HEART

Developing Human Rights at the Heart of Higher Education

SUMMARY OF REPORTS ON

BEST PRACTICE IN HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

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

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[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

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 seven key points:

(1) Content
(2) Inter-disciplinarity
(3) Student engagement
(4) Employability and skills
(5) Assessment
(6) Resources
(7) 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 seven areas. In addition to these seven invited areas, two other areas which impact upon the teaching of human rights will be discussed, namely, the issue of external partnerships, particularly with civil society organizations, and the question of the relationship between teaching and research, as both featured in some detail in the reports.

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.

INTER-DISCIPLINARITY

> ***BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:*** Discussing human rights solely from within the comfort zone of a particular discipline is not entirely helpful. However, *inter*-disciplinarity may not be the ideal solution, if by that 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 HRE.

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.

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.

EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

> **BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:** Partnerships with civil society organizations such as 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.

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.

LEGACY

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

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:

(i)   Transforming students
(ii)   Transforming teachers
(iii)   Transforming curricula and the University itself
(iv)   Transforming society

To conclude, a slightly modified version of a diagram submitted by the University of Kragujevac summarises this perfectly:
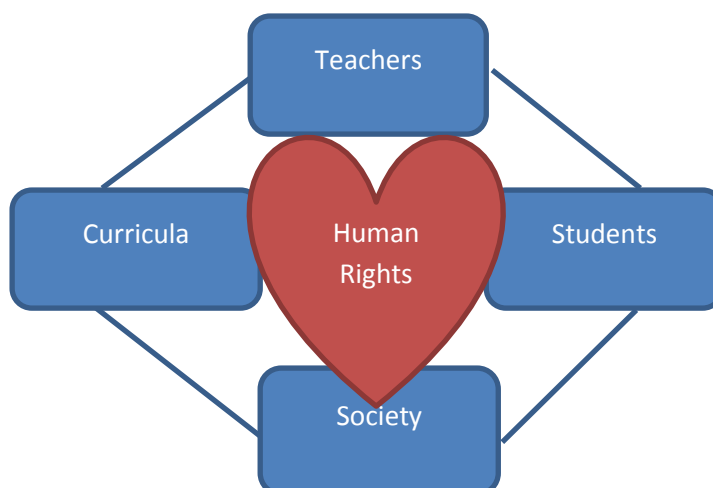
> **BENCHMARKS FOR BEST PRACTICE:** Human rights education must, above all, be socially relevant, critical of orthodoxy, challenging in respect of established power structures, and be driven by its transformative capacities.

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

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