

Turning the Classroom Inside Out: Educating for Democracy, Human Rights and Open Society

Satellite event organized at the Central European University

The Department of Legal Studies, Human Rights Initiative, the Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education and the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives organized on November 8, 2016 a satellite event for the Council of Europe's World Forum for Democracy. The aim of the CEU event was to offer a broad overview of the role education in democratic transition through a panel discussion with academics and researchers using experiential teaching methods in their classes or work. In addition to the academic insights, the organizers also brought together a poster session showcasing a few examples of good practices of human rights education and civic engagement outside the strictly taken academic world.

In the panel session moderated by Professor Renata Uitz, Olexandr Shtokvych (Senior Program Manager, Yehuda Elkana Center for Higher Education) gave an overview of CEU's involvement in higher education reform in Myanmar (formerly Burma). He reflected on the significance of university autonomy as a precondition of world-class higher education in democracy. Through examples from past experiences he highlighted CEU's emphasis on engagement with local stakeholders and the significance of continuing presence on the ground for lasting impact.

Dr. Oksana Sarkisova, the Director of Verzio International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival (Budapest) introduced the Verzio DocLab workshop that year after year encourages film-makers to address human rights problems and social justice with the help of an international team of filmmakers, editors and human rights experts. This year the workshop focused on the processes of integration, and encouraged the participants to look into ways people from different cultures, backgrounds and religions can live together. The Verzio Film Festival started on the same day of the satellite event, so the results of the experiment, the personal stories were all to be seen only later.

Professor Eszter Polgari (Department of Legal Studies) introduced the internship program and the clinical specialization offered primarily for students studying human rights. Both the internship and the clinical course are part of the experiential learning component of the curriculum and they resonate with the institutional mission of the university on many levels. Human rights students value this combination of formal education and practical experience as they can develop transferable skills and working on real cases raising important human rights issues exposes them to the problems of justice, fairness and vulnerability – no classroom environment can possibly deliver this on a similar scale and with a similar intensity.

Finally, Csaba Szilagyi (Head of the Human Rights Program, Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives) introduced the cross-departmental archives and evidentiary practices specialization. The program offers a solid background in contemporary archival theory, thinking and practice, information management and evidentiary practices in archives holding documents relating to the recent past. He emphasized the importance of archival documents in building open societies, giving justice to the victims and building memory.

The panel discussion ended with a Q&A session where the participating students and members of the broader CEU community could address the speakers and ask further questions in their field of expertise.

Following the panel discussion, attendees were invited to visit the poster session of the event. As part of this session, several NGOs, and initiatives had the chance to introduce their projects focusing on democracy, civic engagement, human rights, and non-formal education. Organizations showcased some of their most successful and engaging projects by presenting information and pictures on posters.

The BAGázs Public Benefit Association introduced their School Community Service, Adults Education and Legal Clinic programs, focusing on legal aid service provided in Bag, a small Hungarian settlement, and their social and civic introduction sessions.

The UCCU Foundation provided information on their interactive sessions focusing Roma culture and identity, acceptance, and tolerance. UCCU organizes their trainings for elementary and high school students, teachers, and other organizations as well.

CEU's Open Learning Initiative (OLive) was also among the presenters. The initiative was started in January, 2016, and has developed into a full-scale non-degree program. They organize weekend courses (OLive-WP) for refugees and asylum seekers in Hungary and a university preparatory program (OLive-UP) for people with a refugee status in one of the EEA states.

Another CEU unit, the Civic Engagement Office also presented their projects, with a special focus on their Science Shop program. Its goal is to increase non-profit organizations' and civil society groups' access to scientific research and to strengthen the commitment of students and faculty to civic engagement. This program provides independent participatory research support in response to concerns experienced by civil society.

Finally, CEU's Ambedkar English Tutoring Program was also presented at the event. Within the framework of this program, Roma high school students from the Dr. Ambedkar School visit CEU once a month to receive English tutoring from CEU volunteers.

Throughout the poster session, attendees had the chance to familiarize themselves with the above mentioned projects and initiatives by taking a look at the various posters and pictures, prepared by the participating units. Additionally, there was also an opportunity for more informal, one-on-one discussions with the representatives. This ensured that participants could ask about the specificities of each program, and find out all the details that were of interest to them, including volunteering opportunities, and various other ways to get involved.