

## **Progress report: *Megaphone* writer development scheme.**

Monday, 04 January 2016

### **Introduction**

Megaphone opened for applications on 10/10/2015 and closed on 24/12/2015; a total of seventy-five days. In this period the primary goal was to secure many, valid, high-quality applications to the scheme. A website ([www.megaphonewrite.com](http://www.megaphonewrite.com)) was created to act as a gateway for applicants, who were asked to submit a sample of writing and a letter of application via email. The scheme was promoted via Twitter (@MegaphoneWrite) and Facebook (Leila Rasheed's personal account). Press releases were sent to England-based local and national press, including specialist press for writing and ethnic minority interest groups. The scheme was also promoted to and via regional literature development agencies, university creative writing programmes, local and national libraries, [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com) writers groups, and other organisations and networks relevant to writers, such as The Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), and The National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE). The University of Warwick, my employer, issued a press release and secured coverage on The Voice Online. Coverage was achieved in, among others, The Voice, Asian Writer, Words and Pictures (the online magazine of British SCBWI), Spread The Word's website, and on local radio (BBC WM). I also presented the scheme at Writing West Midlands' Writers' Toolkit conference in Birmingham in November 2015. The website has had 2,321 visitors to date. The most visitors (197) were on December 8<sup>th</sup> 2015 which coincided with a blog post: <http://megaphonewrite.com/2015/12/08/blog-how-can-i-a-white-writer-include-more-diverse-characters-in-my-writing/comment-page-1/> .

Sixty-two valid applications were received. Three invalid applications were received. Given that this is a new scheme with a relatively demanding application process, which involves committing to a long-term course of work, I think sixty-two applications is a good result. The standard of applications was generally high and I decided there was no need to extend the deadline.

During this period £300 was very generously donated by an individual, Melissa Cox, which she wishes to cover the cost of fees for any one applicant who is in need.

In order to assess how successful I had been in promoting Megaphone, and to gain information to improve future projects, I set up an auto-reply to the Megaphone email account which asked applicants to complete a Survey Monkey questionnaire. This was completely anonymous and not linked to the applications at all. There were four questions, and applicants could skip any question. All questions were open; no multiple-choice was used. The four questions were:

**1) How would you describe your ethnicity?**

The purpose of this question was to discover if promotion was reaching a wide spread of minority ethnic groups, or if more needed to be done to reach all equally. An open question was used to enable people to describe themselves in ways that are meaningful to them.

**2) How did you hear about Megaphone?**

The purpose of this question was to find out if particular avenues of promotion were more effective than others, in order to determine where to focus in the future.

**3) Did you encounter any barriers when applying for Megaphone? If so how can we improve?**

**4) Please add any other comment or suggestion about Megaphone that you would like to.**

The purpose of questions 3) and 4) was to gather more information about how well Megaphone is meeting the needs of the people it is targeting, and find out if anything should to be done to address concerns or meet needs.

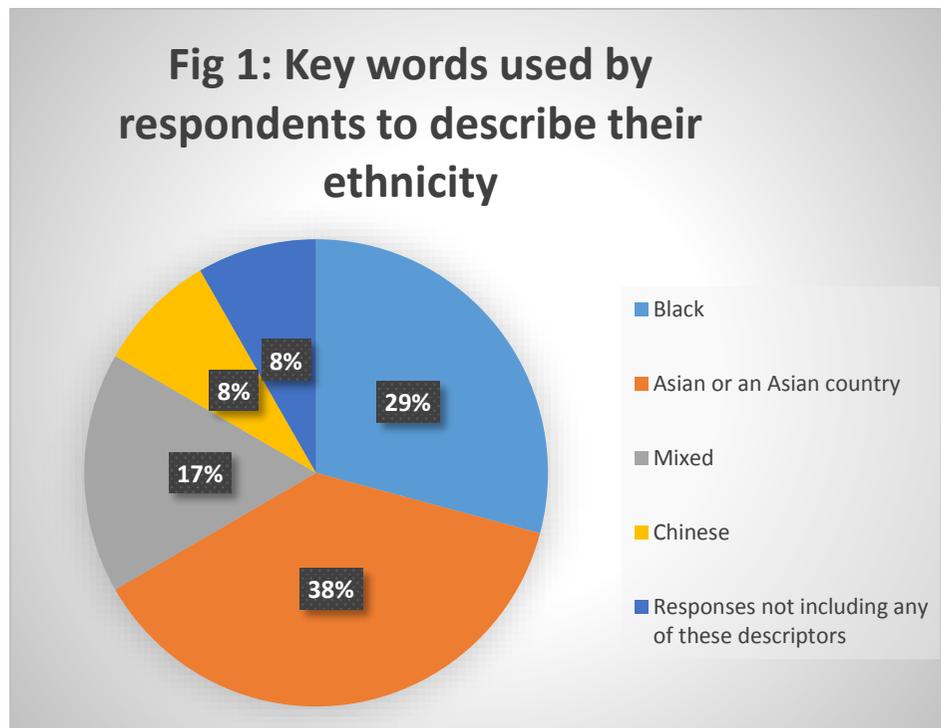
There were twenty-four responses to this survey. The responses are recorded and analysed below. I have drawn some observations from this data; these are at the end of the document.

**Data from the Survey Monkey questionnaire****Question 1: How would you describe your ethnicity?****Table 1: Actual responses (24/ 24)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>No. of people giving this response</b>
British Asian	4
Asian other	1
Sri Lankan	1
Mixed / mixed race	3
Pakistani	1
Black British	3
Black AfroBritish	1
British Pakistani	1
Indian	1
Black British (Jamaican) and White British (English)	1
Black	1
Black Caribbean	1
Irish	1
Chinese	2
British Muslim	1
Black African Briton	1
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>24</b>

**Table 2 (Fig. 1): Which ethnic groups applied?**

Key words used by respondents to describe their ethnicities	No. of respondents using this descriptor
Black	7
Asian (or an Asian country)	9
Mixed	4
Chinese	2
Responses not including any of these descriptors	2
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>24</b>

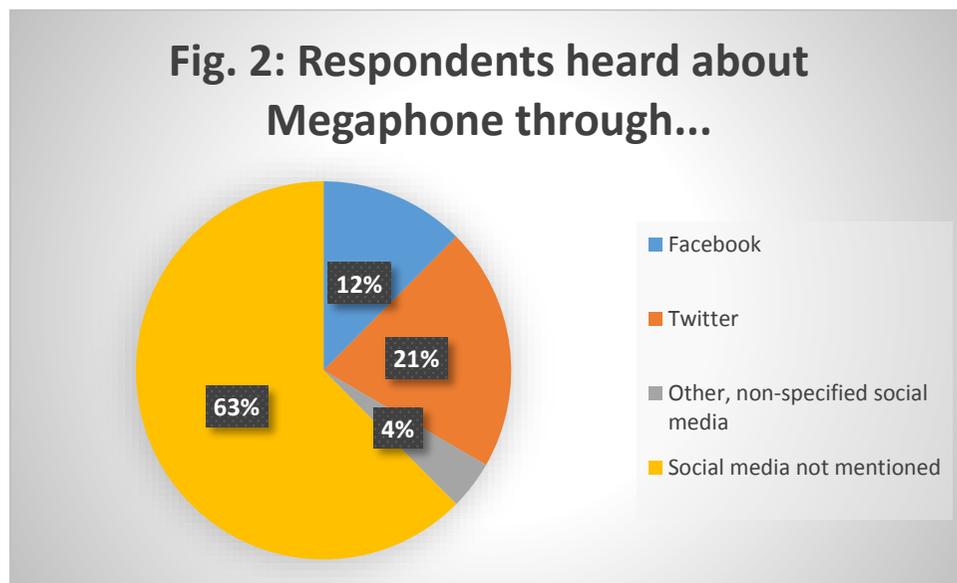


**Question 2: How did you hear about Megaphone?****Table 3: Actual responses (24/ 24)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>No. of people giving this response</b>
Through Leila Rasheed.	1
Through writing west midlands	1
Facebook page of SCBWI BI	1
I was sent a link by a friend who thought I might like to apply.	1
Through a writing group	1
At the Writers Toolkit Day, Birmingham University, 2015	2
Courttia Newland	1
Google search and browsing through Writing West Midlands opportunities.	1
My writer's group posted it to our Facebook group.	1
A friend who works in minority rights	1
Internet search.	1
Through Scbwi	1
Twitter	4
Warwick University E-Newsletter	1
WGGB Newsletter	1
Through Asian Writer's twitter scheme	1
Facebook	1
Social Media	1
NAWE	1
through a tutor at City Lit. London.	1
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>24</b>

**Table 4 (Fig. 2): Was social media effective in getting the word out about Megaphone?**

Social media mentioned	No. of people giving this response
Heard about it through Facebook	3
Heard about it through Twitter	5
Heard about it through Other, non-specified social media	1
Social media not mentioned	15
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>24</b>



**Question 3: Did you encounter any barriers when applying for Megaphone? If so how can we improve?**

**Table 5: Actual responses (22/ 24)**

<b>Response</b>	<b>No. of people giving this response</b>
No barriers/ none found	22
<b>Total responses</b>	<b>22</b>

Additional comments included in this section:

“Everything was straight forward and clearly explained. The only thing I would say is to clearly state the deadline, such as (24.12.15 23:59) to avoid deadline panic!”

“No, the application process was made very accessible, but I wouldn't have heard about the scheme if a friend hadn't sent it on.”

“It was all very straightforward but more could be done to get the word out - great scheme, more people should know about it!”

## Question 4: Please add any other comment or suggestion about Megaphone that you would like to.

### Actual responses (15/ 24)

“It would be great if (a) more places were available and (b) the programme ran every year. It's a fantastic opportunity for the 5 people who will be selected and it would be wonderful to have the support and advice of people who are experts in the field.”

“I'm very pleased about this initiative, and I hope it goes from strength to strength.”

“I think this is a great idea but I would not have heard about it had I not gone to Writers Toolkit day. Perhaps have more publicity?”

“Thank you for your work.”

“Perhaps increase advertising through various websites so more people are aware of the opportunity e.g BBC Writersroom etc.”

“None. It's a fantastic initiative!”

“Really pleased to see all of the effort Leila is putting in to help BAME writers. It is just what is needed. Thank you! The website, application details and information are very clear and easy to follow. The editors, agents and authors supporting the scheme are very impressive. I hope I get a chance to work with them.”

“This scheme is brilliant, just hearing about it game me so much hope.”

“No suggestions. The application process was simple and clear to understand.”

“Thank you for setting this up. It wasn't until I was looking to write my own novel that I realised how hard it was for a black women like me to break into the worlds of writing and publishing.”

“Thank you for putting this together”

“A great scheme that is much needed in the UK and it's going to change lives of readers and of the writers involved.”

“I was glad to see someone looking out for us after so many rejections after reading about discrimination in publishing.”

## Observations

This is a small survey, but some thoughts follow:

- There were applications from all the main non-white ethnic minority groups.
- Although the majority of respondents did not mention social media, I suspect they probably did in fact hear about Megaphone this way. For example, ‘Courtia Newland’ is an author who has an active Facebook account where he flags up opportunities for Black writers, so this response is likely to refer to that.
- Equally, most people probably heard about Megaphone online. For example, ‘NAWE’ is likely to be The Writers' Compass, e-newsletter of The National Association of Writers in Education, which carried a notice about Megaphone.

- With hindsight it would have been useful to have multiple choice for question 2, and to allow respondents to indicate if they heard about the scheme in multiple places. If the scheme runs again I will improve the design of this question.
- Respondents (sub-section of people who knew about the scheme and applied) did not experience any barriers to their application.
- The application process was clear and easy to negotiate, for those who knew about it and applied and responded to the survey.
- The scheme has a very positive response from those who know about it and applied and responded to the survey. Respondents perceive a strong need for the scheme and value it highly.
- Respondents think there should be more publicity and promotion of Megaphone.
- One respondent thought there should be more places available.
- One respondent suggested publishing a time-specific deadline.
- It would have been useful to know the geographical distribution of respondents (are we reaching widely across England?) Should the scheme run again this question can be incorporated into the survey.
- It would have been useful to have a separate survey for those who knew about the scheme but did not apply (why did they not apply? Did they face any barriers?). A separate survey can be conducted later in the year to try to reach this group.

Finally, I was interested to find that by far the largest number of query emails I received were from writers asking if they were eligible on the basis of ethnicity. Some of these were white but not originally from the UK, others were from complex mixed backgrounds. The boundaries between ethnicity, culture, race, nationality and even religion appeared frequently hard to negotiate, which is understandable given that no absolutely clear definition of ethnicity exists. In the case of complex queries I directed writers back to the goals of the scheme, as published on the website, and suggested that if they felt inclined they could explain the reasons why they felt the scheme was suited to them, in their letter of application. I felt it was important to keep the focus on the ultimate goals of the scheme, to stress applicants' responsibility to self-define their ethnicity, and to take a position of inclusion rather than exclusion. I have therefore not refused to accept any applications, nor have I invalidated any applications received, on the basis of ethnicity.

I believe Megaphone is off to a very positive start and look forward to delivering it in 2016. Your comments, questions, suggestions and recommendations on any aspect of Megaphone, whether you applied or not, are very welcome. Please email me on [megaphone.write@gmail.com](mailto:megaphone.write@gmail.com)

Leila Rasheed