



ASIAN UNIVERSITY FOR WOMEN

Grant Report from the
Asian University for Women Support Foundation
and Professor Anne E. Becker

To the South Asia Institute at Harvard University



June 2016



The Asian University for Women (AUW) Support Foundation, jointly with Dr. Anne Becker, is pleased to present this grant report to the South Asia Institute pursuant to its grant of \$1,000 in support of Professor Becker's travel and meals during the Global Mental Health course at the Asian University for Women in May-June 2015.

I. Course Content

The inaugural version of the Global Mental Health course was offered at the Asian University for Women during its 2015 Summer Term, lasting from May 24th – June 22nd. The class attracted 27 students taking the course for credit, and 3 auditing; these students came from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Malaysia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. In total, five professors collaborated to teach the course. They are listed below in the order in which they taught:

Varuni Ganepola, *Asian University for Women*.

Anne Becker, *Harvard Medical School*. Professor Becker had responsibility for the longest module of the course, teaching for approximately one-third of the class hours. She covered topics intended to introduce students to the scope and complexity of global mental health and to engage them in thinking critically about the relevance of the course material to their respective regions. Topics included: definitions of mental health; diagnostic frameworks; the social and cultural context of etiology, presentation, local responses, and course of mental disorders; the global burden of disease and resource gap; the life course perspective, with a focus on dementia; and an introduction to selected methods relevant to implementation research. Professor Becker drew from her field research in Fiji and Haiti to illustrate key points and as a prompt for students to apply course concepts to responses to mental illness and associated resource gaps in their respective regions, based on their own observations, experience, and local expertise. For example, Professor Becker facilitated class discussions that engaged student perspectives on how the elderly are cared for in different communities and the potential for leveraging existing social infrastructure for care delivery. Students also gave small-group presentations on their observations of the impact of social and economic transition on mental health as well as culture-specific idioms of distress and illness presentations from their home countries. While at AUW, Professor Becker also gave a special talk on her research and professional trajectory that drew students, staff, and faculty from the AUW community. She also met with small groups of students from the Global Mental Health class, over several dinner and lunch events, who asked questions about her studies, her career, and her advice for young women.



Professor Anne Becker giving a talk open to the entire AUW community

Elizabeth Nair, *Work & Health Psychologists*, formerly at National University of Singapore.

Bandy Lee, *Yale School of Medicine*.

Neerja Chowdhary, *Sangath India*, consultant to London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

In their final papers, students either described an original design for or suggested adaptations to an existing community-based intervention to address an important mental health problem in their home

region. Topics included suicide in rural Bhutan, schizophrenia in Bangladesh, depression in Burmese refugee camps, violence against female prisoners in Malaysia, post-traumatic stress disorder in a mountain village in Nepal, and substance use disorder along the India-Nepal border.

II. Reflection from Professor Becker

It was a great privilege for me to contribute to the development and launch of this inaugural A UW course on global mental health. The students were outstanding individually and as a cohort in their deep intellectual engagement with the course material—much of which was entirely new to them. I was particularly impressed by their uptake of social science oriented approaches to understanding the scope and challenges inhering in the field of global mental health and also by their application of critical perspectives—always respectful and considered—that were often highly original and on the mark. Their grasp of the material was demonstrated in their written assignments and particularly in the high caliber discussions we had throughout my portion of the course. Indeed, I was struck by the students’ openness to novel (to them) perspectives on mental health and our lively in-class discussion about local understandings of normal aging and dementia was an excellent illustration of this.



Students share mental health issues that are particularly prevalent in their home countries

From my own point of view—based on giving lectures and leading class discussions in 6 two hour and 20 minute slots as well as reading and grading written assignments and final papers—the course was highly successful in providing students with a foundation of selected key concepts in mental health, engaging them in applying these concepts to their exploration of important regional and global mental health challenges, and developing their capacities to understand and respond critically and constructively, as well as with optimism.

Finally, the agenda in developing and delivering this course was focused on enriching the A UW curriculum with new content on global mental health and potentially engaging students as future leaders and advocates for promoting mental health and the global mental health agenda in their respective regions. I believe we met these goals.

Teaching this course also left me with pedagogic insight that—even after years teaching similar content to students and trainees in the US—was both unanticipated and invaluable. As the course unfolded, we drew increasingly from the diversity of experience within the class to explore the social and cultural contextualization of mental health. Cross-cultural contrasts and commonalities were neither remote nor an intellectual abstraction, but rather could be limned and articulated in the classroom as vivid and experience-near. That is, the local knowledge residing even in a relatively small cohort (that, in many ways could be seen as a microcosm of the region) became the very centerpiece of our discussion and learning. I felt that, as a result, students reached a more nuanced and tangible level of understanding this material than is generally possible in other educational settings. Though not at all the point of my contributions to this course, I count it as one of the most exhilarating teaching experiences of my life and I am grateful for it.

III. Student Feedback

Professor Becker requested feedback from students through several questions about their experience in the class up to that point. Examples of students' responses are below:

What did you enjoy most from Professor Becker's section of the course?

"I think the best learning for this past week was from all the small group discussions and presentations we had. It was most interactive and helped students to learn from one another. Dr. Anne herself was very open to questions and her explanations were easy and simple."

"In this course I learned how mental illness is perceived by society and difficulties that individual face and the impact that [is] being faced by families. Also, I learned what [is] happening in different parts of region regarding mental health problems."

What has surprised you the most?

"The most interesting thing I have gained was different kind of mental illness related to old people, youth, and children. I enjoyed learning that the most. It was great to learn about how different cultures treat mental health problems. By listening to lectures and sharing our own regions' point, I learned that we could understand community building."

"I got surprised at the pie chart that showed mental disorders occupy world's no. 1 burden of diseases. Previously I thought it was chronic diseases. And also post-partum depression in mothers is very new and surprising for me! I never knew something like this even existed."

"The most surprising thing was that diseases are diagnosed differently in every culture and that there are disease in one culture that do not even exist in the others, and how hard that makes diagnosing someone."

What is an example of how your thinking or understanding of mental health has changed since taking this class?

"I used to think mental health wasn't a big issue in Asia. Maybe because we always hear about mental health issues from the western world and any studies or disorders we read about is also from the western world. Maybe because it's a taboo and stigmatized issue in Asia as well and so less discussed or heard of, so I never realized this issue was so important even in our cultural concept."

"Before, I did not have any clear ideas about mental health issues and services, but after this course, I knew that mental health is the most important thing that we need to care about currently... Moreover, I also found that the Vietnamese do not notice the importance of mental health in their life, and I need to do something for raising awareness about global mental health in my hometown."

IV. Future Goals

The Asian University for Women strives to be a center for excellence in the region, both in terms of academic rigor and driving a social justice agenda. By hosting a Global Mental Health course with an international set of faculty, AUW has contributed to opening the dialogue further on mental health in

Asia. The participating students, who came from nine different countries, are now equipped with new skills and motivation to intervene in the perpetuation of stigma surrounding mental illness, and will have the opportunity to continue to engage with these topics in future research, volunteer, or professional endeavors.

AUW is now considering several options to continue destigmatization of mental health illnesses, and productive engagement from students and community leaders to design more effective, ethical treatment strategies. We are pleased to report that another version of the Global Mental Health course is being offered in July 2016, with participation from Dr. Becker once again. Other options include:

- Hosting an annual conference on mental health research and policies, which would connect students from different universities with research scientists, policymakers, and funding sources across Asia.
- Connecting students with mentors from the fields of psychology, medicine, anthropology, and public health who wish to pursue research projects or internships related to mental health issues.
- Supporting students who wish to establish a student organization that will focus on issues of mental health in the AUW campus, the local Chittagong community, and countries represented at AUW.

V. Conclusion

Professor Becker's participation in the Global Mental Health course – both as a member of the Steering Committee and as visiting faculty – was undeniably a significant factor in the project's success. Her early commitment helped draw in other high-quality faculty, and pique student interest in a new topic at AUW. She brought an extremely rich professional repertoire to the classroom, enabling students to learn from someone who has engaged with mental health issues as an academic, a researcher, a psychiatrist, and an activist. Professor Becker's time at AUW also sent an important signal to the wider community that mental health is a topic deserving of attention in any region of the world; and that women are valuable stakeholders in developing effective interventions for mental health in a range of settings.

The support from the South Asia Institute made it possible for the Asian University for Women to cover Professor Becker's travel and meals while she taught part of the Global Mental Health course. We are extremely grateful for the opportunity to channel resources to Professor Becker's involvement in the important cause of mental health education in Asia. From the perspective of the students, the class was a transformative personal and academic experience; and from the perspective of the university, the class was the start of what will hopefully be a long-lived commitment to the agenda for progress on the treatment of mental health issues in the region and worldwide.

Annexes:

1. Course Syllabus
2. Pre- and post-class assessment
3. Press release (June 11, 2015)