



HEART - 'Higher Education Action for Rights Teaching'

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN UNIVERSITIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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A complete version of this report can be found on the Consortium webpage at www.humanrightsteaching.org



HIGHER EDUCATION ACTION FOR RIGHTS TEACHING

Introduction

'HEART' is an EU Tempus Funded project to develop courses and programmes in Human Rights at Universities in five countries in the Western Balkans in cooperation with four EU Universities.

The countries are: Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Germany, The Republic of Ireland, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

The project, led by the Crucible Centre for Human Rights Research at the University of Roehampton, United Kingdom, is uniquely focused on human rights education in Universities – aiming to integrate human rights across the academic curriculum in each University, as well as develop undergraduate and graduate programmes in human rights through which future generations of human rights educators in the region will emerge.

The programme is inspired by The United Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, unanimously adopted by the United Nations in December 2011 which explains that the teaching of human rights should be undertaken from three perspectives:

1. Teaching about human rights – giving students knowledge of human rights
2. Teaching for human rights – empowering students to protect their own rights and the rights of others
3. Teaching through human rights – a learning environment that respects the rights of students, staff and administrators

Members of the HEART project work together to embed human rights in accordance with the Declaration at the heart of higher education in the Western Balkans.

To find out more about the project contact Dr Michele Lamb, Heart Project Coordinator at the University of Roehampton at Michele.lamb@roehampton.ac.uk.

The Best Practice Guide to Human Rights Education in Universities in the Western Balkans has been developed collaboratively by members of the HEART Consortium:

PREAMBLE

At the heart of this project since its inception has been a commitment to establishing generalizable principles of best practice in human rights education and embedding these in diverse local contexts. This is no easy task, not least because the concept of 'best practice' is itself deeply problematic. In a recent commentary on how universities are increasingly becoming organizations characterized by an emphasis on employability and the transmission of market-oriented skills, the authors state:

Regulatory procedures dressed up as 'quality assurance' and standardized processes of teaching and learning championed as 'best practice' beg the very question that Habermas implies in his account of the colonization of the life-world: best for whom? How does one 'measure' the 'quality' that is being assured? The very construction of 'objective' centralized criteria is demonstrative of the Weberian 'iron cage'.¹

While the imposition of heavily centralized 'best practice' guidelines is not always welcome, for these very reasons, in an emerging and inter-disciplinary area such as human rights education, the establishment of a loose set of core recommendations can actually be of considerable use to those who wish to follow the example of others and establish courses in Human Rights. They can serve not as standardized criteria usable in a disciplinary way to measure 'success', but minimal benchmarks to which one can aspire. So, to respond to the question posed in the previous quote – best practice for whom? – the focus here is on best practice for the promotion and development of human rights education. In practice, this may or may not incorporate or overlap with that which is deemed best practice for a number of core stakeholders, not least students, universities, potential employers, NGOs, and even elites and governments, not to mention best practice for the promotion of human rights in a wider sense.

To facilitate this quest for such minimal benchmarks, the partnership was, at its inaugural meeting, asked to consider three founding questions: What do we mean by human rights education?; What do we mean by human rights?; What kind of pedagogy might human rights education involve? These questions address best practice in issues of curriculum, content and delivery respectively.

In seeking responses to each of these questions, the partners have understandably found ourselves negotiating a variety of other challenges. For instance, when engaging with the meaning of human rights education, one has to consider both the opportunities and challenges posed by inter-disciplinarity. Also, one has to consider whether best practice is achieved through the establishment of specific programmes in human rights or in the promotion of a set of values to be embedded across the curriculum.

Finding agreement on the meaning of human rights is even more problematic. Does the term refer to the language of freedom? Of equality? Of justice? Of respect? Or of something else? Does the language derive from global or universal standards, or must it be directed to meeting specific regional priorities? Should the emphasis be on the public realm of the state, or can it incorporate an engagement with non-state and private actors? Is its fundamental dynamic bound in state-citizen relations, or more broadly in social relations? In other words, what are these human rights about which we wish to educate?

Even if we are able to find basic agreement on these broadly philosophical questions, there is no guarantee that a consensus exists on how best to actually deliver this human rights education, on how best to embed these values within and across the curriculum. Much has been written on the use of emotions in education and in the case of human rights education, this is particularly significant. How might one best bring personal experiences into the teaching of human rights? And what role, if any, should civil society practitioner organizations such as human rights NGOs play in the education process?

It is with these questions in mind that partners were asked to consider how, if at all, we currently provide human rights education at our institutions, and where we might want to go now, i.e. what kind of human rights education do we want to develop? To help facilitate this discussion, partners were asked to try and address issues of current and future practice through an engagement with nine key points:

1. Content
2. Inter-disciplinarity
3. Student engagement
4. Employability and skills
5. Assessment
6. Resources
7. External Partnerships
8. Research
9. Legacy

This report will summarise the key points of the various responses to these questions, drawing on examples of current practice in teaching and learning about human rights and assessing some of the obstacles to achieving best practice in each of these nine areas.

The full report from which this Executive Summary is derived can be found on the project's website at www.humanrightsteaching.org

¹ Bond, C. and O'Byrne, D. (2013) 'If It Moves, Measure It: Taylor's Impact on UK Higher Education' in C. Evans and L. Holmes (eds) *Re-Tayloring Management* Basingstoke: Palgrave



'Focus on developing transferable skills and in particular critical thinking'

CONTENT

BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:

Be aware of the multiple uses and interpretations of the term 'human rights' and endeavour to dispel any misinterpretations of your usage by addressing this problem early on, ideally in such a way that enables you to work within rather than against these competing definitions. This applies to staff as much as to students. Even when working within a more established field, such as a course in human rights law, remember that a legal definition is only one such definition and that students will come across others which are no less (or more) legitimate. This need not require you (e.g. the law lecturer) to change your definition (because your definition fairly reflects the content of your course), merely to acknowledge that it is not absolute when engaging in the broader (i.e. legal and non-legal) debate on human rights. One way of doing this is to incorporate more engagement with the underlying theory of human rights into discussions, which is not synonymous with the philosophy of human rights. Meanwhile, to help promote some shared understanding among students on what to expect from a class in human rights, it may prove useful to begin with a student debate on what this term means to them.

INTER-DISCIPLINARITY

BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:

Discussing human rights solely from within the comfort zone of a particular discipline is not entirely helpful. However, multi-disciplinarity or inter-disciplinarity may not be the ideal solutions, if by those we mean just a class on this discipline and another class on that discipline. Finding common ground, particularly at the introductory level, is better, but not always easy to include within the constraints of the curriculum. It is also not reasonable to expect lecturers to simply incorporate some element of inter-disciplinarity. For it to be meaningful, beyond simply empty rhetoric, inter-disciplinarity needs to be backed up by resources, including perhaps training, additional staffing, or the provision of clear and understandable case studies which transcend disciplinary boundaries. By its very nature, inter-disciplinarity challenges orthodox practice in teaching and assessing, and so cannot be implemented on a modular level, or with the sudden wave of a magic wand. It requires planning at a more structural level – and so requires cross-University support.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:

Human rights education should, ideally, incorporate extra-curricular as well as curricular activities. To this end, co-operation between faculty and the students' union or council may be needed to enable a student-run society acting autonomously and organizing its own events, including campaigning work. This is important in part because by its very nature human rights education should be about integrating theory and practice. At the same time, within the formal curriculum, human rights education defies its own purpose if it is presented as a 'top-down' offering: the students themselves should be active stake-holders and participants in the decision-making process concerning the curriculum etc, and an active student society would be well placed to ensure that the student voice is represented on appropriate committees. This, of course, should be the case for all subjects but seems especially significant in the case of human rights education.

EMPLOYABILITY AND SKILLS

BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:

Human rights education is not, and should not be, vocational in the strict sense of the word (any more than, say, business studies is vocational); it is not training for specific careers, and offers no steps up a pre-agreed ladder. Instead, it should focus on developing transferable skills and in particular critical thinking to give graduates as good a chance as possible.

ASSESSMENT

BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:

All assessment forms should be directed by the aims and objectives of the course itself. Formal examinations or standard essays may not be appropriate in all cases (which is not to say they may not be perfectly appropriate in some cases). Innovative forms of assessment in human rights education should be student-focused and address actual concerns, enabling students to find solutions to real problems. There is much to gain from the adoption of self-, peer-, and group-assessments which will equip students for the rest of their careers with well-developed self-evaluation and self-appraisal skills. Such methods will help to strengthen a student's reflective process and encourage more self-direction in learning.

RESOURCES

BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:

At most universities, departments and courses are caught up in an internal marketplace when seeking centralised funding. In the current economic and policy climate, it is likely that human rights education will not be seen as a priority, making it imperative for appropriate departments to seek out external funding and establish their own, self-resourced Human Rights Centres. Those wishing to do this can learn much from the experiences of those partners which already host such Centres. However, crucially, key resources need to be available in English and the local language.

EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:

Partnerships with civil society organizations such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are an essential foundation for human rights education, which should never be just about the classroom and the library, the lecture and the book, but equally about real problems and how these are being addressed. For the partnership to work effectively, though, it has to be a two-way contract. Also, the involvement of NGOs in the delivery of human rights education should not be taken in an uncritical way, as an absolute good. It has to be appropriate in the context of the curriculum. Furthermore, partnerships with government agencies may be beneficial in a number of cases, but need to be delicately handled.

RESEARCH

BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:

Human rights education should go hand-in-hand with human rights research, as the two are intimately relational, and discussions over resourcing should take this into consideration within a more joined-up University-level approach.





‘Human rights education must be relevant, critical of orthodoxy, challenging in respect of established power structures, and be driven by its transformative capacities’

LEGACY

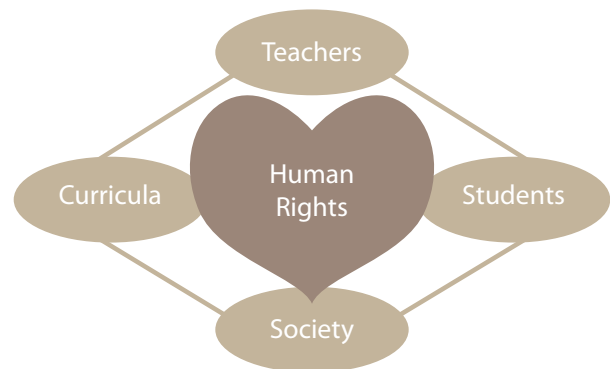
What, then, might be the lasting legacy of implementing human rights education across programmes and institutions?

Perhaps the best way to address the issue of legacy is to consider the transformative capacities of human rights education. This can be achieved in at least four ways:

1. Transforming students
2. Transforming teachers
3. Transforming curricula and the University itself
4. Transforming society

And perhaps, in addition to these, it is important to recognise that human rights education must itself be transformed, both by its transformative capacities already listed, and through its on-going engagement with the conditions in which it exists. If human rights education itself becomes dogmatic, it loses all its transformative power.

To conclude, a slightly modified version of a diagram submitted by the University of Kragujevac summarises this perfectly:



BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:

Human rights education must, above all, be socially relevant, critical of orthodoxy, challenging in respect of established power structures, and be driven by its transformative capacities. It must also be transformable. It cannot be simply another dogma. It must be responsive to the transformations it enables and to the conditions within which such transformations take place.

SUMMARY	
Key area	Summary of recommendations for best practice
Content	Open to multiple interpretations of human rights, not restricted to specific definitions
Inter-disciplinarity	Based on discussing common ground across the disciplines, rather than simply accepting intellectual pluralism
Student engagement	Student-focused, democratic and 'bottom-up', requiring extra-curricular student-led as well as formal curricular activities
Employability and skills	Focused on transferable skills and critical thinking rather than attempting to be purely vocational and market-driven
Assessment	Directed by the aims and objectives of the course, rather than by simple tradition, and should include innovative problem-solving
Resources	Concentrated ideally in dedicated resource centres and where possible locally-relevant and accessible
External partnerships	NGO and civil society links essential, but partnerships need to be mutually beneficial
Research	Relationally inter-linked to teaching, not juxtaposed with it, and addressed in a holistic way
Legacy	Transformative for students, teachers, curricula and the University, and society, and also for itself

WESTERN BALKANS UNIVERSITIES



European University
of Tirana
Tirana, Albania



Marin Barleti University
Tirana, Albania



University of Tirana
Tirana, Albania



University of Sarajevo
Sarajevo, Bosnia &
Herzegovina



University of Zenica
Zenica, Bosnia &
Herzegovina



University of Prishtina
Prishtina, Kosovo



University of Crna Gore
Podgorica, Montenegro



University of Donja Gorica
Podgorica, Montenegro



University of Belgrade
Belgrade, Serbia



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