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Title of abstract: Promoting Diversity and Enhancing Learning Opportunities for Refugee Students in Postgraduate Education

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Context

The refugee phenomenon has become an issue of world importance, affecting vast numbers of peoples who find themselves victims of displacement and exclusion. The MA and Postgraduate Diploma in Refugee Studies was set up in 1996 at the University of East London as a joint inter-school initiative (Social Sciences, Law and Cultural Studies) to investigate the causes of forced migration, the ethical and legal issues involved, the impact upon individuals and refugee communities, and the implications for the wider society.

The Refugee Studies Programme is unique for its refugee-centred approach in curriculum development, service delivery, and composition of its student cohort. The Programme is interdisciplinary, embracing insights from politics, international relations, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and cultural and legal theory. The Diploma is conferred upon completion of four modules (not the Dissertation) while award of the MA Degree requires successful completion of five modules as follows: two core modules (Introduction to Forced Migration and Research methods), a choice of two options (to be chosen among Migration, Citizenship and Social Policy, Psycho-social Perspectives on Forced Migration, Human Rights, Cultures of Exile, International Refugee Law, Gender and Forced Migration, and Current Issues in Forced Migration) and a Dissertation project on a subject of choice. Refugee Studies seeks to develop general conceptual and critical abilities, and enhanced study and research skills. It prepares students for employment in areas related to refugee needs, notably in the fields of immigration and asylum law, advocacy, social and community development, counselling and welfare. It also aims to develop skills appropriate for further academic research in migration, diasporic and ethnic studies, legal studies, and in social, political, psycho-social and cultural theory.

The Programme attracts students of diverse origins and experiences, including a significant percentage of refugees and students from ethnic minority backgrounds; it brings together academics and others who work professionally in the refugee field, including teachers, counsellors, welfare workers, legal advisers, and community workers. A distinguishing feature of

the programme is its emphasis upon the lived experiences of refugees and of refugee communities.

Issues

In looking at anecdotal evidence over the years the Programme has been offered, it seemed as though refugee students were struggling with the academic demands of the course and, on average, seemed to perform less well than non-refugee students. This observation prompted us to apply for Quality in Learning and Teaching (QILT) funds in 2004 to conduct a participatory action-oriented project to understand issues related to diversity in curriculum, service delivery and overall learning experiences, and then implement a plan of action, for which additional QILT funding was obtained in 2005. This presentation outlines these two participatory inter-school case studies aimed at incorporating refugee voices and concerns into our teaching practice. The findings of the QILT projects are meant to benefit the Refugee Studies Programme and other Programmes. They have the potential to enhance the equality and diversity initiatives of any University which has a large proportion of students from minority and ethnic backgrounds, and whose explicit mission statement is to achieve inclusion and diversity.

In 2004, a project team made up of current members of the MA Refugee Studies course team and three former students conducted a systematic investigation to:

- compare the performance of refugee and non-refugee students on the course
- identify the factors that the course team might build on to support the Refugee Studies course in recruitment and retention of these students
- develop tools for dissemination of our findings to share with other staff concerned about retaining refugee students, as well as educators in general.

We adopted an integrated approach to teaching and learning whereby curriculum development is part of our commitment to equality and diversity in overall learning and teaching praxis, which is characterised by a refugee centred perspective in all aspects of our programme.

The main findings of the investigation into the learning needs and experiences of refugee students (as compared to those of non-refugee students) highlighted the strengths of the programme and also the barriers that undermined their learning experience. The findings indicated that all of our students were highly motivated to enrol in the course and liked its specificity, its refugee-centred approach and its link with communities. They also valued the opportunity to network with fellow students on the programme and the strong sense of shared purpose. However, there was a divergence of expectations as to the academic requirements of a programme at postgraduate level, whereby refugee students who had received their degrees outside the UK and often many years prior to their enrolment were at a disadvantage compared to non-refugee students who tended to be younger and educated in the UK. Refugee students often had very important

contributions to make, but were hampered by their unfamiliarity with UK academic conventions and complications in their personal lives, and required considerable administrative, social and pastoral support. In the last two years, as a result of the participatory action research, we have implemented a number of activities aimed at improving equality and enhancing diversity both in terms of curriculum innovation and service delivery.

Managing the issues

Programmatic developments were designed to address several of the most pressing concerns of refugee students. These activities included academic and research support, internship and funding opportunities, the introduction of information technology, and recently an on-line forum for current and former students. In all of these activities, we have engaged in a continuous dialogue with our students in the form of module evaluations, programme committee meetings, and the specific QILT-funded research projects.

Academic and research support

The action-oriented QILT project showed that strengths of the course were the fact that lectures were given in the evening, which made it convenient for those students who were working, and in terms of course content, in that the academic material foregrounds the refugee experience. Language was not acknowledged to lead to significant problems, and was not as significant a factor as the lack of experience of the UK educational system, which presented serious issues for some students.

As a result of this information, an academic support module, delivered in the evenings, was made accessible to all students and those whose academic degrees were obtained abroad or long time ago were encouraged to attend it. Some form of mentoring or pairing was also suggested to help new students and refugees who had their previous education elsewhere cope with academic standards. Peer groups were set up in the Introduction to Forced Migration Module so that students could work together and support one another.

While most of the modules had a refugee focus, over the last two years we have restructured our Research Methods module from general social science methods training to a refugee-specific module. This restructuring has two components: the framing of research methodology as it applies to research with refugees and other forced migrants (accounting for the vulnerability of illegal migrants, working with hidden populations, gaining trust, and considering the psycho-social needs of refugee participants); and the shift in emphasis from general research methodology in lecture content and readings to highlighting methodological issues that relate to forced migration research, therefore incorporating refugee issues into social science research.

Internship and funding opportunities

The commitment of the Refugee Studies Programme to incorporating refugees and other representatives of disadvantaged groups is made more

challenging by the cost of postgraduate education. Cost of enrolment has been particularly problematic for refugee candidates. Our QILT findings indicated that financial concerns were a major obstacle for enrolling and staying in the course: most refugee students relied on financial support from family members, charity organisations and in some instances their employers.

Aware of this constraint, we adopted a two-pronged initiative to make funding available to our prospective students. We encouraged suitable candidates to apply for a competitive tuition waiver sponsored by the School of Social Science, Media and Cultural Studies at UEL; and we succeeded in raising funds for tuition waivers for asylum seeking and refugee home students with the trade union Unison. The Pauline Ortiz Memorial Fund for Refugee Scholars has enabled six refugee students to enrol in the MA in Refugee Studies in 2005 and 2006, and funding is currently being sought for the future.

Employability is another concern of our students, in particular refugees, who are at a disadvantage due to their non-UK based training and lack of access to standard career paths. The findings of the participatory action research indicated that internship schemes could become a way for students to have an opportunity to gain work experience in the field and place them in a more competitive position for jobs. To address this concern, we have set up an internship scheme in partnership with UEL's new Refugee Research Centre (RRC) and three non-governmental partner organisations. For some of these students, their internship experiences have been the basis for their academic work in the form of reflective essays and dissertations. For refugee students, their internships have the potential to provide access to mainstream employment through their contacts with agencies and hands-on experience. We have also tried to tailor the internships offered by the RRC to the diverse interests of student applicants.

Information technology

Many, if not most, of our students are new to information technology as a learning tool. The QILT project indicated a discrepancy between younger, UK-based students who were familiar with all of the benefits of IT and made high use of IT facilities, while others—primarily older students and those with educational backgrounds outside of Europe (including most of our refugee students)—reported that they did not make use of IT facilities at all. This significant disparity confirmed anecdotal evidence about accessibility issues and the need for bespoke basic training.

We decided to strengthen the use of IT both as a learning tool and as a networking tool, and access and training was enhanced in various ways. Induction sessions in the use of electronic resources and databases were introduced at the beginning of the Course for all students with the possibility of individual tutorials for those students unfamiliar with new Information Technology. WebCT was introduced to post lecture notes and to communicate with students for each Module, and an electronic WebCT information board was set up for general information about the Programme. The QILT findings showed that one of the crucial barriers to learning was access to academic resources. The introduction of electronic facilities which

allow for 24 hour access to library resources, especially electronic journals and databases, enabled working and evening students to pursue their studies with greater flexibility. Feedback from students shows an unintentional, but beneficial effect in the delivery of curriculum to all working students whose needs are different from full-time day students.

An on-line forum

Findings from the 2004-5 QILT project indicated that students saw a lack of interaction and networking opportunities as one of the downsides of attending an evening postgraduate course. The 2005-6 QILT project provided funding for an interactive website (www.refugeestudies.org), set up by a former student, where current and former Refugee Studies students are able to share ideas and information about research and academic issues, where they can ask advice and obtain peer support, and where they can find out about conferences, job opportunities and social events. This networking tool has great potential for placing the academic goals of the programme in a larger integrated context.

Reflections

Although we are committed to an innovative and integrated approach to incorporating diversity in our teaching practice, at times the five academic members of staff find that the particularities of supporting our diverse cohort of students competes with other demands on our time. We have also learned that there are different facets of diversity. Whereas initially we began our inquiry with the sense that refugee and non-refugee students had different requirements, expectations, and outcomes, upon reflection we now understand that our cohort is diverse in many other ways, both within the programme and across the university. In particular, age, educational background, and lived experience meant that we have had to acknowledge and accommodate different expectations about curriculum and academic goals. The QILT findings also indicate that working students enrolled in evening programmes have different needs that currently place them at a disadvantage compared to full-time day students. Finally, we have become more aware that diversity also means that postgraduate and undergraduate students have very different motivations, needs, and 'cultures' in terms of their education. For us, this raises questions in relation to promoting equality and diversity across the university.

A second reflection emerging from the QILT project and implementation of its recommendations is the importance of training to mature postgraduate students in the use of IT. This represents a major shift in learning practices for many of our students, who unlike today's undergraduates, did not receive IT skills training as part of their curriculum. In the rapid adoption of IT in learning and teaching in higher education, we find that the diverse abilities of students in mastering today's educational technology represent another type of challenge.

We have found that the participatory action research project funded by UEL's QILT initiative has focused our programme to come up with specific activities

building on anecdotal evidence to improve diversity in learning and teaching. We are now in a much better position to respond to the needs and lived experiences of our particular cohort of students. In the course of the implementation of the project, we have come to understand that diversity in learning and teaching has many meanings, not only limited to the particular experiences of refugee students but also other identities as working students, mature students, postgraduate students, and evening students. As such, the activities that followed from our QILT action research project accrued benefits for all of the students on the MA Refugee Studies programme.

Application of the model

Although our programme has used our refugee-centred approach to curriculum development and other aspects of learning and teaching as an example of enhancing diversity, two main applications of this model can potentially benefit others in their practice.

The first is the value of participatory action-oriented research in pursuing innovation in curriculum development and enhancing diversity at programme level and beyond.

The second potential application of our model is the consideration of an integrated approach to learning and teaching. While this approach involves collaborative effort and planning, it has proved valuable for our teaching and learning praxis. Through the participatory QILT research project, it became clear that diversity in curriculum is enhanced when it is part of a broad programmatic approach

Points for Discussion

- How does our case study inform debates on equality and diversity; conversely, how can our programme learn from current thinking on these issues?
- What is the relationship between incorporating diversity and the rapid introduction of IT?

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