

TEACHING PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION: AN EXPERIMENT IN SRI LANKA

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Introduction

In April 2004, twenty students from a variety of backgrounds including the police, military, clergy, local government administration, international and domestic NGO sectors, graduated from the first academic course on peace and conflict resolution to be conducted in Sri Lanka. The *Post-Graduate Diploma in Conflict Resolution and Peace Preparedness* is implemented by the Peace Studies Programme of the Sri Lankan research and educational institute the Social Scientists' Association (SSA), and is validated and awarded by the Department of Peace Studies¹, University of Bradford, UK.

The PG Diploma was conceived through a recognition that those tasked with the job of actually making peace 'work' in Sri Lanka—such as the middle level decision-makers, NGO personnel, managers, administrators and security forces—generally had no practical or theoretical bases from which to help them address the complex issues that face a transitional society emerging from years of protracted conflict. The course aimed to provide people, especially those living and working in conflict affected areas of Sri Lanka, with the opportunity to develop their understanding of such challenges by developing an informed and applied framework for peace preparedness and conflict resolution.

After two years of operations and the graduation of the first batch of students, the Peace Studies Programme-SSA, the University of Bradford, and the Diploma's funders are assessing the impact of the Diploma against stated purpose and goals. The purpose of the diploma was given as:

To enhance the professional development, awareness and understanding of government, military, LTTE and civil society managers in the field of conflict resolution, peace preparedness and post-conflict planning.²

The broader goal of the course was the hope that this awareness and understanding would ultimately translate into the practical and tangible application of conflict resolution, peace preparedness and post-conflict planning concepts and strategies by the Diploma programme students.

This briefing paper summarises the development, content, and delivery of the *Post Graduate Diploma in Conflict Resolution and Peace Preparedness* and outlines the methodology that the programme is employing to assess the courses' peace related impact.

Development

The concept of conducting a peace related diploma programme in Sri Lanka developed through a series of discussions over a number of years between the authors. Both have been involved in research, conflict resolution and peace building initiatives, development projects, and training programmes in Sri Lanka since the early 1990's working with agencies such as Oxfam GB, DFID, Cordaid, Quaker Peace and Service, and Peace Brigades International. This 'hands-on' experience revealed that there was a limited domestic resource base or opportunity for grounded academic peace studies and conflict resolution courses. This was particularly so for local government, military and civil society institutions who were working in the most conflict affected and potentially volatile areas of Sri Lanka. Discussions with Sri Lankan colleagues indicated that there was a great demand for an internationally recognised academic course which would equip people with the knowledge and skills to analyse the potential peace and conflict impacts of their work programmes and activities, to design and initiate measures that would reduce the likelihood of conflict and maximise the potential for peace, and for their personal and professional development.

Although numerous short training programmes and workshops in various aspects of peace building and conflict resolution had been offered by both local and international organisations for a number of years, it was felt that these offered only one-off, isolated and limited introductions to a particular aspect of the peace studies and conflict resolution field. Training workshops covered topics such as negotiation skills, peace and conflict impact assessment (PCIA) and non-violent communication skills. Whilst these are valuable in their own right, what was missing was a sustained, comprehensive, integrated and well resourced process of learning which combined conceptual and theoretical elements with practice. At the same time it was noted that none of the Sri Lankan universities had yet developed either an under-graduate or post-graduate level stand-alone peace studies or conflict resolution

programme, although elements of conflict resolution and associated subjects formed parts of courses such as law, political science and human rights. Whilst plans were emerging within the University of Colombo it was felt that these were likely to target students within easy access of Colombo. It was evident that there was a gap in the market for a high calibre programme of academic study in applied conflict resolution and peace preparedness which was accessible to people living and working in 'outstation' areas affected by conflict, and who under such circumstances would usually not have access to such a course.

The ensuing collaboration between the Department of Peace Studies (University of Bradford) and the Peace Studies Programme (Social Scientists' Association) brought together over twenty local and international academics and practitioners to design a PG Diploma course appropriate for the Sri Lankan context of conflict and post-conflict transformation. A core curriculum design team developed an outline of eight modules and then invited faculty from Sri Lankan universities and non-governmental organisations to produce a series of comprehensive module handbooks. These modules were:

- Conflict Dynamics and Conflict Analysis (10 Credits, Compulsory)
- Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice (10 Credits, Compulsory)
- Human Rights, Reconciliation and Justice (10 Credits, Optional)
- Peace, Conflict and Development (10 Credits, Optional)
- Gender, Peace and Conflict (10 Credits, Optional)
- Religion and Conflict Transformation (10 Credits, Optional)
- Culture and Conflict (10 Credits, Optional)
- Comparative Peace Processes (10 Credits, Optional)
- Project Dissertation (60 Credits, Compulsory)

Their brief was to construct modules which were of Diploma level standard and whose content supported the purpose of the Diploma as stated above. Whilst importance was to be given to aspects of study which would enable students to critically analyse the Sri Lankan conflict and peace processes, and to conceptually and practically understand the key issues and challenges of resolving conflict and laying the foundations for peace, lessons from international experience and case studies were to be included. The completed modules were subject to the usual rigorous scrutiny by University of Bradford academic committees and quality assurance procedures before being finalised. The result, a *Post Graduate Diploma in Conflict Resolution and Peace Preparedness*, registered its first batch of students in April 2003 on fully paid scholarships with the support of the British Governments' Global Conflict Prevention Pool fund.³

Implementation

Under the British university system, it is not necessary for applicants to a PG Diploma to have an undergraduate degree. This was important for the rationale underpinning the programme,

since it was recognised that many of the potential students would not have had access to either local or international higher education due to the restrictions of cost, career and because of living in conflict areas. Careful consideration was therefore given to candidates work experience as well as their academic ability. Selection was based on oral and written English language comprehension and fluency, aptitude to study at a post-graduate diploma level, motivation, residential proximity to teaching sites and likely contribution to peace building and conflict reduction through the candidates work or community involvement. Approximately four hundred applications were received for just twenty places in each of the two teaching locations, Vavuniya and Matara, which are located in outlying districts that have, or had experienced, different dimensions of Sri Lanka's complex conflict. Vavuniya is a multi-ethnic government controlled town in the north central region of Sri Lanka that lies just south of border with the LTTE controlled areas of the Wannu. It is a highly militarised area with a large number of internally displaced people, many who live in IDP camps. Matara is a city located on the south coast of Sri Lanka in an area that experienced much violence during the JVP insurrection of 1988/89. The southern region is still associated with conflictual politics, religious and ethnic tensions. Diploma lectures were conducted on the premises of UNHCR in Vavuniya and a local NGO, INDECOS, in Matara. Both premises were made available free of charge by the respective organisations who recognised the value and benefit of such an educational experience for the local communities.

Of the nine modules three are compulsory for all students (Conflict Dynamics and Conflict Analysis, Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice, and the Project Dissertation) and students were then required to select four of the remaining modules. The Diploma was delivered between April 2003 and April 2004, with each module taught over four consecutive weekends at each site. Modules consisted of 100 hours of study divided between lectures, seminars, guest speakers and directed study. Teams of two lecturers (who had developed the module material) conducted the courses with the support of a number of guest lecturers. Students had access to a comprehensive library offering over two hundred titles, remotely accessed through a weekly mobile service from Colombo in addition to module hand-outs and an introductory package of core text materials. A local tutor was assigned to each student to provide support in study skills, the development of essays, and a project dissertation.

Impact Assessment

To what extent has the *PG Diploma in Conflict Resolution and Peace Preparedness* achieved its stated objectives? The full impact may not be known for some years as graduates develop in their careers, and hopefully engage in and influence different aspects of policy and practice in a peace and conflict sensitive manner. Impact assessment was an integral aspect of the diploma programme's design from its inception encompassing three criteria: quality, performance and impact.

- **Quality:** The academic quality of the course as a professional learning experience capable of developing the students' knowledge, understanding and skills in the required discipline.

- **Performance:** The development or progression of the student over the period of the course indicating a conceptual understanding of the material covered.

- **Impact:** The direct and indirect influence of the course and the students' learning on the external environment (peers, workplace, other institutions etc).

These criteria are interrelated. Effective student performance cannot be achieved without the provision of a quality assured programme. Similarly, the basis of a student's capacity to effect some level of external impact will be contingent upon his/her ability to adequately comprehend and apply the learning.

The three criteria are evaluated using nine different external, internal and student self assessment instruments which combine both quantitative and qualitative indicators:

University of Bradford Quality Assurance: Since the Diploma is validated and awarded by the University it is responsible for ensuring that the quality of the Diploma in Sri Lanka adheres to quality requirements and regulations as laid down in University regulations. So, the Diploma and its modules are continually monitored and evaluated through processes such as the school academic committee, a Course Approval and Review Team, and the Annual Monitoring Report (AMR). The latter is a key check for the University which ensures that quality assurance and enhancement processes are embedded into operational management. The process of preparing an analytical annual monitoring report enables the Bradford Course Co-ordinator and the SSA to formally:

- identify existing strengths and/or difficulties which may present challenges;
- report on changes that have occurred as a result of monitoring;
- report on actions that have been taken during the course of the academic session under review and
- prepare an 'action plan' to identify planned future developments

Student module and course evaluations: These provide a students perspective on the quality, content and usefulness of the individual modules, the overall course, and the performance of the lecturers involved. The information is used to provide feed-back to the teaching staff and to identify areas of course content and delivery that need to be improved or revised.

Student progression: Academic performance is assessed by module essays and a project dissertation. These demonstrate a students conceptual understanding of the material and their ability to critically apply this to a particular problem or issue. It is expected

that students will improve their grades as their critical intellectual capabilities develop during the course.

University of Bradford assessment missions: The programmes' academic and administrative systems are regularly reviewed by visits from the UoB Co-ordinator. Teaching venues are visited and interviews conducted with the programme managers, lecturers, student supervisors, students and local external examiner.

QAA assessment missions: The British Governments' Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAAHE) regularly conducts assessments of all UK university validated courses at home and abroad. The QAAHE mission investigates all aspects of a course and is regarded as the most rigorous independent assessment of an academic programme. The PG Sri Lanka Diploma was visited by a QAAHE team in May 2004⁴.

Learning impact assessment: Questionnaires and semi-formal interviews with students and a selection of student peers, superiors and subordinates in order to help determine the wider impact of an individual's learning.

Alumni assessment: Graduates from the course are invited to join an alumni which is hoped will provide a platform for continued learning, exchange and development. A follow-up workshop for alumni twelve months after graduation will focus on students' self-assessment of institutional impact.

External Impact Indicators: The delivery of this course in a conflict affected / post-conflict context is a unique and innovative educational experience whose impact may extend beyond that effected by the students / graduates themselves. Through discussions with a wide range of civil society observers and an examination of external developments this component aims to account for the external impact of the diploma programme.

Conclusion

Although the assessment process for the first year of operation has just begun⁵, initial findings are encouraging. Throughout the year the Diploma has received support and encouragement from Sri Lankan authorities and organisations. Students have engaged well with the course material, and at the April 2004 Exam Board, of the original thirty eight students who were enrolled, 20 were awarded the Diploma (five with Merit), three were awarded Certificates, eight were allowed extensions or to submit supplementary assessments, six students had withdrawn from the Diploma throughout the year, and one student failed. The award of a Diploma indicates that, amongst other measurements, students can deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgements in the absence of complete data, communicate about their subject to others, have achieved a professional competence in tackling and solving problems in their subject area, have developed and enhanced decision-making in

complex and unpredictable situations, and hopefully will want to continue to advance their knowledge and understanding and to further develop new skills and knowledge to a higher level.

Already graduates have experienced promotions, career moves and other educational opportunities in which their new learning has played a pivotal role. The participation of military personnel on the course has led to the enrolment of fifteen senior army officers on the 2004-2005 Diploma course in Colombo. Interest from within the LTTE has also led to the Diploma being taught at Kilinochchi, where it is the first external academic programme to be conducted since the beginning of the conflict. Sri Lankan faculty members have also drawn inspiration from the UoB-SSA programme and instituted new peace related courses in their own universities. Some graduates talk of the personal changes that the programme has imbued, such as a reconsideration of their own perspectives and understanding of the conflict, the complex peacebuilding, reconstruction and long-term reconciliation work that is needed, and their potential part in this. As the UoB Validator noted in his report:

Whilst in Vavuniya, I had the opportunity of informally meeting three current students on the Diploma. All three were highly appreciative of the opportunities offered by the programme and stressed its value, especially in respect to its relevance to their daily occupations – two are senior policemen and one is a senior army field commander.⁶

Students talked of being more aware of the needs of 'others' and the importance of thorough conflict analysis and planning that peace related activities require both in the short and long term. The Diploma has provided an intellectual confidence for students who can now participate on a more equal footing in the current debates

and prescriptions concerning development and peace in their country and regions. As one Vavuniya student commented:

I now know what peace can be and how I can help us get there.⁷

End Notes

¹ The Department of Peace Studies is located in the School of Social and International Studies (SSIS), University of Bradford. It is the largest University Peace Studies Department in the world.

² Harris, S. and Lewer, N., *Proposal for a Diploma in Conflict Resolution and Peace Preparedness*, Centre for Conflict Resolution, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford and the Social Scientists' Association, Sri Lanka, March 2002.

³ The Global Conflict Prevention Pool (GCPP) is a joint fund administered by the British Government's Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Ministry of Defence (MOD) and Department for International Development (DFID).

⁴ QAAHE Report due in August 2004 and will be available to the public on their website.

⁵ The authors will be producing a fuller report.

⁶ Dr Robin Coningham. *Validation Visit to Sri Lanka*, February 2004.

⁷ Course impact assessment interview with student, May 2004.

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