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Needs-based mentoring: A dynamic approach to engaging students from refugee backgrounds

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Of students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), those who have come to Australia as refugees face many barriers in accessing higher education and catering to the needs of these students is necessarily complex. Students from refugee backgrounds face cumulative deprivation of relevant cultural capital (including assumed knowledge about further education such as HECS-HELP, ATAR and higher education pathways) inhibiting meaningful access to further education opportunities. The Macquarie Mentoring program supports high school students from refugee backgrounds through a holistic and flexible step-by-step approach to mentoring, allowing the students to set the speed and direction of the mentoring process, and to take ownership of their engagement in higher education. Macquarie mentors, often from similar backgrounds to the students, serve as positive role models and seek to foster students' confidence in their own capacities and high aspirations whilst encouraging them to think laterally about the opportunities available to them. This paper will discuss the benefits and success of the Macquarie Mentoring program as a flexible platform with which to engage high school students from refugee backgrounds in higher education.

In the current educational climate, there is growing recognition of the need to support the engagement in higher education of certain previously under represented social groups, and coupled with this recognition is a push for a more flexible means through which to achieve this. People from a language background other than English (LBOTE), and specifically those who have come to Australia as refugees face numerous challenges in their attempts to engage in higher education (Silburn, Earnest, Butcher & de Mori, 2008). The effects of trauma, alienation, language difficulties, extra family responsibilities and a lack of cultural capital in Australia are just a few of the issues faced by people from refugee backgrounds that have an impact on their engagement in higher education. The current support systems that are in place to assist people from refugee backgrounds engage in higher education, in many cases are often not enough to overcome the immense barriers that they face and so this group is continually under-represented in Australian higher education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). More flexible and dynamic approaches may be necessary to assist people from refugee backgrounds to over-come the barriers they face and allow them to successfully engage in higher education.

This paper will argue that a needs based mentoring approach is imperative as a support for young people from a refugee background, using the Macquarie Mentoring program

as a case study. Needs based mentoring is a dynamic model of engagement that has been successful in educational engagement. This paper will discuss the LEAP Macquarie Mentoring program and its approach to engaging high school students from refugee backgrounds in higher education. A description of the program, its rational and results are discussed in the interest of promoting dynamic engagement strategies and the continued support of students from refugee backgrounds.

The social dimensions of education

In the recent past, equality in the educational context has been promoted through the lens of identical treatment of students (Silburn & Box, 2008). In the current educational climate however, the understanding of the diversity of students' needs and the responses to these needs is in a state of continued development. Increasingly, students from a diverse range of experiences and demographics are recognised as valuable contributors and investments in a higher education context (Bradley et al., 2008). Harnessing diversity has become a key priority instead of its previously marginal status in the educational realm (Silburn & Box, 2008). The heterogeneous nature of the student body and the under representation of certain 'equity groups' in access to higher education (Bradley et al., 2008) has particularly made apparent the need for more flexible platforms to meaningfully engage students in the education system and practically enable access to higher education via pathways.

LBOTE students

In New South Wales government schools the percentage of students from a language background other than English (LBOTE) has risen from 27.4% in 2006 to 30.2% in 2012 with an estimated 229 106 LBOTE students from 240 language backgrounds, enrolled in government schools (DEC, 2012). Students from LBOTE backgrounds face many barriers when engaging in higher education in Australia ranging from language difficulties, to a lack of cultural capital (Multicultural Development Association, 2010). So far, many studies of LBOTE students have thus far neglected to sufficiently differentiate the contextual needs and experiences of LBOTE students, based on criteria such as cultural and educational background, and how long students have lived in Australia (Williamson, 2012). This reinforces the need for a nuanced response to the complex needs of students from LBOTE backgrounds in order to meaningfully promote substantive equality outcomes (Williamson, 2012; Silburn & Box, 2008).

Refugee Context

Of LBOTE students, those who have come to Australia as refugees face additional barriers and catering to the needs of these students is necessarily complex. The number of people coming to Australia as refugees has been growing in recent years (Refugee Council of Australia, 2013) and of arrivals between 2004 and 2010, up to 43% have been under the age of 18 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011). Programs which cater to young people are thus particularly important in the context of service provision, including educational support programs. This is especially valuable as higher levels of educational attainment are strongly correlated with improved income levels (Silburn and Box, 2008), which would otherwise be inequitably distributed.

A typical issue for many young people from a refugee background is irregular schooling patterns prior to settlement (Weekes, Phelan, Macfarlane, Pinson & Francis, 2008). The consequences of disrupted or incomplete schooling are multifaceted, including fewer opportunities to develop the desired skills and competencies which other students have consistently consolidated throughout the schooling process (Weekes et al., 2008). Additionally, due to the geographical distribution of world conflicts, young people from a refugee background often lack English language proficiency prior to settlement. In Australia, the predominant provision of high school education in English creates an extra barrier which young people from a refugee background must overcome. This may also make young people from refugee backgrounds less confident to actively participate in discussions and other academic activities (Earnest, Joyce, de Mori, & Silvagni, 2010). Such barriers often result in a slower rate of learning, creating even greater difficulties in providing sufficient support such students and meaningfully measuring progress (Silburn et al., 2008).

Alongside academic outcomes, the psychological and social needs of students from refugee backgrounds are particularly significant. Trauma is a common experience, which can severely restrict the ability of young people to concentrate, engage and learn in the short and long term (Weekes et al., 2008; Aroche & Coello, 1994). Additionally, students from a refugee background often experience bullying and stigmatisation. This can be predicated on having access to the additional educational supports which are needed to remedy the multilayered disadvantages they experience (Silburn, et al., 2008). Such students may also experience identity crises and feelings of isolation whilst struggling to adjust to predominant norms in the Australian context. While young people often experience identity struggles, and difficulties adjusting to new academic cultures such as university, these difficulties may be more pronounced for students adjusting to a new national environment (Williamson, 2012). Emotional distress may be exacerbated by low academic performance, despite such academic outcomes being understandable given the compounding difficulties young people from a refugee background face (Weekes et al., 2008).

It is also important that young people from a refugee background are given the opportunity to express their own aspirations, and hence promote agency through self-guided goals. Such an approach reinforces the resilience which people from refugee backgrounds strongly exhibit, and which makes them capable learners. This strengths-based approach also helps ensure that those participating in such programs do not feel targeted by a program for lack of capacity or personal deficiencies. Rather, this is a symbol of the strengths they carry, and the desire to support such individuals in a way that best reflects their own interests.

While young people from a refugee background often experience common difficulties, these are likely to be experienced to different extents, and have different effects on educational outcomes. What remains clear is that the need for more holistic, representative and inclusive educational frameworks is important as academic disparities are more likely to reflect differences in access to appropriate educational supports, rather than differences in innate talent and ability. As per the above discussion, educational support programs must recognise the academic, psychological and social needs of young people from a refugee background. Depending on the particular skill set available however, these needs can be met through a variety of

complementary supports, in order to assist young people from refugee backgrounds to reach their greatest potential.

Needs-based Mentoring

Mentoring can be defined as a mutually beneficial relationship between a more experienced person and a learner (traditionally younger), that is developed within an agreed period of time, with the aim of improving learner wellbeing, pathways planning and learner achievement (Grunwald, 2011). Mentoring, as opposed to tutoring or coaching, is a holistic and multidimensional approach to student engagement and is focused on creating long term and sustainable changes in students' lives (Grunwald, 2011). The benefits from mentoring are numerous and mentoring is specifically known to improve student connectivity to their school and their community (Randolph & Johnson, 2008). Mentoring has also been found to be an effective form of intervention strategy to re-engage disengaging students with their education (Rollin, Kaiser-Ulrey, Potts, & Creason, 2003).

Needs-based mentoring is a method of mentoring through which the individual needs of the mentee are the focus of the mentoring, rather than program objectives. Needs-based mentoring takes an individual approach to mentoring, where mentors take a foundational approach to students' development. This approach is guided by the aims and the goals and context of the students, rather than strictly by the goals of a program. The aim of this approach to mentoring is a program that is dynamic and flexible and so able to meet the diverse needs of its participants.

The LEAP Macquarie Mentoring Program

The LEAP (Learning, Education, Aspiration, Participation) Macquarie Mentoring program is a Macquarie University initiative, begun in 2011, as part of the university's continued commitment to widening participation. The program operates in partnership with the NSW Department of Education and Communities, and provides support for high school students from refugee and humanitarian entrant backgrounds. The mentoring program aims to support students to engage in school life, progress in their studies and to plan their transition to higher education. The program specifically aims to:

- develop confidence, resilience and agency
- raise aspirations towards further study
- develop social and cultural capital to navigate the tertiary education system
- develop study and research skills, including ICT skills
- develop an awareness of school and university cultures and expectations in the Australian context
- increase understanding of tertiary education pathways.

The program was set up in consultation with the NSW Department of Education and Communities, partner schools in Sydney's Western Suburbs and with input from students from refugee backgrounds. The program recognizes the complex needs of students from refugee backgrounds (Earnest et al, 2010) and that currently there are programs designed to assist students with their academic work while in high school (Weekes et al, 2011; Naidoo, 2011), but little support available to assist them in investigating higher education options. Many students from refugee backgrounds struggle not only with the academic side of schooling, but lack the background knowledge and cultural capital to understand and access the range of higher education options available to them and the available pathways on offer (Earnest et al., 2010). It is within this area that the LEAP Macquarie Mentoring program operates; working with students in the school grades between year 9 and year 12, using needs-based mentoring to support them to discover, understand and engage with the higher education opportunities available to them.

Since it began in 2011, the LEAP Macquarie Mentoring program has worked with 533 high school students from refugee backgrounds in seven high schools in West and South-Western Sydney. The age of the students varies greatly depending on the school, the year group, their level of prior schooling, and age they were when they arrived in Australia. The majority of students are between the ages of 15 and 23.

Methodological Approach

The Macquarie Mentoring program recruits Macquarie University student volunteers to mentor high school students from refugee backgrounds. Prospective mentors are selected from a pool of student applicants using a paper application and telephone interview process. Personal experience of the refugee experience, prior experience working with people from refugee backgrounds or demonstrated experience and ability in mentoring are essential qualities for successful candidates.

Mentoring sessions run for approximately 11 weeks within the schools, with sessions being overseen by a school coordinator. Mentors work with two high school students from refugee backgrounds for the duration of the 11 week program. The program also includes one on-campus session where the students, their coordinating teachers and their parents are invited onto the Macquarie University campus for a day to experience university life firsthand.

Due to the relatively short duration of the program and the need for program accountability, the 11 weeks are divided into a three section program; 'Introduction and rapport building', 'skill development', and 'pathways to higher education'. Each section of the program has a different focus and provides a guide for mentors when working with their mentees, however the program is flexible and mentors are encouraged to adjust the program to suit the needs of their mentees.

Throughout the mentoring process, the Macquarie mentors work with their students on the areas that their students feel they need assistance with. These can vary greatly from student to student due to the diverse backgrounds of students (length of time they have been in the country, their confidence with the English language, and their reported enjoyment level of school). Areas that are common among all mentoring groups are assistance in setting educational goals, both short term (within the program's time frame) and long term (beyond the scope of the program), developing self-sufficient

research and analytical skills, working to build cultural capital and an awareness of the multitude of post high school educational options and pathways. Building students' confidence in their ability to investigate, engage with and access higher education opportunities is at the core of the program as this has been identified in previous research as an issue for people from refugee backgrounds, and is known to inhibit their ability to successfully engage in tertiary study (Zufferey et al., 2012; Earnest et al., 2010).

Needs-based mentoring: Rationale

Vast differences exist between high school students from refugee backgrounds (between and within schools) in terms of settlement experience, time living in Australia, language ability and confidence, prior schooling, academic ability and confidence, career goals and their understanding of tertiary pathways. Due to the heterogeneous nature of the students in the program (see fig 1.1), a flexible approach to the engagement of the students is necessary so as to accommodate the wide and varying needs of the students. Needs-based mentoring was deemed the best way to accommodate the needs of the students and achieve the aims of the program as it has been found to be effective in youth development and engagement in education (Rollin, Kaiser-Ulrey, Potts, & Creason, 2003; Randolph & Johnson, 2008; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011).

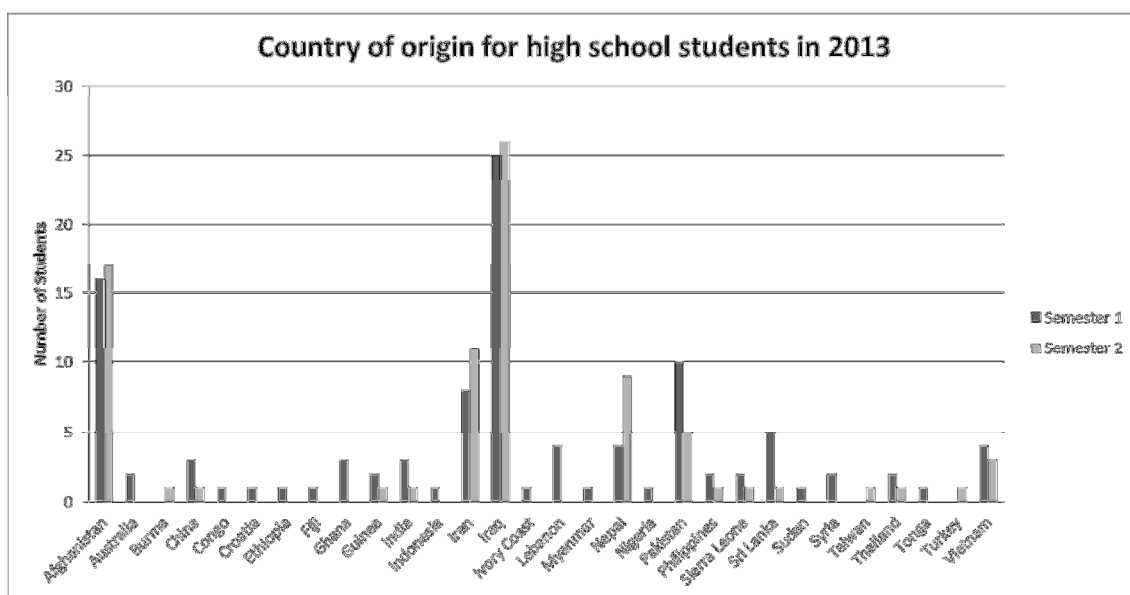


Figure 1. The countries of origin for all high school students within the LEAP Macquarie Mentoring program in 2013. N=188.

As no two students' situations are the same, a flexible approach to the mentoring program allows mentors to not only support students in their investigation of higher education and pathways, but allows them to take a holistic approach to student support and encourage a broader engagement in education, both current and future. Due to the complex needs of people from refugee backgrounds, there are many factors that can impact on students' engagement in their education (as mentioned in our brief introduction to the refugee context) that may not be readily apparent. Silburn and Box (2008) in their paper on educational interventions argued that simply increasing access to higher education will not result in the desired higher rates of engagement as it does

not take into account the cumulative deprivation that comes with the refugee experience. The flexible needs-based approach to student engagement that the Macquarie Mentoring program employs means that mentors are not only able to work with students in regards to higher education and pathways, but they are able to provide guidance and support to students in other areas of their lives that may be impacting on their educational engagement, as many of the mentors in the program have come from a refugee background themselves, or have personal experience of the refugee situation.

Further supporting the approach of mentoring as a means to enable high school students from refugee backgrounds to engage in higher education, Earnest and colleagues (2010) gathered a series of recommendations of ways to better prepare people from refugee backgrounds for university, from interviews with current university students from a refugee background. Their first recommendation was to provide guidance and encouragement to people from refugee backgrounds to attend university, especially for those still in high school.

Program evaluation and discussion

Evaluation of the program was undertaken in June, 2013, using a self-report questionnaire and a group evaluation activity. All responses were in written format and free response. The statistics being presented are made up only of responses that expressly mentioned the theme presented. Examples of some of the student's responses have been provided.

Pre-program Questionnaire

- At the outset of the program, 75% of students stated that they intended to pursue some form of post school education
- 64% of students stated that they wanted guidance about post school educational pathways.

University Experience Day Feedback

- When asked whether attending the university for a day had changed their perception of university, 90% of students said that they were more positive about attending university, and 82% of students said that the day had increased their desire to study at university.
- When asked what they would like about studying at university, 46% of students said that they thought that they would enjoy being able to study the courses they wanted to.
- When asked about what they perceived would be difficult about studying at university, 33% of students believed that course material and exams would be difficult and equally 33% were concerned about how to get to and from university

Post Program Evaluation

The following results are a subset of responses to certain questions for the evaluation. It should be noted that all students responded that they were glad that they participated in

the program, and that all of the students' responses indicated that they had a positive experience in the program.

- When asked what they had gained from participating in the program 44% of students mentioned they had gained a lot of information about higher education and pathways, and 34% of students mentioned that they gained skills that would be helpful in the future.
- When asked what they had learnt about themselves in the program, 32% mentioned that they felt more confident in the program. This was backed up in the group evaluation activity, with 33% of students reporting that they feel more confident in themselves, and 30% of students saying they felt motivated and confident to study at university. The rest of the student's responses mentioned an awareness and development of skills, greater future direction, and an ownership over their pursuit of other interests.

I found that I wasn't really believe in myself. Now I know if I have faith in myself I can do nearly anything I want in my life.

- When asked how the program may have changed the way they think, 34% of students stated that they now had a greater awareness and understanding of their future options and 28% reported a greater importance placed on study

Before I participate in this program, I was thinking about dropping out of school, thinking about what's a use of going to school if I know that I won't have enough ATAR to get into uni. Now I know there are many other programs to help me get into uni. Tha[n]ks to this program.

- When asked whether student's beliefs about their ability to complete higher education had changed, 77% of students said that they had changed, with those students reporting feeling more confident.
- When asked what students liked best about their mentor, 58% of students said it was their mentors personal attributes

She is so so so so friendly and helpful. She encouraged me a lot in everything. She always made me think positive. And encourage me to study hard and go to uniy.

The responses of students to the evaluation questions indicate that the program is having an impact on them, specifically in the areas of building confidence, developing cultural capital, and providing knowledge. These results are directly in line with the aims of the program.

Pre-program results indicate that many of the students in the program saw university as a beneficial post school pathway, and had plans to go to university. However the large percentage of students who stated that they wanted to know more about university is indicative of a general lack of knowledge and understanding of higher education in Australia. Anecdotal evidence reported by mentors supports this, with many mentors

reporting that their mentees were unaware of accessibility schemes such as scholarships and HECS-HELP study loans and pathways such as TAFE pathways.

The results of the post program evaluation indicate a holistic development in students regarding their attitude, knowledge about and perceived ability to engage in higher education. Students reported that through the mentoring program, they had gained valuable insight into the higher education options and pathways available to them. Furthermore the increased confidence reported by many students in their knowledge about higher education and their ability to access it is evidence of the benefit of using mentoring to engage students from refugee backgrounds. Mentors were able to provide support and encouragement to students, as well as information and we are confident that this would have contributed to the students reported increase in confidence. One student specifically mentioned in the evaluation that the diverse backgrounds of the mentors gave her confidence that she could engage in higher education.

I use to think it is impossible to make it because im from a different background however I was surprised when I seen a lot of mentors from different backgrounds

Further supporting the benefit of using mentoring as a flexible method with which to engage students from refugee backgrounds, the best thing about the mentors, as reported by the students, was not the information they gave, but their personal attributes. This evidence supports the value of mentoring as a platform through which to enable education.

Challenges and Further Research

One of the key aims of this program is to support high school students to engage in their education and plan their transition into higher education. However, the substantial time and resources required for longitudinal studies of former participants during and after high school is beyond the current scope of the program. A longitudinal examination of these students beyond the scope of the program would bring much greater clarity to the long term effects of this program. Despite this, we endeavor to follow up with participating schools to enquire about where students from the program have gone after school. So far we have confirmation that three students from one of our partner schools are currently at university, two of them being at Macquarie University, and have cited the program as an important influence in their decision.

While the program's flexible needs based approach enables maximum benefits for participants, drawing meaningful comparative data becomes more difficult as the areas of impact may differ from students to student depending on what their needs were. Furthermore, the current evaluative framework has required a compromise to overcome the risk of student disengagement due to the number of forms to be filled throughout the program, despite their value for evaluation purposes. Nonetheless, the Macquarie Mentoring program continually seeks and implements feedback, relevant theory and collaboration with key stakeholders to attain the best outcomes for participants.

Conclusion

This paper has endeavored to promote the value of needs-based mentoring as a flexible and dynamic approach to supporting and engaging high school students from refugee backgrounds in their education, and in their investigation and transition into higher

education. In the current climate, flexible and responsive methods are needed to meet the needs of students from refugee backgrounds and this paper has shown that mentoring is one such way that this can be achieved. The results of the evaluation of this program indicate that it is supporting students in the areas previously identified in the literature as being an issue for people from refugee backgrounds, and that it is having a positive effect on their engagement in these areas. A longitudinal analysis of the program may bring to light the long term effects of the program.

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