

Theme

Policy

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Protecting Students at Risk of Forced Marriage: An Exploration of Perceptions and Awareness Amongst University Professionals (0116)

Part 1 – Abstract

Certain students at higher education institutions may be at risk of being forced into marriage and as the Multi-Agency Practice Guidelines 2009 point out, lecturers and other members of staff are 'in an ideal position to identify and respond to a victim's needs at an early stage' (pg. 55). But would university staff be able to identify a (potential) case of forced marriage and would they know how to approach the situation? This paper presents the findings from the first stage of project that explores perceptions and awareness of forced marriage amongst university professionals.

Part 2 – Outline

A forced marriage is one 'conducted without the valid consent of one or both parties where duress is a factor' (FCO/Home Office, 2005). It should be distinguished from an arranged marriage where the families of one or both parties take a leading role in choosing the spouse, but the bride and groom provide free and full consent. The Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), which is run by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office, was established to provide assistance to those at risk of being forced into a marriage (or those who have actually been forced to marry) in the UK and overseas. In 2010 the Unit provided advice and support in 1735 instances, which emphasises the extent of the problem (FCO, 2011). Although the courts in England and Wales have had the power to protect those at risk of being forced into a marriage for some time, these laws were not developed with forced marriage in mind. They did not therefore make it explicit that pressurising someone to marry is unacceptable. The UK Parliament thus enacted the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007 to make this clear and to provide more practical remedies. The Act enables potential victims or relevant third parties acting on their behalf to apply for a forced marriage protection order, which can prevent a forced marriage from taking place or respond to a forced marriage. The Act came into force in November 2008 and in the first year 86 protection orders were made by the courts (House of Commons, 2009). By the end of February 2011, 293 orders had been issued (Home Affairs Committee, 2011). However, the cases that come to the attention of the Forced Marriage Unit and those that reach the courts are thought to be the tip of the iceberg, for it is estimated that fewer than one in ten cases are actually reported (Hansard, 2007). There is consequently a need to promote awareness of forced marriage itself and the assistance available. The necessity to increase awareness amongst key professionals

has been highlighted by the FMU, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Home Office, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department of Education) and the Welsh Assembly Government. Some of the mechanisms introduced include the production of Guidelines (e.g. The Right to Choose: Multi-agency Practice Guidelines 2008), poster campaigns (e.g. FORCED You have a right to choose) and eLearning training (Dealing with Forced Marriages E-Learning Training). However, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee recently concluded that it was 'concerned about the level of awareness of the Act's provisions amongst frontline professionals' (para 13). Increasing awareness amongst those working in schools, colleges and universities is particularly important, for as the Multi-Agency Practice Guidelines point out 'students who fear they may be forced to marry often come to the attention of, or turn to a teacher or lecturer or other member of staff before seeking help from the police or social services' (pg. 55). Furthermore, the student's friends may report concerns to staff members. As the guidelines indicate, teachers, lecturers and other members of staff are therefore 'in an ideal position to identify and respond to a victim's needs at an early stage' (pg. 55). Given that most victims of forced marriage are between the ages of seventeen and twenty, university students are more at risk than other age groups.

The importance of providing social support to students has been the subject of much previous research. For example, in 1994 research conducted by Van Laar and Easton highlighted the fact that lecturers are frequently required to provide personal help and support to students in distress and in many cases staff feel inadequately trained to do so. More recently, Rogers (2009) has emphasised the need to provide pastoral care to students from lower socio-economic groups, whilst Stephen et al (2008) indicate that increasing student numbers can impact upon the ability of staff to provide effective support. However, this project relates to supporting students at risk of forced marriage: an area that has not been the subject of research within the Higher Education sector to date.

The purpose of the study is therefore to determine whether staff at higher education institutions in South Wales could identify a (potential) case of forced marriage and whether they would be able to handle such issues appropriately. The research methods to be utilised in this study will be both quantitative and qualitative and will involve questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The first stage of the project will involve the distribution of a short questionnaire to at least 50 staff members at each institution that have direct contact with students. The questionnaire will seek to determine if the individual can identify a potential case of forced marriage, if he or she is aware of the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007, if he or she has seen the forced marriage awareness posters, if he or she has received training relating to forced marriage and who would the staff member contact if faced with a case of forced marriage. This will help to assess the level of awareness of forced marriage amongst key professionals in the South Wales and whether they would act appropriately.

The second stage of the project will involve in-depth interviews with key staff members from each institution, which will include student welfare officers, personal tutors and lecturers who teach large cohorts of students who fall within the at risk age group. This will add richness to the quantitative data as it will be an opportunity to explore real cases that staff have encountered and will enable an evaluation of the student support policies that are in place at each institution.

The paper delivered at the SRHE conference will present the findings from the quantitative research, which will have been completed by the end of November 2011.

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