**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Graham Pike, Dean, International Education

Charlotte Sheldrake, Associate Dean, International Education

Meg Savory, International Projects and Grants Coordinator

Audrey Hansen, Manager, Education Abroad

Mohammed Hawamdeh, International Student Lisaison

Steve Lane, Dean, Arts and Humanities

Dawn Thomson, Chair, English Department

FROM: Katharina Rout, English Department

DATE: November 23, 2011

**RE: Report on Internationalizing ENGL 415 and on Internationalization Grant**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I would like to thank the Faculty of International Education for awarding me a grant of $530.00 to buy books for my ENGL 415-F11 course on *Modern Arabic Fiction*. I also appreciated having had the opportunity to present my work during International Education Week, and I would like to take this opportunity to describe not only how I spent the grant money but, more generally, how the internationalization of ENGL 415 has unfolded.

**Background:**

ENGL 415: *Comparative Literature* has changing content and has never before been taught on *Modern Arabic Fiction*. I am a literary translator and specialize in Translation Studies, but I have no background in Arabic literature other than my knowledge of “world literature” and the work of Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian Novel Laureate I taught in ENGL 416-F10. I do not read or write Arabic. When I proposed to the English Department that we offer ENGL 415 on *Modern Arabic Fiction*, I was assigned the course and had to immerse myself in a field I knew little about and had few books on. The grant allowed me to buy books not only to prepare for the course, but also to lend to my students when necessary.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Results:**

Initially, I thought we needed a course on *Modern Arabic Fiction* because, collectively, we know too little about the Arab world and because Canadian students would benefit from the insights into Arab culture and the daily life of Arabs that literature can provide—insights very different from those we get in the news media.

Very aware of my limitations and the kind of information I could not provide, I soon realized I needed people in the classroom who could offer my domestic students and me the authentic perspectives of people who are from Arab countries, know Arabic, and can talk about the culture and history of their particular country.

This is where Mohammed Hawamdeh came to my rescue! Thanks to Mohammed’s promotion of the course to the Arab students on campus, several of them enrolled, and several more have dropped by more or less regularly to participate and share their views of the literature we discuss and of their own experiences and views in general. They enrich the course enormously. Mohammed himself has most generously given of his time and expertise by joining the class and sharing his knowledge in class discussions and through a formal introductory lecture on Islam as well as mini-lectures on many aspects of language, history, politics, and culture.

As a result, our collective experience in ENGL 415 has been most encouraging:

* Instead of learning *about* Arab culture and people, **domestic students** are learning *from* their Arabic peers.

As far as I can see from class discussions, student papers, e-mail messages, and conversations in my office, the process of working *with* their Arab peers has changed the domestic students. They were curious from the start or would not have signed up for the course, but they were also quick to judge, even to attack, and they were unable to make distinctions between Arabic or Islamic, between one Arab country and the next, or between different decades in recent history. Now, toward the end of term, the classroom atmosphere is characterized by mutual respect, by an awareness that no individual epitomizes his or her society and culture, let alone his or her government, and by a strong desire to learn more about each other. The domestic students are keen to show appreciation and be supportive of their Arab peers, and when they raise issues they find troubling, they do so in language that is carefully chosen to be respectful and culturally sensitive. They proudly tell me of talking to each other in the Library or Cafeteria and treasure the bits of knowledge they glean from even casual encounters.

* Instead of feeling labelled as students with ESL problems and as representatives of countries eyed with suspicion, the **Arab students** experience that they have valuable information to offer to Canadian students.

Several of the Arab students have told me that they are proud of being able to *teach* their Canadian peers. They feel empowered and speak of appreciating the opportunity to dispel stereotypes about their countries or beliefs. They feel so comfortable and welcomed that they bring friends and family members to the class. The fact that all class discussion begins and ends with literature—mostly by internationally recognized, award-winning authors—means that the Arab students’ culture and countries are represented by the creative work of some of their most gifted, independent-minded people.

* That I would not be tempted to adopt a “sage on the stage” role was clear before I even proposed the course, but I did not foresee that the “guide by the side” model would include a shared sense of **collegiality**. I am very fortunate to have three colleagues from the English Language Centre in the class (Madelaine Campbell, Maurice Gallant, and Therese Neufeld) and treasure the experience, knowledge, and wisdom they bring to the course. Subtly but effectively, they have nurtured an awareness among the domestic students that it is an enormous achievement for the Arab students to participate as equals in a fourth-year English literature course. I see great benefit in strengthened relationships between the English Language Centre and the English Department and hope we will continue to build stronger connections.
* Finally, to add more perspectives to our discussions, I have invited **advanced ESL students** from Arab countries to visit our class and give short presentations on topics related to our discussions. Thanks to the work of Jackie Foster and Maxine MacGillivray, six students have followed the invitation and earned bonus points for their Directed Studies courses. My ENGL 415 students have benefitted through a deeper understanding of social, environment, and gender issues as well as through hearing from more nationalities; if it weren’t for the ESL speakers, we would not have heard from an Iraqi perspective.

**Challenges:**

The open-door, collaborative approach comes with its own challenges. Classes are highly unpredictable.

Workload is a big issue: for me, teaching *Modern Arabic Literature* has meant a huge amount of scholarly activity in a new field, and for Mohammed Hawamdeh, it has meant an overload of three hours in a classroom added to his full-time job every week, plus extra e-mails and meetings with the Arab students in the class.

Promoting the course was difficult because most VIU students do not search out the specific course descriptions on the English Department’s website and hence are aware only of the generic description for ENGL 415; if it hadn’t been for Mohammed writing to the Arab students, none of them would have known about the course. I myself promoted the course in the community (and had two “Love of Learning” students sign up as a result) by running around town putting up posters I had made myself. Whatever awareness of the course now exists among the student body will be lost by the time the course may be offered again, if it ever will. More institutional support to promote the course would have been a great help.

**Conclusion:**

How successful ENGL 415 on *Modern Arabic Fiction* has been from the students’ point of view will be seen when the results of the **course evaluation** become available.

From my own point of view, the course is a very successful example of internationalization of the curriculum. It fosters respect, an understanding of other cultures, and an appreciation for a multitude of perspectives, and it develops skills for effective living in a global community. From the narrower perspective of the person who has to evaluate the academic achievements of students, I am pleased that, at this point, the grades my students earned in papers and presentations are clearly higher than I typically see in upper-level English courses; however, this may reflect that only academically-stronger students enrolled in a course that weaker students may have perceived as too challenging.

I look back with gratitude: for the grant, for the opportunity to teach the course, for an amazing experience in the classroom. As for the future, I sincerely hope that VIU will build on this experiment and support future collaborative, internationally focused sections of ENGL 415 that bring staff and students from both International Education and English together in the study of literatures from different cultures.

1. I am sending a printout of my Amazon.ca book order to Maxine Stewart. It shows that on June 16, 2011, I ordered 29 titles of Arabic literature, which arrived in six different shipments. Their titles are individually listed on the printout. The total of the six different amounts in this order is **$596.35.** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)