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### **TEACHING CULTURAL COMPETENCE FOR CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK**

**Aim:** To outline an initiative for the development of cultural competence in the context of QUB Social Work programme and reflect on the outcomes and processes involved .

**Background and rationale:** Globalisation connects the world ever more intimately often resulting in the disparity, displacement and marginalization of certain groups of people (Jordan 2004). It is therefore necessary to educate social workers in the global dimensions of local professional practice and to foster the development of the generic attributes of critical awareness and culturally competence (NASW 2001). Cultural competence involves the development of critical knowledge, reflective skills and values that enable students, be self aware and non-judgemental (Weaver 1999). However, the teaching of cultural competence must address existing power relations including colonial and imperial structures, for the promotion of social justice (Haug 2005, Wehbi 2009).

**Cultural competency in social work education in Northern Ireland (NI):** NI is considered a post-conflict society recovering from a long history of deep, violence and traumatic sectarian divisions, which in turn shaped the nature of Ulster society and the role, scope and practice of social work in such a unique context (Campbell and Pinkerton 2002). Over the last 10 years the predominantly anglo-celtic profile of NI has undergone changes as it becomes a recipient country for migrants from Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa. While Queen's University Belfast (QUB), has made significant strides in introducing and addressing sectarianism in a sensitive and systematic manner within the social work curriculum, the broader concepts of cultural diversity and cultural competency have remained underdeveloped. This paper discusses the outcomes of a series of discrete activities designed for first year students to aid their development of cultural competence.

**The project:** A series of voluntary and compulsory activities were offered to first year students to facilitate their development of knowledge and skills relevant for cultural competence. These inputs included

1. A voluntary visit to a mosque with a presentation on Islam, followed by a de-briefing session
2. A voluntary participatory workshop session, exploring spirituality and difference
3. A voluntary visit to a Traveller and Roma project working with these communities in NI
4. Compulsory seminar on Social work practice with diverse ethnic groups which included half hour inputs on 4 topics, followed by a lunch discussion
  - i. Minority ethnic communities in NI by a member of an organisation who worked in NI Centre for Ethnic Minorities
  - ii. Working with minority ethnic communities in NI by a senior community organiser working with the Belfast Trust in NI
  - iii. Social Work Practice with Asylum Seekers in the Republic of Ireland by a social worker doing her PhD on the topic
  - iv. Family Group Conferencing as a culturally sensitive way of working with minority ethnic groups by a manager of an FGC project from London

Evaluation and feedback of students on their learning was sought after each input session to measure outcomes.

**Outcomes:** The outcomes revealed that prior to their involvement on the program social work students had limited knowledge of other cultures and what knowledge they did have was based on stereotypes and dominant media discourses. The input sessions enabled students to develop an insight as to the knowledge and skills required for cultural competence. However, it should be noted that due to the voluntary nature of most of the programmes, less than half of the students in the class attended one or more of these site visits and information sessions. In addition, it is unclear as to what extent students were able to develop a deeper and critical understanding through brief cultural excursions, presentations and voluntary exercises. We argue that there is an additional need to incorporate teaching about cultural competence from a critical perspective and to ensure that this learning is closely allied to student's agendas. One approach involves linking the cultural exposure with a form of academic assessment and embedding it across the teaching programme in ways that interlink and are incremental. Indeed, this can be challenging and requires considerable effort and structural changes (Daniel 2011). These exercises, nevertheless, can serve as important vehicles for further development of this agenda.

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