through writers from both horizons is supposed to stimulate the sharing of thinking, values and solutions facilitating mutual understanding and complementarity. This will has been implemented through dedicated online information technology facilities, which will open up shared
creative and cultural space. The emphasis is on building a new international community of writers, on new work for a new world.

**Target group:** Young African writers

**Partners:** The project is funded by the British Council in London, designed and managed by the Department of English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University and enabled by a network of British Council offices in Africa.

**Source:** The British Council website and the website of the activity

*Crossing Borders* is made possible by collaboration between the British Council, Lancaster University and a range of partners in Africa. Elsewhere in this section there is information about *How the scheme works*, the *Project history*, up-to-the-minute *News* about its progress, contact details and more information about *Who’s behind it?*

**GET INVOLVED**

If you are resident in one of the participating countries and are interested in applying for the scheme, please contact *Tara Duce* who will help with further details on the scheme or put you in touch with the relevant local British Council office.

Click on *British Council offices in Africa* for their contact details.

**About the Project**

Each writer on the scheme is linked to an experienced professional UK writer who gives close attention to their work through e-mail exchange. The programme consists of six tutorials over a nine-month period. At the end of the e-mail exchange a series of live writing workshops and public readings are delivered by visiting writers. Attention to the participant is personal and specific. Participants can direct their own learning through correspondence with their mentor. Reflection on the creative process is enabled and a portfolio of new writing is developed and revised. The writing journal, which collates the entire experience of the course, forms a resource that can be drawn upon in the context of new creative work.
The project is delivered in partnership with local British Council offices and is now operating in Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Zimbabwe, South Africa (including Botswana), Cameroon, Nigeria and Ghana, making it a truly pan-African initiative. Individual African participants are supported on a structured programme by a team of 25 mentors – all professional writers in a range of literary genres.

Based in the UK, but drawn from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, mentors are inducted and trained by experts at Lancaster University. Crossing Borders aims to break the isolation of young African writers, promoting writing development, library usage, cultural exchange and a greater knowledge of contemporary literature in English. It also aims to support writers in the UK who work as mentors on the scheme, enriching their literary and cultural experience.

For general enquires concerning Crossing Borders please contact Hannah or Tara accordingly. For country specific enquires please contact the appropriate in country co-ordinator below.

Crossing Borders is funded by the British Council in London, drawing upon the expertise and resources of the Department of Film and Literature. In each participating African country the British Council office provides induction in IT skills and acts as an electronic postbox for participants' work. Live workshops and readings are also hosted by these African Learning and Resource Centres.

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Crossing Borders is designed and led by Dr Graham Mort of the department of English and Creative Writing at Lancaster University. The university provides an office, personnel services, mentor induction and training, and other resources. Project manager, Tara Duce, oversees all administrative aspects of the project. A mentor co-ordinator, Sara Maitland, looks after tutorial provision.

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In February 2001, the British Council UK invited the writer and lecturer Dr Graham Mort to take part in a writing residency at the University of Makerere, Uganda. Graham Mort’s report on that residency and his analysis of the Ugandan literature infrastructure recorded a lack of educational access for young writers, a lack of publishing opportunities, limited access to contemporary literature in English and a desire for contact with other writers, especially in the UK.

Accordingly, a pilot distance learning scheme, Crossing Borders, was developed in 2001, linking Ugandan writers to a multi-cultural group of mentors in the UK, all of whom were professional writers and experienced writing workshop leaders. A framework for e-mail exchange was devised and guidelines written to enable the submission of work to mentors and facilitate their response. A series of live workshops was held at the end of the distance learning scheme, culminating in a public performance of new writing before an invited audience of Ugandan writers.

Feedback from mentors and participants showed that the pilot scheme had worked well and it was consolidated and expanded to include 18 participants in 2002. Results from this expanded pilot scheme were also overwhelmingly positive.

Consultation and writer’s visits began to show that similar restrictive conditions prevail in a number of other English-speaking African countries in which the British Council is active. The project was therefore significantly extended based on the successful pilot scheme in Uganda. In 2003/2004 the expanded scheme was re-launched in Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The project has a UK base at Lancaster University under the leadership of Graham Mort. As well as existing as a dynamic action-research project, Crossing Borders will become the subject of academic research at Lancaster, where the project archive will reside.

We have an expanded team of mentors to include around 25 writers, a project manager, Tara Duce, and a mentor co-ordinator, Sara Maitland, to provide a secure and efficient administrative framework.
The British Council UK have increased their core funding and assigned Hannah Henderson, from the Department of Film and Literature, as their UK Project Leader.

In April 2004, a new development was launched in Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon, with South Africa joining the scheme in June. East and Central Africa were also offered the scheme again in June 2004. Discussions and consultation about the long-term strategy of the scheme are now taking place between the management team and our partners in Africa.

**LITERATURE MATTERS ARTICLE**


**CROSS-CULTURAL DISTANCE LEARNING**

Graham Mort looks at the challenges faced in *Crossing Borders*.

**THE LANCASTER UNIVERSITY ALUMNI MAGAZINE**


**A DAY IN THE LIFE OF GRAHAM MORT**

In 2003 the poet Graham Mort was writer in residence at Makerere University in Uganda. Read a diary account of Graham Mort’s residency in Uganda, published in *Literature Matters*. 