

Postgraduate peace building: Conflict as a tool for learning

Abstract

Developing effective conflict transformation processes in universities is necessary in the increasingly globalized world of academia. Universities are becoming more multi-cultural, with students and academics from a wide range of backgrounds. Academia itself also has its own particular cultural norms that new students must negotiate as they complete their studies. Recent research in Australia demonstrates that student grievances with universities are increasing, and provides evidence that many universities do not manage those complaints in the most effective manner. In the higher education context, when conflict is not managed well, there is an impact on individuals, the institution and the quality and timing of new research being offered to society.

A pilot study at James Cook University (forming the basis of a proposed national study) examined conflict in the Higher Degree Research student/supervisor relationship. It considered the experiences of both students and supervisors in conflict, how they each attempted to manage the conflict, and the impact of the conflict on all parties. The project aims to generate workable solutions for students, supervisors and universities to prevent unnecessary conflict and effectively manage inevitable conflict. The project also aims to promote the premise that conflict, managed effectively, can be a tool for learning, and can assist students to develop broader skills in conflict transformation and peace building.

The project team believes that it is possible to develop peace building capacity in students not just by teaching peace-related subjects at universities, but also by actively integrating peacebuilding processes into the university system. Conflict management strategies can be integrated into the teaching methods and administrative structures used at universities, supplemented by resources to support learning through conflict.

Underlying themes and ideas could be applied in other conflict transformation contexts.

- Processes being a form of education about peacebuilding rather than content.
- Institutions modeling peacebuilding and supporting their stakeholders to engage and develop peacebuilding practices in their day to day business.