Research and Development in Higher Education:
The Shape of Higher Education
Volume 39

Refereed papers from the
39th HERDSA Annual International Conference

4 - 7 July 2016
Esplanade Hotel, Fremantle, Australia

Ramsay, G., Baker, S., Miles, L., & Irwin, E. (2016). Reimagining support models for students from
refugee backgrounds: Understandings, spaces and empowerment. In M. Davis & A. Goody (Eds.),
Fremantle, Australia, 4 – 7 July 2016.

Published 2016 by the
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia, Inc
PO Box 6106, Hammondville, NSW 2214, Australia
www.herdsa.org.au

ISSN 1441 001X
ISBN 978-0-908557-96-7

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DIISR
requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence and they reviewed the
full paper devoid of the authors’ names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity.
Papers were reviewed according to specified criteria, including relevance to the conference theme and
audience, soundness of the research methods and critical analysis, originality and contribution to
scholarship, and clear and coherent presentation of the argument. Following review and acceptance, this
full paper was presented at the international conference.

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Reimagining support models for students from refugee backgrounds: Understandings, spaces and empowerment

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The role that education plays in the resettlement of students from refugee backgrounds is receiving increasing attention, yet understandings of how institutions respond to the identified needs of these students are less developed. A small body of empirical literature substantiates anecdotal evidence from practitioners about how the structures of higher education can hinder these students’ success in their studies through not recognising the complex suite of specific needs that students from refugee backgrounds have. This paper is based on research that explored, through a reciprocal research methodology, the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds enrolled in undergraduate degree programs at a regional university in Australia, where the student and staff population is predominantly from a monocultural Australian background. Working from the finding that the participants felt excluded within/from the forms of institutional support on offer, we seek to imagine how an institution could better engender a sense of belonging. We propose three approaches that could be implemented to better accommodate the support needs of students from refugee backgrounds, that transcend the limited horizon of ‘learning’ support: firstly, by developing face-to-face channels for information rather than relying on online systems of support; secondly, championing training for university staff; and thirdly, creating inclusive spaces through which to develop institution-wide cultures of belonging.

Keywords: Students from refugee backgrounds, support, belonging, reciprocal research.

Introduction

At a time of unprecedented displacement across the globe, the impetus for developing understandings of, and improvements to, the settlement of refugees has never been more necessary. Education is often a key priority for refugees in resettlement, particularly for those settled in countries with markedly different language and cultural backgrounds (El Jack, 2010; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010; Stevenson & Willott, 2007). In 2016, Australia is expecting to
resettle 12,000 additional Syrian refugees on top of its annual 13,750 offshore and onshore intake, and many of these people will enter the Australian education system. This translates into an expected increase in the participation of students from refugee backgrounds in the Australian tertiary education system. However, the complex suite of specific needs that students from refugee backgrounds bring to higher education may not be recognised or met through existing institutional structures. Indeed, it is arguable that the increasing diversity of the student body is not well-represented in the pedagogies, curricula or learning and teaching activities that construct tertiary education (Dawson, Charman & Kilpatrick, 2013; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Clarke, 2007).

In this paper, we focus on the needs of undergraduate students from refugee backgrounds, and outline better support mechanisms in terms of teaching, learning and student experience, which emerged from the reciprocal research described in this paper. Support systems—including student liaison, literacy and numeracy assistance, counselling, careers advice—are key to underpinning the widening participation agenda in Australia. However, the centralisation of support services in many Australian educational institutions belies a view that study support is directed at an ‘ideal’ and homogeneous student body—Australian-born, educated in Australia, native English speaker, school-leaver—and not at students who come from different cultural/language backgrounds and/or who may have had fragmented previous educational experiences. The literature clearly points to the need for tailored guidance or support available to aid students from refugee backgrounds with their studies (Naidoo, et al., 2015; Earnest & DeMori, 2008; Clarke, 2007). Therefore, while the ability to access the same support mechanisms as native students may suggest that the system is ‘fair’, this apparent ‘fairness’ may actually impede the educational experiences and engagement of students from refugee backgrounds, and arguably other marginalised and disadvantaged groups of students, because they do not recognise it as reflecting their own needs.

This paper reports on a project that explored the reflections and experiences of a group of undergraduate students from refugee backgrounds studying at an Australian regional university. This study identified how the structures of higher education impede students from refugee backgrounds’ success in their studies as a result of not recognising the complex suite of specific needs that they may have. As well as identifying participants’ experiences that were identified as hindering their learning, the project also set out to make recommendations about how the systems and practices at the University where the research was conducted could be adapted to make better provisions for students from refugee backgrounds. This paper provides a review of the growing research into the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in higher education and reports findings that suggest these students commonly experienced exclusion and a lack of belonging, particularly with respect to accessing and utilising the support mechanisms on offer. We also include a set of recommendations for adapting practices to better support students from refugee backgrounds.

Students from refugee backgrounds in higher education

The experiences of students from a refugee background in higher education are receiving increased attention in scholarly research (see Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Joyce et al., 2010; Joyce et al., 2010), although it arguably remains an underexplored area of interest. Much of this research in the Australian context focuses on the experiences of young people in primary and secondary school education, and predominantly on students from African countries (for example, Ferfolja et al., 2011; Matthews, 2008). However, if universities are going to support not only their access to university but also their participation and retention within degree
programs, the specific needs of students from refugee backgrounds requires exploration (Earnest & DeMori, 2008; Silburn et al., 2010). This imperative implies that research needs to not only recognise the particularities of how students from refugee backgrounds experience tertiary study but, in addition, to consider the ways in which universities can develop support systems that can best meet the identified needs (Clarke, 2007). Recent Australian research has started to address this dearth of scholarly literature regarding the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in higher education, and a particular focus in this field is the ways in which students from refugee backgrounds are prepared—or ‘underprepared’—for tertiary study (Naidoo et al., 2015; Silburn et al., 2010). Other research recognises that students from refugee backgrounds studying at university, and utilising tertiary education to seek employment, are impacted by diverse and complex social, health, and financial factors, as well as educational concerns related to language, disrupted or misrecognised knowledges, and discrimination (Lawson, 2014; Lenette & Ingamells, 2013; Wache & Zufferey, 2013; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010; Earnest et al., 2008). The findings from this paper build on this body of knowledge, and specifically contribute to dialogue related to the ways in which students from refugee backgrounds perceive and access university support systems.

**Methodology**

The aim of the project was to avoid a recognised tendency to speak about persons from a refugee background in scholarly research (Block, Riggs & Haslam, 2013; Pittaway, Batolomei & Hugman, 2010), and to instead privilege the voices of students themselves. As such, we drew on the principles of sustained and reciprocal research developed by Yin (2011) to employ an ethnographic approach to the project that permitted engagement with the research participants over a three-month period of data collection. Accordingly, the research design was reciprocal and participatory, and included the use of a student reference group to co-produce themes drawn on in subsequent interviews; in-depth semi-structured interviews; ongoing engagement with the participants over the three-month period of research; and a follow-up meeting with the participants to seek feedback on our interpretations of the project findings, and potential outcomes. Although the exploratory basis of this project and the small number of participants is not intended to produce generalisable findings, the perspectives of these participants nonetheless provides insight into the ways in which students from refugee backgrounds perceive and utilise university support services and provides a platform from which to develop initiatives to improve study experiences at higher education institutions, and from which future research may stem.

**Data collection and analysis**

The data for this paper are drawn from the semi-structured interviews that were conducted with the seven participants who were undertaking undergraduate studies at the main campus of a regional Australia university. The recruitment of these students was complicated by the aim to disrupt the assumptions that can be attached to students from a refugee background in higher education discourses and practices (Naidoo et al., 2015). A further complicating issue is the difficulty of identifying who ‘refugee students’ are. Rather than treating students from refugee backgrounds as a homogeneous group categorised purely by their visa status, we sought to develop a method of recruitment that would usefully expand the underpinning classifications to include what the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR, 2014) refer to as coming from ‘refugee-like’ situations, thus including students who may have experienced the torture and/or trauma of forced migration but who do not personally hold refugee visa status. In order to identify a cohort of participants who had shared
experiences of forced migration without stigmatising them as a homogenous group, we firstly identified the countries set out by the UNHCR as being “source” countries of refugees and utilised university admissions data to identify undergraduate domestic students who originated from that broad set of countries. Once a list of over 400 potential participants had been identified we emailed this cohort, inviting them to participate in the project if they identified themselves as students from a refugee background. Therefore, we did not delineate the students based on whether or not they migrated to Australia on a Humanitarian visa category; instead, we recruited based on the self-identification of being from a refugee—or ‘refugee-like’—background.

Following this approach, we recruited seven research participants who originated from four African and one Asian countries. The participants included three women and four males. All of the students were undergraduates, but at different stages of their degree program: three students were in the first year, two students were in their second year, one in their final year. The remaining student was in the second year of his second undergraduate degree. The participants were recruited from a variety of disciplines, including teaching, social work, nursing, engineering, social science, biomedical sciences, and visual communication and design. Interviews lasted between 35-80 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were sent to each of the participants for their feedback; none of the participants requested any changes or omissions. The data was analysed by the research team, who individually coded key themes from the interviewee transcripts and then cross-validated these findings as a team. Recurrent codes were drawn on as key themes and presented back to the participants as part of the reciprocal research design for member-validation and collective discussion of possible future directions. The participants’ anonymity was protected through the use of self-selected pseudonyms, which are also used in this paper.

Findings

A sense of being excluded from institutional support systems emerged as a key finding in the interviews. This sense of exclusion stemmed from a variety of causes, including: digital gatekeeping of services; a lack of understanding from staff in relation to the experiences of refugee-background students and assumptions of deficiency. Moreover, there was an affective sense that spaces on campus—including support services—were designed for a homogenous student body which does not cater to the often distinct learning profiles of students from a refugee background. The support services the students referred to in interviews included academic ‘skills’ development, assistance with language, careers advice, support regarding choice of degree program, counselling services, advice regarding student fees, library services and student clubs and organisations. In this section, we relay these findings, and also set out recommendations for institutional change.

Digital gatekeeping: assumptions about access to and proficiency with online environments

Many of the support services that are available to students require that they first book an appointment online prior to attending the service. The participants identified this ‘digital gatekeeping’ of services as a barrier to their accessing them, which is an issue that many students could potentially face. For some of the students interviewed, computer literacy made accessing such services difficult and impractical:

One thing that was initially difficult is that everything is on Blackboard. Everything is self-directed. Initially I found it difficult. You understand? I found
it difficult because my computer knowledge is not good. That is one of the difficulties. (Togie, Social Work)

Another student pointed out that the online systems used to access support services were not user-friendly, meaning that even those with computer literacy can be put off by the requirement of arranging service use from online portals:

They say, ‘go online, go online,’ because I was not able to do things. Even now, this careers support service, I tried to book an appointment there. I couldn’t do it. They say, ‘just drop in’, but they need you to book it online. That shows you that sometimes people struggle to find things online. That can make frustration for people … It’s like the way that the website is designed, and the lack of knowledge of doing things online. It is a bit of both. (Lmutima, Social Science)

This same student suggested that these online systems felt exclusionary, and stated that:

The services are not for us because sometimes when you want to use a service, they tell you, like, ‘go online,’ or you don’t get the support you were expecting before. The prevalence of support being either mediated or offered online is clearly an issue beyond the site where this research was conducted, and is an accepted feature across the Australian higher education sector. Online support certainly has benefits, particularly for students who are unable to access services in person due to distance or family/work responsibilities. However, the dominance of web-based support is underpinned by a series of underexplored assumptions. These include students being able to use a computer, that students have access to the internet, that students can navigate (often complex) booking systems, and are happy to register for help via a digital gatekeeper. From an institutional perspective, working within the increasingly market-based academy, finding efficiency savings and maximising resources by centralising support online is an attractive proposition. However, our data supports the notion that registering for support online can be exclusionary for students from refugee backgrounds. Naidoo and colleagues (2015) suggest that “pushing” student support services online seems to assume that students … are a homogenous group with similar capital and capacity to manage the online university environment” (p.10). Naidoo and colleagues suggest that students from refugee backgrounds transitioning to higher education would benefit from services being delivered to them in face-to-face contexts. Our findings support this recommendation. In addition, providing access to services, such as counselling and careers advice, that do not require online registration would be beneficial.

**Recommendation: Developing face-to-face channels for support**

Broadening the range of methods that institutions use to disseminate information and register for support would allow for greater engagement with services and facilitate a sense of belonging. The findings from this study suggest that face-to-face options for information delivery and registrations for support should be made available for all students who experience barriers when navigating digital systems. It would also be desirable for the proposed ‘information broker’ to undertake multicultural/trauma and torture-specific training, and to be able to relate to the needs of students from refugee backgrounds. Ideally, such a person would also have a refugee background.

**Interactions with university staff**
Another issue that impacted on students accessing support, in terms of both organised support services or ad hoc from teachers and lecturers, was the interactions they had with university staff. Whilst most of the participants reported positive interactions with university staff, their reflections suggest that helping staff to better understand the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds would be beneficial. As one student described:

Student: And another thing I want to add … you know you can meet a person who has no experience in or assisting people who come from where I am coming from. And then maybe, they can feel like, you know, they can feel uncomfortable, and they can give you a little bit of information…

Interviewer: So what happens?

Student: You break the trust. You break their belief. They feel like, uh, you are not supporting me because maybe my skin colour. The way I speak. Because I am not this, this, this. But you know, if they go towards a proper service, a proper person who understands the background, it would be an improvement. (Tony, Engineering)

Another student described how she had become an informal mentor for other students from her cultural background because the mainstream support services cannot respond to the kinds of experiences students from refugee backgrounds are confronted with whilst studying:

Student: Sometimes they will try to go to someone, and they will not understand it … But if they come to me, I understand exactly what they are saying. And especially sometimes we are just sitting down and talking about the lectures and tutorials. And they will say, ‘Oh, in the lecture today the lecturer assumed I didn’t know anything’. And I understand what they are talking about, because that happened to me as well. So you guys have never experienced anything like that, but for us that is normal. For me now, that is the norm.

Interviewer: So people now they just assume that you don’t know anything?

Student: Yeah. Nothing. No. And especially like, if I tell people that I am nearly finishing my teaching degree they are like, they look at me like, ‘how did she do that?’ Yeah so they are thinking that, ‘what is she doing’ or ‘what is that’ or ‘how did she get there’ so there are questions in their head, so the look on their facial expression will tell you all about it. (Ellie, Secondary Teaching)

This student is describing how assumptions of deficiency from others, particularly from academic/teaching staff, can impact on the kinds of support they seek. This perceived lack of empathy and understanding was widely reported by the students, and the need for staff training was described in their accounts, as the comments below attest:

Train them that there are people from other cultures, you don’t have to disrespect them, you don’t have to humiliate them, you don’t have to make them feel as if they are not people, because we are all people, human beings, you have a brain, I have a brain, there’s nothing wrong. (Ellie, Secondary Teaching)
The students are suggesting that their encounters with university staff would improve if staff had a better understanding of the experiences of refugee background students, which they felt could translate into more respectful treatment within their educational encounters. Research by Silburn and colleagues (2010) similarly emphasise the need for staff to be aware of student diversity in teaching and learning contexts. In the regional context described in this paper, where diversity is the exception rather than the norm, such multicultural awareness is perhaps more necessary than in metropolitan universities.

**Recommendations: Multicultural training for university staff**

It is possible that the university staff referred to by participants in this study were unaware of the negative impact of their own assumptions and comments regarding the students. Awareness could develop from specific cultural competency training which would be recommended for all frontline administration staff, support and teaching and academic staff. Universities could utilise the expertise of organisations who offer specific training for educators who work with people who have experienced forced migration, trauma and torture. This kind of investment in the workforce of universities could have beneficial implications for the wider student body, as challenging assumptions and critically reflecting could help educators to engage in reflexive practice, and potentially lead to positive changes in terms of developing more inclusive teaching and learning practices.

**Exclusionary spaces**

The students also described feeling that university support services, generally, were not intended for their use, but for students from ‘Australian’ backgrounds:

Student: … many times, it is not because I don’t belong to them, because they are for everyone, but sometimes it feels like many things are for Australians, not for me. When I am encouraged to use something I will use it, but it needs encouragement. Otherwise it starts disappearing out of my mind. And I think of it as not mine. I feel like I don't belong to it.

Interviewer: So is there any specific services? … Are there any other places on campus you wouldn’t go?

Student: Well most of the places would be because of my culture or my religious beliefs there are many areas that I won’t use. But there are other places I will use with my peers or friends, but personally I wouldn’t go to use them. I feel like maybe these places are mine, but you feel like you are going to use it. You don’t exploit it like you are supposed to. Because you don’t feel the power to go and use them. (David, Biomedical Science)

These comments suggest that students from refugee backgrounds can experience a cultural and social disjunction between themselves and the kinds of students they imagine the support services available at the university cater to.

**Recommendations: Creating inclusive spaces**

Developing inclusive spaces on campus for students from refugee backgrounds and others to develop social connections would benefit the institutional culture of the university and help to build a sense of belonging. Creating a designated drop in ‘space’ outside of the formal institutional (exclusionary) support could help to build wider institutional belonging and,
potentially, make students from refugee backgrounds feel comfortable to then seek support from other services at the university. Such a space should be inclusive—not only for students from refugee backgrounds—and allow students to network with staff members from specialised academic and social support services, as requested by students. Staff from those services could be included regularly in the space to provide ‘drop-in’ support. Moreover, developing a ‘safe’ space like the one imagined here could provide students from refugee backgrounds with navigational assistance to access support services, without requiring registration through online booking systems.

Ideally, this space would develop into a student-led endeavour, whereby students could be empowered to take ownership of an on-campus space to organise activities and frameworks of support. Initially the development of such a space would require the input of ‘trusted’ people from the institution, such as staff who have already developed connections with students from refugee backgrounds, but ideally the students themselves would eventually take ownership of the space and its activities.

**Discussion**

The findings from this project suggest that students from refugee backgrounds can be confronted with dual disadvantage when studying at university. Firstly, the distinctive learning profiles of students from refugee backgrounds that have developed within contexts of forced migration can be overlooked, because institutional policy and practice primarily treats them as part of a homogenous domestic student group (see also Naidoo et al., 2015). Arguably, this is problematic for many students—not just those from refugee backgrounds—in the context of contemporary Australian higher education where student cohorts are increasingly diversified (see for example, Gale & Mills, 2013; Murray, 2015; Testa & Egan, 2014). However, the distinctive experiences of students from refugee backgrounds can require specialised models of academic and social support (Silburn et al., 2010) and these specificities are often not recognised in institutional policy, nor teaching and learning practices (Naidoo et al., 2015). At the same time, the participants in this project described feeling excluded from classroom activities and spaces on campus as a result of undeveloped understandings of the educational needs of students from refugee backgrounds, and the perception that staff attach assumptions of difference and deficiency to them. This appears to have developed into a kind of institutional culture of exclusion, resulting in our participants’ shared perception that the official university support services are not ‘for them.’ In an alternative imaginary of support, these services could be disrupted by co-developing with students flexible and dynamic support systems that are able to recognise and respond to the particularities of the learning needs and experiences of broader, more diverse groups of students. These imagined forms of support could promote the development of institution-wide cultural shifts, facilitating the feeling that students’ learning experiences are being recognised, and that they ‘belong’ within their university.

**Conclusion**

In this article we have explored how a group of undergraduate students from refugee backgrounds experienced the institutional support mechanisms available at a regional Australian university. This paper is located within a broader suite of research that responds to a growing interest in the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in higher education. Our findings connect with and build on those of other studies by showing how students can experience exclusion based on assumptions attached to their refugee
background, whilst concurrently having their distinct learning profiles unrecognised through university policy and practices that cater for a homogenous ‘ideal’ student cohort. Our findings indicate that accessing support from the university is hindered for these students from refugee backgrounds by: online registration systems for support that act as ‘digital gatekeepers’; the perception that university staff do not understand their experiences, or attach assumptions of deficiency to them; and the feeling that spaces on campus are exclusionary. In response to these findings, we have recommended that university staff, at practice and policy-making levels, consider

i. developing flexible face-to-face systems through which students can access support services;

ii. ensuring that all staff, both academic and professional, permanent and casual, undertake training that provides awareness on the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds; and

iii. developing physical spaces on campus that are inclusive, student-led, and flexible in use. These spaces could be utilised as an entry point through which institutional support services can be connected with students.

We consider that the implementation of such recommendations could assist in the development of an institution-wide culture of inclusivity and recognition of student diversity. This would be beneficial for all students, and particularly those from refugee backgrounds.

Acknowledgements

The study on which this paper reports was funded by a Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) 2015 seed grant. We wish to thank CEEHE for supporting the project and its dissemination. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.

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