



## THREE UNIVERSITIES PARTNER TO DELIVER A COURSE ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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### 1. The Partnership

In 2011-2012, instructors from three universities — Carleton University in Ottawa, University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) in Tanzania and the University of Sierra Leone (USL), Freetown, Sierra Leone — collaborated to design and deliver a course on Gender Violence and Harassment in Higher Education. The course was designed for upper undergraduate students at Carleton and for graduate students at USL and UDSM and was delivered simultaneously by the three higher education institutions via the use of various information and communication technologies. Its aim was to allow students to explore gender violence and harassment in higher education settings through the comparative perspective offered by the participation of institutions located in three different countries. More specifically, its objectives were to provide an introduction to gender violence and harassment in higher education; to support student-directed action research on the topic, and to foster shared learning between students and faculty in Africa with students and faculty in Canada, using different kinds of media. This initiative was consistent with the respective priorities of the three partners involved.



Photo: Carleton University

### 2. Ways of Working

The instructors met in Canada two years prior to the inception of the partnership when the two African instructors were visiting researchers at Carleton University and the North-South Institute. During this visit, the instructors involved in the initiative had the opportunity



PARTICIPANTS, INCLUDING SOME OF THE INSTRUCTORS FROM CARLETON AND UNIVERSITY OF SIERRA LEONE, AT A RELATED WORKSHOP ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE HELD IN BUJUMBURA, BURUNDI, FEBRUARY 2013. Photo: Carleton University

to discuss possible areas of collaboration, agree on priority areas for teaching, build a common understanding of the goals to be pursued through the course and start identifying their first steps.

A collaborative work approach was used to develop and agree on the common core course content with the understanding that local adaptations would be undertaken in each location to ensure the relevance of the course for the students. One participant describes this collaborative process: “*The beauty of the collaboration lies in the equality amongst collaborators. Ideas were flagged back and forth, some accepted and others rejected. It was only after everyone had agreed to a final step that a specific action was chosen*”.

The partners utilized various web-based tools to support the implementation of the course activities: video-taping lectures that were then made available to the other universities, video conferencing and the use of an electronic blackboard to hold discussion groups and to post documents produced by the students, using Web CT. In particular, the video conferencing allowed students and instructors to see each other and greatly facilitated the exchange of ideas and the expressions of their different understandings and experiences of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. As one of the instructors mentioned, this way of working provided “*a comparative model in a natural way*”, referring to the fact that the students from the three universities were able to compare different realities on the basis of real-life examples.

The delivery of the course included the following activities:

- One videotaped session with students introducing themselves and talking about current issues on their campus.
- Weekly lectures and discussions on sexual harassment and gender-based violence within the context of higher education institutions. All students had to read common materials that included readings on the socio-historical background of each country.
- Organization of on-line discussion forums where students from each university were placed in one of 6 ‘chat’ groups with specific questions/themes to discuss.
- Research on issues relevant to sexual harassment in their respective context was designed and conducted by students at each university. The results of their research were shared in a final videoconference session with all three universities.

### 3. Results

The course was delivered twice and reached 85 students from the three countries (17 Canadians, 43 Tanzanians and 25 Sierra Leoneans). The Canadian students were mostly female; while in Sierra Leone and Tanzania the groups were mixed. The course is now in its second and last year of delivery.

A wide range of very positive results have been reported upon completion of the first delivery of the course (the second delivery will end in 2013). These results can be grouped into the two areas described below and are consistent with the results expected.

#### Developing New Understandings, Acquiring New Skills

Through this course, the students discovered how to learn from and understand different contexts. This international initiative allowed them to learn about student life in other countries and to understand how issues are framed in other contexts. They were also able to identify similarities across national contexts. This



UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM. Photo: Carleton University

led them to reflect critically on their own concerns and positions and provided a practical and concrete method for the development of comparative perspectives. Students increased their awareness of the importance of learning how to ask questions and listening to others to recognize those different and contextualized ways of understanding and acting.

On their part, the instructors indicated that the exchange of the various country-specific points of view added depth and richness to the course. For one of the instructors, a primary benefit of this partnership was that it helped participants understand *“How disciplinary positions, academic training and culture impact on how problems are defined and how your location impacts on what you think.”* One Canadian instructor also said that she witnessed her students acquire a better understanding of the importance of knowing about the history of the women’s movement in Canada after listening to stories from Sierra Leonean and Tanzanian students. The instructors also learned about the specific issues in their partners’ context and shared knowledge about research and publications on relevant topics.

The African participants reported that they were able to develop their capacities to use the technology like Web CT and video conferencing. Although the Canadian students and their African counterparts had different levels of access to technology, the participants ended up being able to build and sustain a virtual community of learning on the basis of their shared interests.

### New Knowledge Produced and New Research Collaboration

A majority of the students reported having acquired new knowledge on sexual and gender discrimination. They also engaged in various research projects on topics such as: the changing context of the participating universities concerning sexual and gender discrimination and violence and the need to review, update and apply policies; mapping the various groups and institutions on campus and in the city that focus on this issue; and researching the frequency and extent of sexual and gender based violence as reported to authorities and in the media and comparing it to the results of surveys completed by a sample of students and staff of the participating institutions.

The sharing of their research results allowed them to be able to learn about how other students living in different contexts frame these issues. There was knowledge produced on sexual harassment in higher education institutions in the three countries. The new knowledge produced by the students contributed to the discussions held on their campus about their existing policies (Carleton and UDSM) and to the design of a sexual harassment policy at USL. The Carleton University students identified and chose to research a topic that they identified as a gap in the Carleton anti-harassment policy, which was the fact that this policy does not address harassment of students by other students.

The external support provided by the connection to Carleton University seems to have given some added weight to the courses delivered at UDSM and USL. This international connection also provided more legitimacy for the presentation of the results of students' research to senior administrators in the hope of improving sexual harassment and discrimination policies at UDSM and to contribute to their establishment at USL.

#### 4. Innovative Practices: Strengths and Challenges

The first source of innovation in this project was the mutual learning principle that guided the partners' work. "We are all learning together", said one of the participating instructors. This principle of equality among partners transposed into a collegial approach at three levels: the instructors at the three sites that had to work together to develop a good quality course and to understand how best to connect their approaches; the students that had to connect with other students at other universities and develop understandings of issues in the different contexts; and the technical teams at the three universities that had to connect with each other to ensure that course participants could interact effectively. This principle of mutual learning allowed knowledge to be shared in different directions during the project: North to South, South to South and South to North.

The use of technology clearly added value beyond the obvious cost savings involved in the use of information and communication technologies to bring partners together (instead of having to travel to work together) in international initiatives of this type. The various communication(s) tools allowed the instructors to work collaboratively on the course design. During the delivery, web-based tools were used to connect the students from the three classes, either through real-time or asynchronous exchanges. One video-conferencing session allowed

students from the three countries to present the results of their research and, as one instructor said "hearing personal stories on how the issue of sexual violence and harassment impacted students both here and there was a great catalyst for discussion." The technology facilitated the simultaneous delivery of the course to three classes in three different countries without incurring enormous costs and logistical challenges, while providing students with the opportunity to take part in an international initiative.

Two main challenges were faced by the partners. The first was related to the different levels of connectivity amongst the participating countries. These technological challenges were resolved through the competent and perseverant help of the technical teams who invested many hours of work, sometimes investing their personal time, to resolve these issues in the three universities. The second challenge was related to the synchronization of the academic calendars (different beginning and end of semester) at the institutions. The course is now delivered over two semesters to facilitate the full completion of all activities, including the research projects, which resolved the difficulties created by the different calendars.

#### 5. Looking Forward

This initiative is now in its second and final year but the partners are already planning a future collaboration. Two of the instructors, one from Canada and one from Sierra Leone, will be conducting more collaborative research on gender-based violence in post-conflict situation in the near future.

Through the connection that it offered to students from three different countries, this initiative shows how technology can add breadth and depth to the delivery of university courses.

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