

GRAMNET:

BRINGING TOGETHER RESEARCH AND PRACTICE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

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The University of Glasgow's Refugee, Asylum and Migration Network (GRAMNet) aims to bring together researchers and practitioners, NGOs and policy makers working with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland.

Co-convened by Professor Rebecca Kay and Professor Alison Phipps, GRAMNet takes inspiration from the women's movement and other progressive movements for social justice and equality to offer an innovative way forward for leadership and collaboration in research, bringing together theory, empirical insight and practice. GRAMNet is deliberately set up as a network to facilitate work through developing relationships and structures on a horizontal rather than a vertical basis, responding to problems brought to the network with team approaches and an interdisciplinary perspective to participatory problem solving. Moreover, GRAMNet's relational approach to research seeks to create a safe, reflective space for critical intercultural knowledge and exchange.

Reflecting on Glasgow as a context for research and knowledge exchange, it is clear that during the past decade Scotland has seen an unprecedented change in its migrant, refugee and asylum populations. In 2000 Glasgow City Council signed a contract with UK Border Agency to become the largest centre for the dispersal of asylum seekers in the country. The intercultural and linguistic complexities involved in such a change to the demographic constitution of the city raises considerable questions relating to the use of established concepts often referred to by government agencies, voluntary organizations and advocacy groups, such as 'connection', 'security', 'sanctuary', 'community' and 'integration'. There is still considerable research work to be done, in order to develop a clearer understanding of how such concepts are experienced and understood by arriving populations as well as by receiving communities living in Glasgow. These intercultural and linguistic complexities also have a bearing on the grand challenges of health, education and housing, of security and social security in Glasgow, which are linked to community cohesion.

In such complex intercultural and multilingual

contexts where 'connectivity' and 'community integration' are key indicators of positive social developments GRAMNET asks:

- How are new patterns of belonging defined and experienced in intercultural, multi-language community, policy and provider groups?
- What are the key factors, in terms of care, activity and experience which promote and enhance resilience, settlement and integration for both arriving and receiving communities?
- Who defines the nature of 'integration', 'security' and 'community', with what resource, and what are the outcomes of such definition?

Crucially, Glasgow's experience is considered by policy makers and NGOs alike to have led the way in integrating asylum seekers and refugees into the City alongside other new migrant populations. 'There is evidence that the Scottish public is more welcoming of migrants than in other parts of the UK and that Migrants report positive experiences of living in Scotland.' <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publication/2009/02/23154109/2>

GRAMNet's research in this context seeks to understand the basis of the claims made regarding Glasgow's new communities and how it is that they have come in to being. In doing so, GRAMNet has placed considerable emphasis on the importance of developing methodologically and conceptually innovative research in order to address key questions and concerns emerging from research and practice in Glasgow.

The demographic, language and intercultural changes in the City of Glasgow's communities have occurred alongside the establishment of a devolved government in Scotland that has responsibility for the care of migrant populations but has no autonomy in the decision-making process or policy on immigration.

A considerable amount of bibliographic and evidence-based social and economic research has been undertaken by statutory bodies in order

to assess health, housing and other issues of care regarding new asylum, refugee and migrant populations. This research informs Scottish policy relating to these new migrant groups. The 2009 comprehensive Scottish Government report on migration drew on existing research. It noted that Scotland has an ageing and, in the long-term, decreasing population. Thus migration has a key role to play in meeting EU demographic targets.

But what is particularly significant is that the report found that the research to date, whilst covering a range of indicators of concern relating to poverty, health and well-being, educational and life expectancy, does not consider questions relating to the nature and process of connectivity or the character of these newly formed communities. Research is based on large scale quantitative surveys and semi-structured interviews and has been undertaken to enable the planning of service delivery and target setting for demographic sustainability. It has not been undertaken for understanding the process and nature of integration or the experiences and perspectives of new migrant populations, which have been the key issues not just for Glasgow, but for cities and towns throughout the UK and Europe. Issues regarding the process of integration raise important questions relating to the histories and learned dispositions for hospitality and welcome in host communities and for the ethics of befriending, advocacy and citizenship in new contexts of intercultural integration, where a shared language is far from given and where there are regular experiences of loss through deportations, destitution and detention for asylum seekers. In attempting to find solutions to the grand challenges of the twenty first century, the experience of the City of Glasgow, whose 'wicked indicators' make it one of the most complex and needy of European cities, has much to offer, drawing from its recent success in integration and multilingual and cultural transformations.



Beach in Scotland, 2010,
Photograph by Alison Phipps

In this context, GRAMNet is interested in several paradoxical elements relating to empirical work in the City of Glasgow on new asylum, refugee and migrant communities, in particular:

- Having often fled situations of violence, oppression, turmoil and poverty, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants have to invent their lives again, often with very sparse resources and in highly unpredictable circumstances. Yet within the asylum, refugee and migrant populations there are strong social bonds and high degrees of interdependence. There are regular social and organizational gatherings with other migrants of similar standing as well as cultural and faith-based activities and a high degree of mutual aid and reciprocity between groups. Strong relationships and community-formation are abundantly evident amongst these newcomers, whilst settled communities often struggle with atomisation and the erosion

of a sense of community and neighbourliness.

- Those who have experienced displacement and are highly vulnerable do not use the normative academic or policy concepts of ‘connectivity’ or ‘community’, of ‘integration’ or ‘security’ to describe their strong social bonds. Such concepts are deployed by policy makers, researchers and care providers to describe the difference between new ethnic populations and the perception of an impoverished sense of connectivity and community in indigenous urban populations.
- Ethnographic research amongst Scottish host communities and initiatives for befriending and advocacy on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers in Glasgow shows that these initiatives have been taken to ensure access to basic human rights, statutory care and social security. This type of grounded, qualitative research also highlights the extent of the intimate knowledge vulnerable and oppressed populations have of their oppressors and their strong sense of connection to their ‘enemies’ at home and those who ‘monitor’ and ‘regulate’ or ‘reject’ their claims to stay abroad. Thus, ‘close’ connections and relations of intimacy are also experienced as invasive and threatening and cannot be assumed to be always desired and benign.

The University of Glasgow academic community has a wide range of expertise in relation to refugees, asylum and migration. In response to the radical demographic and community changes occurring in Scotland and in the City of Glasgow, the University established GRAMNet as a much needed research and knowledge exchange network. The network brings together researchers and practitioners, NGOs and policy makers working with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland, focused especially on the City of Glasgow. Partner organisations include Oxfam Scotland,

Positive Action in Housing, Bridges Programmes, Scottish Migrant Network, Glasgow City Council, Scottish Government, The Unity Centre, Scottish Immigration Law Practitioners’ Association, Equality and Diversity Unity, ‘Centre for Russian Central and East European Studies, Glasgow Centre for International Development Haven, Camcorder Guerrillas, Centre for Contemporary Arts, Black and Ethnic Minority Infrastructure Scotland, Faith in Communities Scotland, Glasgow Centre for International Development, Russian Centre in Scotland - Haven, Scottish Detainee Visitors, National Coalition of Anti-Deportation Campaigns, Scottish Refugee Council, and Medical Justice.

GRAMNet has around 200 members, 9 research clusters, a postgraduate research network, wide stakeholder membership, regular eBulletins and events, a (well attended) civic film series and an established advisory board of KE partners and



Street Protest, Glasgow 2010,
Photograph by Alison Phipps

academic researchers. GRAMNet Research Clusters represent the following research areas: Care, Health, Trauma; Children; Forced/ Unforced Labour; Housing; Identity; Immigration; Languages; Law; Narratives & Representation. In addition it offers a gateway for work shadowing placements and one-to-one information sessions where asylum seekers and refugees meet and discuss their future career plans and goals with members of the academic community. In terms of postgraduate studies, it places Masters students on knowledge exchange projects with its stakeholder organisations to ensure research in areas of mutual compatibility. GRAMNet is working to develop research capacity

both within academia and in the wider community of organisations advocating for asylum seekers, refugees and migrant populations. We are doing this by supporting the professional development and social engagement of academic researchers, by working closely with and listening carefully to the needs, experiences and expertise of those working directly with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants and by providing spaces and activities which bring academics, activists, policy-makers and practitioners together, to develop collaborative projects and to pursue our shared goals of social justice, intercultural exchange and responsibility, and human rights for all.

Please follow our website, facebook site and blog.

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/gramnet>

Blog site: www.gramnet.wordpress.com

Our blog aims to give comment and opinion from our members on recent and ongoing events linked to refugees, asylum and migration. The Facebook page tracks our upcoming events. We welcome all of you to add comments to these pages, link to them from your own blog or websites. We look forward to your visit.



Vigil, Glasgow, 2010, Photograph by Alison Phipps



Palestinian Exhibit, Glasgow, 2010, Photograph by Alison Phipps