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Pathways to social inclusion: The participation of refugee students in higher education

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The Australian higher education sector is increasingly culturally diverse. Apart from recent school leavers and mature aged adults from various equity groups, there is a growing trend in the participation of students from refugee / humanitarian entrant backgrounds. This group of students come from a position of social disadvantage and have experienced enormous challenges and adverse events in their countries of birth and in their transit countries. Education in Australia represents the promise of a better life but also encompasses multiple factors which impact on their successful transition through university. Effective enabling and support programs not only help individual students and their families but may also impact on broader engagement in the wider community. It forms an important part of the University's policy framework about issues of diversity and social inclusion. This paper outlines the growth of refugee student participation in enabling programs at the University of Newcastle, New South Wales. It includes a discussion of the educational and cultural barriers to learning faced by such students, the range of support currently provided, and the challenges to effectively support students in their educational endeavours and participation in the broader community.

Keywords: refugees, widening participation, enabling, access, equity, social inclusion.

In the contemporary Australian context, the label 'refugee' has a particular political resonance. Refugees are described in the 1951 Refugee Convention as 'people who are outside their country of nationality or habitual residence, and have a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion' (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2012).

Particularly around the time of national elections, discourses about national identity and about those who are, or who are not, 'genuine refugees' and thus entitled to refuge in Australia, loom large. For those who arrive as part of Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian program, education represents the promise of a better life, but as part of a socially disadvantaged group in Australian society, the educational and cultural challenges they face are significant. Research has highlighted the important intersections between the experiences of refugee students, their learning environment and broader community and cultural contexts (Clarke & Clarke, 2010; Earnest, Joyce, de Mori, & Silvagni, 2010; Turner & Fozdar, 2010). In recent years, some Australian universities have been responding to refugee students' complex needs through enabling

and support programs. This paper considers the support provided to refugee and humanitarian entrant students studying enabling programs at the University of Newcastle (UoN) and the effectiveness of that support within the context of the University's key value of equity and social justice and within the broader body of literature on refugee students.

Background

Under its obligations as a signatory to the 1951 Convention of the Status of Refugees, Australia conducts a Refugee and Humanitarian Program which results in the grant of around 13 000 visas each year (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2011a), most of which are granted through the Offshore Humanitarian Program. While the number of visas granted has not changed significantly since 2006–07 (DIAC, 2011a), the number of humanitarian and refugee visas granted to people from Sub-Saharan and North Africa has declined steadily due to an increase in refugee movements in other parts of the world (DIAC, 2011b, 2012). Most humanitarian entrants and refugees are settled in New South Wales. Numbers peaked in 2008–09 at just over 4000, and the state continues to take the highest number of people in this category in Australia (DIAC, 2013a, 2013b).

The Hunter region is home to many humanitarian entrants and refugees, settled here as part of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship's regional resettlement agenda to maintain and build capacity in regional areas, provide employment for humanitarian entrants and support for local employers, and to increase the cultural diversity and vitality of these areas (DIAC, 2009). From 2004 to 2011, 615 refugees were settled in Newcastle and there are established Burundian, Congolese, Mauritanian, Sudanese, Afghan, Ethiopian and Rwandan communities (DIAC, n. d.). The refugees have faced many social and cultural challenges resettling in the region, experiencing the provision of inadequate housing, unreasonable rent for short-term accommodation, and poor relationships between the local settlement service provider and key community groups as reported in an external review of settlement services in the region (Ernst & Young, 2011). Employment for new and longer-term refugees is often limited to factory and processing work from a small number of local employers (DIAC, n. d.). Access to sufficient English language education can also present a challenge to some new arrivals in the region. Adult new arrivals are provided with access to language classes through the Adult Migrant English Program which is consistent with metropolitan areas (Refugee Council of Australia [RCOA], 2010). However, in the Hunter region, school-aged children and some post-compulsory school-aged youth enter local schools shortly after their arrival. While these schools have gained experience in working with refugee and humanitarian entrants (DIAC, n. d.), there is no intensive language program available for refugee children and youth to enter before their mainstream schooling as is the case in other — usually metropolitan — areas (RCOA, 2010). The comparatively low numbers of children and youth arrivals render the provision of such a service difficult and costly given current funding arrangements (RCOA, 2010).

The Hunter and Central Coast areas experience low levels of participation in higher education across the population with only 40 per cent of residents continuing schooling after Year 10 — much lower than the national rate of 60 per cent (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR] and Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research [DIISR], 2011). The University has a high

level of commitment to the values of equity and social justice (University of Newcastle, 2012) and as part of the University's Mission-Based Compact with the Australian government, UoN engages with local communities (including high schools and local service providers) to increase tertiary participation for people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the region. The University of Newcastle's *NeW Directions Strategic Plan 2013–2015* includes as a primary objective the building of access, participation and success for students from a diverse range of national, ethnic and language origins. As an example, the University's Equity and Diversity website includes a 'Cultural diversity and Inclusive Practice Toolkit' which incorporates resources for staff and students on how to promote culturally inclusive environments and practices. As part of NeW Directions, the English Language and Foundation Studies Centre (ELFSC) plays a key role in building access to tertiary education for a diverse range of students including those from a low SES background, indigenous students, international students and students who enter the University from refugee and humanitarian entrant backgrounds.

University of Newcastle's Enabling Programs — support for refugee students

It is important to note that while Australia's intake of refugees from Africa has declined in recent years, the participation in higher education of this group has not. From 2004, a growing number of students from African refugee and humanitarian entrant backgrounds have enrolled in the University of Newcastle's enabling programs, Open Foundation and Newstep. In 2009 those numbers peaked and have remained steady with an average of 20 students per year enrolling. While this is a small percentage of the enabling student cohort, the Centre is committed to supporting the needs and challenges of refugee students which include but are not limited to: disrupted previous educational experiences; developing literacy and critical thinking skills, family responsibilities and lack of home life stability; and financial disadvantage (Clarke & Clarke, 2010; Earnest et al., 2010; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; RCOA, 2010; Tlhabano & Schweitzer, 2007). The country of origin for most students is South Sudan¹, with students from DR Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Burundi, Ethiopia and Mauritania also contributing to the number. The majority of students have entered the Open Foundation program for mature-aged students, however, school-leavers from refugee and humanitarian entrant backgrounds present a growing trend in entering the Newstep program as a pathway to higher education.

Sustained and targeted support for enabling students from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds has been offered by UoN's English Language and Foundation Studies Centre since 2008. Prior to this time a variety of reactive drop-in sessions and workshops specifically targeted at the refugee cohort had been offered however, take up of these support opportunities was low and sporadic. The permanent appointment of an English language support staff member in 2008 allowed early identification and engagement with students who face significant educational and cultural barriers when entering the tertiary education environment. The support staff member has built trusting relationships with students and provides an easily accessible, safe environment in which to seek and gain support. The educational and cultural challenges faced by refugee

¹ Prior to South Sudan's independence in 2011, these students reported their country of origin as Sudan.

students will be considered within the context of the authors' experiences — as an English Language Support teacher and as a Lecturer in sociology in the Open Foundation program. The effectiveness of the support service in addressing these challenges will also be considered by analysing the issues within the broader body of research on refugee experiences in Australian and some other Western universities. The issues raised may point the way for future research projects within the ELFSC aimed at providing quality learning experiences and more effective and supportive structures.

Educational and cultural challenges

Harris and Marlowe (2011) refer to the relative dearth of research on refugee students' educational experiences and the need to further understand their concerns and academic aspirations. They make the pertinent (and perhaps obvious) point that refugee students have additional obstacles beyond the experiences of Australian-born students. For refugee students, the university can be an alien environment which is indeed 'far from a level playing field with respect to knowing the "rules of the game"' (Harris & Marlowe, 2011, p. 187). It is important to note at this point that many Australian-born students who enter enabling programs at UoN as in other Australian universities lack academic skills such as structuring an essay, finding appropriate academic material in the library or online, referencing appropriately, and may find developing a reflexive and critical learning style very challenging. However, Australian-born and educated students have usually had experience of other educational settings within Australia, have been taught some writing skills and have some idea about teacher expectations within a relatively familiar cultural context. It is hardly surprising that the most commonly identified challenge for refugees is competency in English language (Brooker & Lawrence, 2012; O'Rourke, 2011). The importance of language study as a pathway to further educational and employment opportunity is well documented in the literature (see for example, Brooker & Lawrence, 2012; Clarke & Clarke, 2010; Earnest et al., 2010; Ferede, 2010; Harris & Marlowe, 2011). Certainly, Newstep and Open Foundation refugee students express language competency as their main concern even when their English language skills appear to be, in face-to-face interactions, very good. However, as many of the researchers point out, and is consistent with the experience of the authors of this paper, the challenges our institutions face in properly supporting refugee students are about much more than the provision of language support. The remainder of the paper will attempt to map out the broad themes which have been identified by the authors as impacting the level and effectiveness of the support available in the context of the UoN. The themes include; the cultural meanings placed on education and the importance of family; negotiating learning styles in an unfamiliar setting; and the crucial intersections between education, community and social inclusion.

Cultural meanings placed on education — the 'Fourth Pillar'

Amani El Jack's paper, 'Education is my mother and father' draws on her decade of field work in Kenya, Sudan, Uganda and North America where she considers the importance of gender values on Sudanese refugee women and girls' experiences of education. Access to education in this context allows women and girls to gain skills which can lead to their engagement in the public sphere and paid employment. El Jack (2010) suggests that in refugee camps 'education is often viewed as the "fourth pillar" of humanitarian assistance: just as important as the other three pillars of food, shelter, and health services' (p. 23). The Sudanese proverb 'Education is my mother and father'

is often used to refer to their disrupted early schooling experiences and instability in their family life. Clarke and Clarke (2010) eloquently describe the importance of having an understanding of students' current context by understanding where they have come from — 'victims of a long protracted war; witnesses to the break-down of civil society; suffering loss of family members, social dislocation and loss of opportunities; subject to discrimination and, in many cases, torture; and spending extended periods moving about or living in refugee camps outside of Sudan' (p. 46). The idea of education as the "fourth pillar" is reiterated in the work of Sinclair (2001) in McBrien (2005) who also argues that education should be viewed 'as an essential element of humanitarian response to crisis' (p. 338).

The issue of a disrupted education is a significant barrier to all refugee students in the UoN context. While some have studied for a period of time in the Australian school system, education disruption has a major impact on their ability to be successful in the tertiary education setting. McBrien (2005) believes that the psychosocial well-being of students is dependent on 'a sense of safety, a sense of self, and an adjustment to the cultural expectations of a new country while maintaining a connection to their heritage' (p. 339). The authors' experience with supporting refugee students at UoN concurs with this.

The particular cultural meanings placed on refugee education also include the level of prestige attached to a university degree in the broader community. The authors' experience with young refugees suggests their educational goals are linked to future financial gain as well as a higher social status within their ethnic communities both in Australia and in their country of origin. Some students have also spoken about taking their degrees back to South Sudan to help build the new nation. Similarly, in Clarke and Clarke's (2010) research from the University of Southern Queensland, students referred to 'the development of skills they could use if or when they returned to Sudan' (p. 44). Harris and Marlowe (2011) indicate refugee students feel a high level of expectation for academic success from within their communities. Some refugee students at the UoN are under significant pressures from their broader ethnic community to be successful in study and work. The English Language Support teacher has supported students who hide their academic results from family and community members in an effort to keep face within the group. As Harris and Marlowe (2011) further suggest there is sometimes pressure to financially support their families in Australia and their country of origin. Women have the additional burden of being primarily responsible for the domestic duties of cleaning, cooking and caring for the young (Joyce, Earnest, de Mori & Silvagni, 2010). While some UoN female students have acknowledged that such obligations are present, they usually do not concede that these duties make an impact on their ability to study. However, perhaps, as Harris and Marlowe (2011) state, they are showing a degree of forbearance, that is, 'the tendency of students to minimize or conceal problems so as not to trouble or burden teaching staff' (p. 193). The relationships between teachers and refugees students will be considered in the next section.

Negotiating different learning styles in an unfamiliar setting

Linda Morrice (2009) in her study of refugees in UK higher education effectively uses the work of Bourdieu to provide an understanding of the refugee educational experience. She suggests that considering Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and

habitus, enables a shift of focus away from refugees as somehow ‘deficient’ and places the emphasis on considering the particular ‘field’ or educational setting. Habitus refers to taken-for-granted ways of behaving, such as how we speak, think, gesture, stand and feel and how this is related to our social and cultural background. According to Bourdieu, differences in habitus mean that some groups in the education setting will feel like ‘fish out of water’ and are disadvantaged because they do not know the ‘rules of the game’ or the social norms (Bourdieu, 1977 in Morrice, 2009, p. 663). Also, the social and cultural capital refugees may have gained in their country of origin may not be recognised in the new cultural setting of the university or in their employment. Clarke and Clarke (2010) refer to the very formal school structures, strict discipline and rote learning which characterises the African school experience and students’ difficulties in adjusting to new communication styles and structures. Similarly, Joyce et al. (2010) refer to the difficulties in negotiating new learning cultures where self-directed learning is a cultural norm. In the UoN setting, the English Support teacher offers support primarily one-on-one and face-to-face based on a principle of flexibility and availability. For example, meeting times are negotiated face-to-face (rather than via the University’s online registration system) and appointments are flexible in length and content, providing not only language support, but also enabling academic literacies, navigating UoN services and systems, building connections with professional and academic staff, and providing guidance on participating in aspects of the wider community (usually related to seeking employment).

The aim is, as Harris and Marlowe (2011) suggest, to ‘move beyond a model focused on intensive orientations towards fostering a stronger and ongoing relational dynamic between students, staff and academic support centres’ (p. 192). While the ELFSC does not have a dedicated ‘support centre’ for refugee students, the support teacher’s office has become a ‘hub’ for any support which is needed. This includes taking students to meet with both professional and academic staff who may be able to assist with specific course-related and administrative issues. The students use the office as a meeting place or as a place to drop off textbooks for friends to collect later. The office is equipped with a computer dedicated to student use and students often complete their work or use the printing facilities in the office. This alleviates some of the financial burden and access to technology problems faced by students. The office is also equipped with some of the key textbooks for Open Foundation or Newstep courses which students can borrow when needed.

Early engagement with the English Language Support teacher has been the focus of the program since it began in 2008. Because the scope of the program is far more wide reaching than the name suggests (for example, dealing with academic literacies and institutional administrative matters, referrals to other support services and links to academic staff), students’ engagement with the support teacher can be a way of engaging with the institution. The support is ongoing and continues for students when they leave their enabling course and enter their undergraduate degree.

At UoN, as is the case in other Australian universities (Harris & Marlowe 2011), some academic and professional staff go to remarkable lengths to assist refugee students who are struggling. They give a significant amount of their own time, and in the case of casual and part-time staff, often without payment. However, challenges arise in the varying levels of cultural competence shown in staff interactions with students. Fozdar and Torezani (2008) highlight the negative perceptions attributed to refugees in some

settings. They state that ‘humanitarian migrants are often the focus of negativity, due to the perception that they are less likely to assimilate into “Australian” life because of their cultural distance in terms of language, values and practices’ (p. 32). Some academic and professional staff assume language difficulties where there may be other issues at play. For example, an academic asked the support teacher whether a particular student ‘knew’ English because she had found it difficult to express herself verbally in a one-on-one interaction with the academic. The South Sudanese student confided to the support teacher how anxious she was when speaking with her lecturer. The support teacher was able to explain this to the lecturer who was more understanding in later exchanges with the student. There is an ongoing need to educate the educators so they are aware of, and have the confidence and knowledge to implement, university policies regarding cultural awareness. Refugee students have also spoken with the English Support Teacher about their difficulties in relating to the primarily ‘Australian’ focus of the curriculum. This is consistent with Earnest et al.’s (2010) study where participants reported that courses were too focused on local Australian issues and that they felt at a disadvantage from their limited knowledge of Australian culture and history.

In relation to staff cultural awareness issues, the ELFSC and the Equity and Diversity Unit in conjunction with the Wollotuka Institute, have been involved in workshops on cultural competency in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures and have an ongoing commitment to develop the skills, values and critical reflection of academic and professional staff. It is important to be aware however, of the increasing work pressures (teaching, administrative and research) and time constraints experienced by academic and teaching staff. In Harris and Marlowe’s (2011) study, staff expressed empathy for African refugee students but often felt that they were not adequately resourced to assist. The researchers also recognised that the provision of services does not necessarily guarantee improvements in student experiences or outcomes. The final section will address the important intersections between education, community and social inclusion by considering ELFSC attempts to effectively engage with refugee students, not only in the University setting but by fostering interactions in the broader community.

Intersections between education, community and social inclusion

In Turner and Fozdar’s (2010) study of South Sudanese students’ perceptions of community, the students see themselves belonging to three concentric circles of community: ‘the first is that of their particular ethnic or tribal group, the second the south Sudanese community and the third a wider Australian community’ (p. 368). They refer to students’ ‘collective orientation’ where personal gain is not as important as the interests of the larger social group. The meaning of education, as discussed earlier, is linked to a community responsibility, for example, a feeling that the more successful students may have a responsibility to the less successful students. Turner and Fozdar (2010) suggest that having more South Sudanese students in mentoring/teaching positions would be helpful and this is consistent with other refugee studies (Earnest et al., 2010; Peterson, 2010). ELFSC has a successful student mentor program where past enabling students volunteer to attend orientation sessions for new enabling students and help new students negotiate the university structure. Attempts have been made at ELFSC to initiate a mentor program specifically for LBOTE and refugee students in partnership with other schools at the UoN. However, it requires the necessity of early engagement with students, a level of trust and a significant investment of time to build

successful partnerships between university schools, ELFSC and refugee students. This is a worthwhile future objective and with appropriate resources and effective planning, could be developed in conjunction with an on-campus refugee students' social group or association.

There does appear to be significant connections between students' improvement over the course of their study and the level of active engagement with teachers (Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Peterson, 2010; Turner & Fozdar, 2010). This involves a relationship with teachers which goes beyond the usual professional helping role and moves to a closer bond between teacher and student. As Peterson (2010) suggests, in his analysis of the Student Refugee Program at universities and colleges across Canada, the potential for 'transformative learning' occurs when 'bonds are formed, and meaningful, often enduring relationships are forged' (p. 118). It is also important to acknowledge how the student's learning environment is influenced by their engagement in the broader community.

Over the years at UoN connections have been built on existing relationships with students and their families and friends, and significant bonds formed through the support staff member's personal and professional involvement in community-based programs and events. The English Language Support teacher builds connections and relationships with the local African community by attending local sporting events — many ELFSC students belong to the Hunter Simba Football Club, a club mainly comprised of youth from the African refugee community of Newcastle. The Support teacher has also attended fundraising events for the local refugee community and made connections with a number of other community groups. The groups include the Hunter African Communities Council and Multicultural Neighbourhood Centre through work on the committee of the REAL D program — a program designed to support and raise aspirations for at-risk African refugee high school students from several Newcastle high schools in partnership with the UoN. The Support teacher has also attended large community celebrations such as a Sudanese student's traditional wedding and a Burundian student's engagement party.

Turner and Fozdars' (2010) findings suggest that 'it may be useful for teachers and other service providers in a refugee/migrant host country . . . to focus on assisting students' negotiation of widening circles of community' and to move beyond relationships of 'official "service provider" or "professional"' (p. 378). Their idea of 'adopting a listening/learning bonding-focused role, as well as a teaching role, and thereby meeting students halfway' (p. 378) is consistent with the role of the ELFSC Support teacher. Similarly, Clarke and Clarke's (2010) study on Sudanese students in Queensland discusses the benefits of engaging the Sudanese community as well as the importance of a social inclusion policy framework which promotes an institutional culture which values diversity.

Conclusion

Refugee and Humanitarian entrants face numerous challenges as they resettle in Australia and for those who are resettled in regional areas such as Newcastle the challenges can be even greater, with limited access to intensive language classes (RCOA, 2010) just one of the hurdles. Universities are seen by the refugee community as institutions which offer not only a pathway to employment but are also linked to a

higher degree of social status within their ethnic community. In short, education represents the promise of a better life. In their study on the experiences of refugee students at universities in Australia, Joyce et al. (2010), recognise the diversity of refugee experiences but emphasise their common experiences related to war that increase their risk of emotional and social health problems. They reiterate the importance of considering their complex needs by using a ‘coordinated approach between families, communities, educational institutions and health services’ (p. 83). With such an important role to play in the lives of refugee students and given the current negative public discourse surrounding refugees, higher education institutions are well positioned to take the lead in linking refugee students with their local communities and facilitating negotiation with the wider community to ‘ensure social inclusion rather than marginalisation’ (Turner & Fodzar, 2010, p. 378). The targeted support offered to refugee students undertaking enabling programs at the University of Newcastle aims to be more than ‘just language support’ and many aspects of it are consistent with the recommendations made in other studies (Clarke & Clarke 2010; Earnest et al. 2010). However, there are further ways in which the experience of both new and current refugee students can be enhanced to facilitate social inclusion in the university and the wider community. More targeted mentor programs, outreach initiatives, and the formation of a refugee students’ association (Harris & Marlowe, 2011) are practical measures that can be implemented with considered planning in partnership with key University and community stakeholders.

This paper has considered some of the educational and cultural challenges faced by refugee students from the authors’ experiences working with refugee students and within the wider literature on the topic. However, there is a need for qualitative research on the lived experiences of refugee students, (as well as the broader cohort of LBOTE — language background other than English — students), in the Hunter region, from the point of view of those most affected. This could include investigating how successful refugee students have been in transitioning from enabling programs into their undergraduate program and beyond. Education for refugee students is intricately linked to their particular cultural understandings of ‘community’ in all its forms. A greater understanding of the important intersections between education, community and social inclusion is the contemporary challenge for tertiary institutions which have a significant responsibility to meet the educational needs of their increasingly diverse student cohort. For refugee students though, the stakes may be somewhat higher than for others, as education is the ‘fourth pillar’ of humanitarian assistance, a link not only to employment, but also to a sense of cultural belonging and the feelings of security that this brings.

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