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# Conference Report

## The 4th Forced Migration Postgraduate Student Conference: Refugees: Questions of Inclusion and Exclusion

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The University of East London (UEL) in the United Kingdom hosted the 4th Forced Migration Postgraduate Student Conference on 18–19th March 2006. The event is part of a series of initiatives started in 2003, when a number of British institutions came together to provide a forum for the growing number of postgraduate researchers conducting research in the field of forced migration. In recent years, more and more universities have developed forced migration programmes and have come on board with the conference planning. The first annual Forced Migration Student Conference was held at Oxford University in 2003, and was followed with conferences at Warwick University in 2004 and at Oxford Brookes University in 2005. The conferences – which are organised by postgraduates for postgraduates – attract more than 100 delegates each year, mostly from the United Kingdom and Europe. As well as providing researchers with a supportive and relaxed environment in which to present their work, they have proved an invaluable opportunity to network and debate the ethics of research into forced migration.

The theme of the 4th annual conference hosted by the Refugee Research Centre at UEL was Refugees: Questions of Inclusion and Exclusion. The two-day conference was attended by more than 130 delegates from academic institutions in the United Kingdom, Europe and beyond, including Brazil, Canada, Egypt and South Africa, and received an impressive array of papers grouped under specific sub-themes.

The opening plenary established the context by considering to what extent we had entered an era of restriction for refugees. Evidence was offered to support this proposition during presentations on camps, interdiction and detention of asylum seekers in Australia, Canada and the European Union. The legality of processing applications for asylum and refugee status in third countries was also questioned. The closing plenary

offered something of a refugee response by examining in some detail the broader implications of recent Sudanese refugee demonstrations in Cairo.

In between the two plenaries, a series of parallel panels explored specific sub-themes in more detail, including a debate about the state control of refugees arising out of the ‘war on terror’ and the emergence of the ‘security state’, different types of state power and the surveillance and social exclusion of refugees in the UK. In particular, the conference was concerned with the treatment of young refugees and their transition to independent living in receiving countries, as well as state responsibility for the forcible return of separated asylum-seeking children. Integration of refugees into receiving countries was, therefore, seen as a crucial issue, and was explored in presentations covering Finland, Italy and Lithuania. Later, specialist panels were devoted to inclusive education for refugee children and the wider question of access to health care, including the myth of ‘treatment tourism’.

This was all set against a wider consideration of maintaining and developing identity in refugee and exile situations, a key issue given an international setting with contributions covering Greece, Ireland and South Africa, together with Turkish and Greek Cypriots in Britain. The converse, the ‘construction of the refugee’, was given a lively airing in a panel which explored ‘imagined’ refugees through photographs, poetic testimony and the role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in the ‘social construction’ of refugees. Seeking to explore the place of non-governmental organisations in the context of state responsibility, the conference considered their role in preventing domestic abuse of refugee women in Canada as well as the sensitivities of researching enclosed camps at the Thai-Burma border. Closer to home was a discussion about the role of non-governmental organisations in confronting the trafficking of people into

the United Kingdom. This also raised the question of the role of churches in providing shelter, a focus which was covered in another paper on their engagement with people seeking asylum in the United Kingdom, all of which was complemented by the more general question of whether there had been an adequate response, both in international law and by all State Parties to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, for example on North Korean refugees. The papers delivered at the conference led to lively and constructive discussions and most can be found on the conference website at [www.uel.ac.uk/ssmcs/research/fmsc/programme.htm](http://www.uel.ac.uk/ssmcs/research/fmsc/programme.htm).

As well as providing a platform for postgraduate papers, the conference hosted a plenary round table with guest speakers Azim el Hassan (research consultant and board member of Asylum Aid, Exile, and the Sudan Research Group), Neil Gerrard (Member of Parliament and Chair of the UK Parliament's All Party Group on Refugees) and Maja Korac (Reader at UEL) on the interface between research and policy, linking refugee communities, researchers and policy makers. Delegates also had the opportunity to view and discuss with Director Danielle Smith her film about Saharawi refugees in camps *The Beat of Distant Hearts*, and throughout the conference participants enjoyed viewing photographic

exhibitions by the acclaimed Czech photographer Liba Taylor, by John Nassari of UEL and by refugees and asylum seekers involved in the Refugee Housing Association project. Evening entertainment was provided by a Kurdish buffet dinner, accompanied by music from The Andean Band.

In conclusion, this successful conference reflected serious concerns about the general treatment of and the attitudes of states and their communities towards refugees. As Phil Marfleet, Director of the Refugee Research Centre, reflected in his welcoming remarks, whereas a generation ago refugees fleeing oppression and conflict might have been offered sanctuary, following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990 most were being refused protection on principle, and states remained increasingly inclined to reject them as a first response (see also Philip Marfleet's book, *Refugees in a Global Era*, published in Basingstoke in 2006 by Palgrave Macmillan). The conference provided an important forum for highlighting and sharing recent and new research on these contemporary developments. It was the recommendation of both organisers and delegates that there should be a 2007 conference. Any views and suggestions from readers can be sent to Mike Mecham at [fmsc2006@ntlworld.com](mailto:fmsc2006@ntlworld.com).