

WORK by an Edge Hill academic investigating the use of the Somali language in Liverpool has received a major boost.

Dr Jo Arthur, lecturer in English language, has been awarded a fellowship by the Leverhulme Trust which will allow her to extend her research into the city's Somali community.

Although no official figures are available, there are believed to be between 4,000 and 5,000 Somalis living in Liverpool, with many more in other urban communities nationwide. Many fled their homeland to escape civil war.

Jo has been working for several years on a project investigating the value placed on the Somali language by members of the community, and the extent to which young people are giving it up in favour of English.

The fellowship will allow Jo to concentrate on the research for a whole year. She intends to widen the project to study how Somali communities in other British cities use the language and to look at any community schooling available to help youngsters learn Somali. She will also be investigating the role of Somali language sites on the internet in maintaining contact between communities internationally.

Jo's interest in Africa developed because she used to live in Botswana. When looking for a research topic based around bilingualism, she realised that it would be fascinating to work with the Somali community in Liverpool, where she lives now.

She said: "The Somali language has a rich oral tradition but no official decision on how it should be written was taken until 1972, when a Latin script was adopted by the Government. Many young Somalis in Liverpool are moving over to English, although their elders still speak Somali.

"At its broadest the research is about that generation gap within the community and about how the young people are creating a British-Somali identity."

Although Jo has the academic aim, over the longer term, of producing a book about her research, she is keen that the project should have positive, practical benefits for the Somali residents of Liverpool.

As part of her research, she helped to establish a 10-week course in Somali literacy for young girls, taught by her research associates Ahmed Aideed and Samsam Saleh. This pilot course was a great success, and it is hoped more courses will be run in the future.



LEARNING IDENTITY

Jo said: "The course raised the girls' awareness of the importance of the Somali language for them. Now we want to publicise the effects of the course across the community and raise discussion around whether the community feels that young people are losing the Somali language, whether that matters, and what can be done about it if it does."

Jo's involvement has been warmly welcomed by the Somali community. Ahmed Aideed said: "It is a privilege to have Jo working with us. One problem facing the Somali community is that most of the older generation, who came to the UK to work, often as seamen, never had any formal education.

"As a result the community still needs to build up the knowledge and expertise to guide itself towards development. It will be useful to have links with an educational institution such as Edge Hill.

"Also, because of political problems in Somalia, there is very little material relating to Somali society and language in libraries. This project will allow us to develop this kind of material. It is very encouraging to find people like Jo from the academic world coming into our community."

Jo said: "It can be hard for minority communities to get their voices heard and their needs met. The Somali community has known a lot of hardship, as victims of conflict in Somalia and now as refugees in Britain.

"The positive focus of this research – on bilingualism as a community resource – is very important. Collaboration with community members is also an essential part of the project.

"I am very grateful for the support I've been given by Ahmed, Samsam and many other members of the community."