Name(s) and department(s) of applicant(s)
Dr Alex Gilder, Lecturer in Law (Law)
Dr Nicola Antoniou, Senior Lecturer in Law and Director/Supervising Solicitor, Legal Advice Centre (Law)
Dr Michelle Bentley, Reader in International Relations and Director, Centre for International Security (PIR)
Dr Daniela Lai, Lecturer in International Relations (PIR)

Our team also includes an external collaborator:
Dr Nasir Ali, Senior Lecturer and Director, Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Hargeisa (Somaliland)

Title of innovation:
International Collaborative Peer Learning: Constructing an Inclusive Online Learning Environment to Promote Social Responsibility

If your application is successful, would you like us to add your case study to the Teaching and Learning space?
Yes

Please describe how your teaching innovation is distinctive in one sentence:
Our project is a ground-breaking international learning collaboration between students based in the UK and the Horn of Africa to promote deep peer learning by creating an innovative legal advice website – one that has allowed students to make a real difference to human rights and peacebuilding in Africa as well as generating both stakeholder understanding and international partnerships.

Please describe how your teaching innovation has a specific focus on inclusivity in one sentence:
Our inclusivity-driven project has a) created a dynamic international learning collaboration between students at RHUL and the University of Hargeisa (Somaliland) where participants engage in deep peer learning with students from a different culture and educational experience, and b) created content on human rights/peacebuilding to directly help local people and civil organisations in Africa, as well as to promote a more inclusive and impactful understanding of Africa amongst UK stakeholders e.g. politicians.

Please describe and evaluate your collaborative teaching innovation (for example creative, novel, original) in any aspect of course design (teaching, learning, assessment) and include reference to inclusion and engagement.

Please write this so that it could be published unaltered on the Teaching and Learning space.

Students from RHUL and the University of Hargeisa (Somaliland) have produced a collaborative, highly innovative, research-led, legal advice website on human rights/conflict in Africa (webpage
examples included in the supporting documents). The website is now available at www.knowaboutpeace.com. It contains free and publicly accessible legal information on human rights and peacebuilding to directly assist local people and civil organisations (e.g. charities, support groups, and activists). The information is now helping people understand and identify abuse, get legal advice to address and challenge human rights violations, and explain/support peacebuilding measures to promote peace and a functioning civil society. The website has been circulated to charities, NGOs, community leaders, and government officials in Somaliland and has garnered a very positive response. The website has also been promoted to UK government stakeholders (e.g. politicians) as well as the UK’s ambassador to Somaliland, to help them develop a more effective and inclusive understanding of these critical issues in the region. As well as learning, therefore, this project also promoted strong student social responsibility – where this in turn plays back into a very deep and more beneficial learning experience.

Students have researched and written the website information, which includes explanations of key legal concepts, free advice, contextualised examples of human rights violations (to help people identify abuse when it happens), as well as explanatory guides to the role of communities in contributing to peace and the impact of civil society on peacebuilding. Each student has also written an original blog post on a related topic of their choice (examples in the supporting documents).

Students from all levels – UG and PG – at both institutions were invited to apply. The application form specifically did not ask for details of academic grades as we wanted the project to be as inclusive as possible and promote an expansive peer learning experience. The application form only asked the students to elaborate why they wanted to do the project and what they could contribute to team working.

Successful students were allocated to one of two teams: one on human rights and one analysing conflict in Africa. Teams consisted of students across both institutions equally to fully promote international collaboration and maximise the benefits of peer learning with students from a different country/culture.

Each team was fully supported by two academics – although teaching staff only provided supervision and students were strongly encouraged to take control of the project. Our teaching team heavily prioritised ‘student ownership’ as a constructive and valuable learning experience; as such, participants were deliberately trusted with significant responsibility for their own and their peers’ learning.

Collaboration took place online – which comprised a very effective learning experience in response to Covid-19. Students were fully trained in online collaboration, but – per the focus on student ownership – participants were strongly encouraged to work together however they wished using a range of online tools. This decision was in response to pedagogical scholarship that has already demonstrated the extensive learning benefits of allowing students to develop their own virtual learning communities as part of peer learning (Keppell et al 2006: 459-61), especially where independent collaborative online learning explicitly ‘encourages critical reflection and self-reflection’ (Altinay 2017). We also adopted an online approach because it promoted inclusion, including access to others in another country that students unable to travel would not otherwise be able to have.
Please describe and evaluate your teaching innovation (for example creative, novel, original) in any aspect of course design (teaching, learning, assessment) and include reference to inclusion and engagement.

Please write this in a form that can be published unaltered on the Teaching and Learning space.

We have now conducted an extensive assessment of the project based on:

1. Formal team reflective exercises by staff (conducted both during and after the project) informed by pedagogical literature;
2. An end-of-project student opinion study, based on an open-question survey and a focus group meeting with students;
3. Co-writing an article on the project for publication (currently under review; draft included in the supporting documents);
4. Speaking to stakeholders to gain feedback;
5. Sharing best practice as a critical exercise.

The project met its aims and improved student learning in the following key ways:

**Peer learning** dramatically improves academic achievement, social/communication skills, motivation for study (Topping 2005: 635), and psychological well-being (Hanson et al 2016) – the latter is especially important during Covid-19. Students reported that participating in a longer-term collaborative project than they experienced elsewhere in their degree, learning from peers with different cultural outlooks, and the focus/social interaction this project gave them during the pandemic, positively changed how they think about learning (to be more inclusive and open to alternative ways of learning), significantly improved their academic skillset (especially research and understanding/explaining complex concepts), and had a beneficial impact on their mental health.

**Student ownership** advances educational skills/achievement by encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning – and is especially beneficial in relation to group projects (Wood 2003) and peer learning (Boud et al 1999: 413-14; Galloway and Burns 2015), as relate to this project. Staff and students both independently report that having control over, and responsibility for, the website has significantly enhanced our students’ commitment to learning, both in terms of the project and their degree more widely. Staff observation identified an extensive upturn in student confidence and capacity for original/critical thinking.

**Enquiry/problem-based learning** strongly promotes learning achievement and engagement (Capon and Kuhn 2004; Summerlee and Murray 2010), successfully producing ‘independent learners with transferable skills’ (Deignan 2009: 19) through greater learner autonomy (Bramhall et al 2010). Students reported a greater capacity for comprehending/explaining complex ideas as well as developing the skills necessary to manage a significant project. In particular, students said they were excited by the way the blog posts gave them an opportunity to explore a specific topic of their choice, which they felt inspired them to develop deeper academic skills to complete it.

**International collaboration** vastly improves learning of global/intercultural issues and provides ‘an educational experience that extends the boundaries of learning beyond the campus’ (Klein and Solem 2008: 245). Working with peers from a different country also builds trust, which makes learning relationships with staff and peer learning more effective (Cronin et al. 2016). Students
reported that they deeply valued working with international peers – which they had not had the opportunity to do before – and that they benefitted from listening to alternate cultural interpretations and ways of learning. They further reported that the international friendships they developed encouraged them to invest in the project (and so gain learning benefits from it).

**Social responsibility** encourages students to want to develop their learning skills to a higher level, promotes academic integrity in learning, and boosts learning self-esteem (Reason et al. 2013: 18-20; Fonesca et al 2019). Our students were genuinely motivated to work with students in the Horn of Africa to protect human rights and improve stakeholder understanding of these important issues – and felt that working with peers who were directly affected by these issues gave them new insight into the importance of research in this area. The website has also had positive traction with stakeholders. One political stakeholder described the website as ‘a truly valuable resource and it is wonderful to see young people engaging in, and learning through, such a worthwhile project.’

We have proactively shared these benefits as good practice by writing an article for publication and presenting our project to staff in Law and PIR, not only to share practice but gain critical feedback. Importantly, the article will share ways in which teams can undertake international collaborative projects that provide opportunities for students with limited institutional funding. In the article, we also explain the lessons we have learnt for future projects and how we can continue collaboration with IPCS.

Please describe any help which you have received from professional support staff (e.g. Careers, CeDAS, Educational Development) in developing, implementing or evaluating your initiative.

The project has had amazing support from Greg Smith, Legal Assistant (Law). We would like to thank him for his incredible hard work in providing us and our students with administrative assistance.

References


