CASE STUDY REPORT:

Supporting school-university pathways for refugee students’ access and participation in tertiary education

Loshini Naidoo, Jane Wilkinson, Kiprono Langat, Misty Adoniou, Rachel Cunneen and Dawn Bolger
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Abbreviations

ABS          Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACARA        Australian Assessment Curriculum and Reporting Authority
AITSL        Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
ALNF         Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation
BICS         Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills
CALP         Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency
CIT          Canberra Institute of Technology
CSP          Commonwealth Supported Places
CSU          Charles Sturt University
DETYA        Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs
EAL/D        English as an Additional Language or Dialect
EAS          Educational Access Scheme
ESL          English as a second language
GWS          Greater Western Sydney
HEPPP        Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program
IEC          Intensive English Centre
OLT          Office for Learning and Teaching
RAS          Refugee Action Support
RCOA         Refugee Council of Australia
SES          Socio-economic status
STARTTS      Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors
TAFE         Technical and Further Education
UC           University of Canberra
UNHCR        United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UWS          University of Western Sydney
Executive Summary

This report examines the barriers and challenges faced by refugee background students transitioning from Australian secondary schools to university. As part of a larger Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) funded cross-institutional study between University of Western Sydney (UWS), Charles Sturt University (CSU), and University of Canberra (UC), it focuses on three main educational regions—Greater Western Sydney (GWS); Wagga Wagga and Albury (regional NSW); and Canberra (ACT). The three regions were chosen specifically for their demonstrated experience in providing targeted programs for refugee students, their significant refugee support programs with schools in the local area and their unique refugee populations.

According to the Bradley Report (2008, recommendation 4), universities need to increase the enrolment of low SES students by 2020. Many students in the low SES category are of refugee or migrant backgrounds. However, there appears to be a disconnect between the intercultural vision universities have for working with their diverse student cohort and the teaching and learning practices within the curriculum, which do not reflect the same vision.

The educational system is one of the first institutions that young refugee background students encounter when settling in Australia. Differences in language, schooling systems, cultural and societal values, along with unfamiliarity in their new country of settlement can present barriers and challenges for many refugee background students entering Australian educational institutions (Earnest, De Mori & Timler, 2010).

General Findings

Refugee background students

The refugee background students interviewed were diverse: some had permanent residency, others had bridging visas, some had arrived with family members and others had arrived alone. They were from a range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and, while some had achieved high levels of academic competence in their home countries, others had received little formal schooling. It is important, therefore, that these refugee background students are not seen as a homogenous group with the same concerns, capabilities and hopes for their future life.
Data obtained from the interviews revealed that the various complex prior life and educational experiences of refugee background students present a number of significant barriers and challenges to their successful transition from secondary school to university. Many of the refugee background students interviewed had high aspirations for educational attainment and a strong desire to succeed academically. Successful transition to tertiary education was inextricably linked to positive interpersonal relationships with peers, teachers, support staff and the wider community combined with the ability to navigate the Australian educational system. Specifically, the students highlighted the challenges of forced migration, interrupted schooling and significant differences in teaching pedagogy as barriers to educational achievement.

However, despite these high aspirations and a desire to transition to tertiary education, data from the university refugee background students revealed a lack of directed support for the transition from school to university. Significant differences in teaching pedagogy and support strategies in secondary schools and universities proved problematic. Mixed messages about enrolment, qualifications and pathways, along with a lack of academic support, guidance and attention were barriers to academic achievement for refugee background students at university. These concerns were reinforced by findings from interviews with university support staff and academics.

English proficiency is a significant barrier to educational achievement and successful transition into tertiary education. English language proficiency usually takes around 7 years to achieve and as such most refugee background students at university are still on their language-learning journey when at university. Differences in teaching pedagogy, assessment structure and modes of learning therefore present additional challenges.

Participants identified the development of interpersonal relationships and social support networks as crucial to academic success, citing that dedicated and accessible learning support was vital in addressing acculturation and achievement barriers. Many students expressed a desire for additional task completion time to combat language or literacy barriers. Students requested targeted information (especially in regard to university admissions requirements) and specialized teacher support in regards to available pathways that would enable their successful transition to university.
Secondary School Teaching and Support Staff

Data emerging from the secondary school teaching and support staff highlighted a number of internal and external support programs targeting support for refugee background students in Australian secondary schools. While the programs identified were largely described as positive strategies, there was some commentary on the difficulty of sustaining programs over the long term due to funding constraints and staff capacity.

Language development and literacy supports at universities are usually generic academic skills programs and are not tailored specifically for the unique language challenges faced by refugee background students. University teaching staff, in particular, were not aware of how their own prejudices or stereotyping may impact their teaching activities and how refugee background students should or could develop English language proficiency to successfully transition at university. Language development and intercultural competence across the curriculum appeared not to be dealt with in any foundational way.

Secondary school teaching and support staff were, in general, supportive of the aspirations of their refugee background students, but this did not prevent teaching and support staff from seeing this particular cohort of students as lacking the means to succeed. While staff were conscious that past trauma, disrupted and limited schooling, language difficulties and unrealistic parental expectations could impede their students’ achievements, they often saw this in terms of deficit.

Teaching staff recognised the lack of resources to support refugee background students and the prohibitive structure of entrance exams and applications to tertiary study. Some teachers expressed deep concern about the effect that uncertain visa and residency status was having on their students. In sum, the attitude of secondary teaching and general staff towards the social capital possessed by refugee background students was highly ambivalent; staff recognised the resilience and motivation of their students, but were inclined to see other difficulties, such as finance, housing and English language development as insurmountable.

All of the secondary school staff were both aware and concerned about the financial challenges these refugee background learners face, confirming the established position in the literature that socio-economic status directly impacts upon the educational outcomes of these
students (Harris & Marlowe 2011). Staff were keenly aware of the additional responsibilities many of the refugee background students had out of school, including employment to support themselves or the family, and significant caregiver roles in the home. These circumstances, coupled with gaps in schooling and traumatic experiences through their journey to settlement in Australia, all contributed to staff acknowledging the additional educational challenges these students face.

Some secondary school and teaching staff at the research sites reported that refugee background students in their classes had unrealistic expectations about their capacity to enter university. Some teachers noted that there were particularly high expectations for students whose parents had tertiary education themselves. However, aspirations and familial expectations varied widely, depending on the country of origin and whether children had arrived by themselves or as part of a family unit. Some refugee background students, particularly those arriving from areas in Africa, arrived unaccompanied by family and were unfamiliar even with the concept of university.

Teachers reported that some refugee background students had high expectations, but the field of aspiration was narrow, specific and based on perceived status and financial rewards. They reported that it was common amongst the refugee background students they taught to aspire to medicine, dentistry and engineering, but most had very little idea of the grades needed and the pathways involved in entering these disciplines and professions. Whilst school staff reported that they encouraged students to seek alternative pathways, such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) (in Canberra) to meet student goals, many did not see these learning institutions as a desirable or appropriate ‘stepping stone’.

However, not all refugee background students aspired to university education. This is sometimes due to the high tuition costs of university education, which prohibits many refugee background students from enrolling. Getting a trade or running a business was seen as more attractive. Teaching staff also expressed very definite ideas about the capability or otherwise of their refugee background students to succeed at tertiary study.
University Teaching and Support Staff

The university teaching and support staff that participated in the study similarly identified the lack of formal university support programs aimed directly at transitioning refugee background students enrolled at university. Data obtained from the interviews revealed that some examples of university programs and practices that supported school to university transition were identified. Overall, however, the support for refugee background students and understanding of the unique prior life experiences faced by students of a refugee background was inconsistent and unpredictable. Moreover, the support programs and practices tended to be untargeted to the distinct needs of refugee background students. One of the reasons for this was the lack of any specific policies dealing with students of refugee background. They appeared to be an ‘invisible group’ at university, with their distinct learning profiles homogenised under a ‘one size fits all’ approach. As a consequence, the creation of specific policies which recognise the distinct issues and assets students of refugee background bring to university studies, an increase in targeted funding and support, and the raising of staff awareness of the unique needs of refugee background students were identified as critical to improving refugee background student transition.

The views of university support staff on the social capital, racialisation and aspirations of refugee background students tended to differ from the views of their academic peers. Support staff were more cognisant of the importance of family and home communities in making choices about courses and which university to attend. They also reported the importance of secondary teachers and mentors, in making the complex and often confusing transition to tertiary study. However, while support staff reported on this social networking as a strength, university lecturers sometimes saw this networking as problematic, even creating what they perceived to be a ‘ghetto’ that impeded their students’ chance of success. Most spoke of refugee background students as a homogenous cohort, whose learning style, inexperience with tertiary education, language and past experiences were inhibiting rather than enabling.

A disconnect between students’ and staff perceptions of the social capital of refugee background students at the tertiary level was abundantly clear. The need to provide a supportive learning culture was overwhelmingly identified as a key factor in enabling and/or constraining full access to and participation in universities for refugee background students. However, there was acknowledgement that current practices, programs and policies were
piecemeal, had considerable gaps and might not be best targeting refugee background students’ distinctive needs.

Scholarships, access to finances and university access schemes such as the Educational Access Scheme were viewed as crucial. Both first year mentoring and retention programs were seen as important in supporting new refugee background students. However, there were few examples of formal structured programs, including academic, literacy and learning assistance designed and aimed specifically at refugee students’ distinctive learning needs. Indeed, although tutoring and mentoring were mentioned as other aspects for strengthening learning skills for at risk students, most staff were not aware of any specific academic tutorial initiatives in their faculties or schools beyond the first year support. They decried this apparent oversight with regard to ongoing student support. Similar to schools, the few available programs tended to be ad hoc, short term or provided under the more general umbrella of student equity services.

Flexibility in relation to assessment, learning practices and service provision was seen to be critical. For instance, one staff member suggested that instead of excluding a student who was failing or struggling in some subjects, the student should be advised to consider taking ‘a step backwards’ for example, enrolling in a bridging program. Inconsistency of funding and lack of coordination and communication in regard to provision of support services was a major issue. Staff rejected the notion of refugee background students as homogenous, with a one size fits all approach to teaching and learning. The notion of ‘pushing’ student support services online seems to assume that students transitioning to university are a homogenous group with similar capital and capacity to manage the online university environment. Staff underscored the fact that the challenges of academic language are present for all learners, but are exacerbated for refugee background students, who require alternative targeted support.

A number of staff suggested good practices that could create an enabling learning culture for refugee students, for example, provision of extra support, clear pathway programs, special consideration, effective school-university communication, and creating a positive word of mouth culture. However, like mainstream school teachers, a number were unsure of how to create a conducive learning environment for students from diverse backgrounds. Their
responses demonstrated a lack of cultural awareness and an indication that some staff may be ill equipped to engage in and with diversity.

Although there were positive responses on how to support refugee students acculturate into the new learning culture, deficit model discourses were apparent in some responses, especially when exploring students’ learning styles. Some staff showed little or no acknowledgement of what may be extenuating circumstances for students to adopt one learning style over another. Understanding refugee background students’ strengths or otherwise regarding social capital is also crucial when it comes to formulating a support structure at a higher learning institution. It allows teaching staff to explore the resources accessible to the refugee background students. Crucially, both university staff and school personnel noted that mental health issues were an area in which awareness and training was needed.

Economic factors such as access to sufficient finances, lack of accommodation and difficulty in securing safe, secure and decent accommodation were major issues that had a detrimental impact on refugee background students’ attendance and ability to focus on study. Apart from learning skills support and transition practices, the teaching staff highlighted the need for universities to provide pastoral and financial care to assist the refugee background students to settle in and concentrate with studies.

Finally, university staff were aware of the importance of school teachers as mentors. Secondary school mentors were viewed as an important factor when it came to building refugee background students’ confidence and mentoring them through the complex process of university admission. Teachers as mentors, forms an important part of a network that strengthens refugee background students’ capacity to aspire towards and access university studies. Across the groups of students and staff at the three universities, there was acknowledgement that current practices, programs and policies were piecemeal, unsystematic, had considerable gaps, overlooked refugee background students as a distinct group with specific needs and abilities, and hence were not best targeting their specific needs and abilities.
Thorny Issues

A number of issues and questions arose from our case study in relation to an enabling culture for refugee background students.

- Both academic and general staff viewed tutoring and mentoring of refugee background students as an important aspect of university support for learners (even if it did not occur consistently or in some instances, at all). This issue raises questions about whether the provision of this kind of support is an abrogation of an academic’s duty in an increasingly diverse student demographic. If the answer to this question is yes, then what is a university staff member’s responsibility when it comes to catering for the needs and abilities of the learners in their classrooms? How far should a university staff member’s responsibility stretch in regard to supporting and enabling this group of learners? For instance, what is a university staff member’s responsibility when a student is frequently missing lectures or tutorials due to housing stress, the need to put food on the table or engage in major caring responsibilities? Is this another agency’s role?

- Contrast between the sheer visibility and greater levels of learning support provided for international students (whose fees are a crucial part of university funding, particularly in an increasingly deregulated environment) and the lack of targeted and specific programs for young refugee background students. This issue raises the question of how well equity groups can be met given straitened times for universities. It also raises the question as to whether money may be playing a far greater role in allocation of resources than concerns for equity. Indeed the invisibility of refugee background students as a distinct cohort, as suggested by the lack of targeted specific policies, programs and supports, was striking.

- The notion of resilience implicitly arises in our case studies. It was clear from the data that a number of refugee background students had achieved their goal of transitioning to university, frequently against the odds. However, this issue raises the question about the completion of university studies for many refugee background students on the tertiary pathway. Data for example on refugee background student retention, goal attainment and degree completion are not readily available or accessible at tertiary institutions.
Key Principles and Recommendations

An enabling learning culture is built on nurturing positive interpersonal relationships with peers, teachers, support staff and the wider community combined with the ability to navigate the Australian educational system. It is a holistic process that extends beyond the formal walls of the face-to-face or virtual classroom and takes into account the needs and abilities of students. It encompasses assistance and targeted support at both individual and systemic levels. It builds on the strengths, resilience and assets that young refugee background students bring to their learning.

In order to achieve this culture, the following needs to be put into place:

Theme 1: Prior Life Experience & Education

- **Ensure that teaching and support staff are aware of the cultural dimensions of refugee background students’ prior life experiences and the impact this may have on their learning and transition at university.**

Refugee background students come from a range of ‘highly differentiated’ prior life experiences, educational backgrounds and schooling practices and should not be classified as homogenous. Teaching and support staff should respect and be aware of how cultural and educational diversity may impact on the university experience for refugee background students.

- **The prior life experiences of refugee background students should be viewed as assets with possibilities for the academic and social cultures of universities rather than problems to be solved.**

The distinct and varied prior life experiences of refugee background students can add significantly to the academic and social cultures of universities. Staff should acknowledge refugee background students as an essential part in celebrating diversity and be encouraged to see the prior life experiences of refugee background students as an essential part of the educational experience.

- **Academic staff should be encouraged to embed cultural understandings and support within their disciplines in order to maximise retention and successful transitions.**
Academic discussion and debate should not take place in a disembodied sphere, rather, academic staff should acknowledge the value of the broad range of prior life and educational experiences refugee background students are able to bring to the intellectual endeavour.

Theme 2: Language

- **Academic supports for refugee background students should be differentiated from migrants, international students or any other ‘special needs’ group to meet the diverse learning needs of the cohort.**

  Refugee background students are extremely diverse in culture, language and life experience. They should not be seen as a single group or subset in the university community.

- **Academic support for refugee background students is best delivered within faculties and face to face, rather than in generic academic skills programs or through online modules.**

  Language usage is specific to disciplines and best taught within the discipline areas. Academic lecturers should see academic literacy, language and meta-language learning as their core business.

- **The multilingual skills of refugee background students should be acknowledged, nurtured and utilised.**

  Refugee background students possess a valuable language skill set. They benefit from networking within their own cultural and language groups and using their languages of origin to understand and collaborate in the classroom. Other students in their classes benefit from the global perspectives these students bring to the classroom.

- **Refugee background students require English language support from staff qualified in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).**

  TESOL trained teachers are able to support the English language development of students as well as provide advice to academics on ways to support and incorporate the language skills and cultural knowledge of refugee background students.
Theme 3: Aspiration, Racialisation, and Social Capital

At a secondary level:

- **Encourage a strength-based approach, viewing students in terms of the languages, skills and experiences that they can bring to the Australian workforce and tertiary education sector.**

  This perspective recognises the resilience of individuals and focuses on the potentials, strengths, interests, abilities, knowledge and capacities of individuals, rather than their limits (Grant & Cadell, 2009). It is in this way that a strengths-based approach differs from traditional deficit models. Networks need to continue at tertiary institutions through mentor schemes to help with the negotiating and transitioning to university.

At a tertiary level:

- **Encourage academic lecturers to see academic literacy, language and meta-language learning as their core business, regardless of their discipline.**

  This model allows bilingual/multilingual refugee background students to take full advantage of their first language knowledge and abilities, to surpass the limits set by their more limited knowledge of their second language (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994). This implies that EAL/D students gain from networking within their own culture and language using their languages of origin to understand and collaborate in the classroom.

- **Encourage all education staff to move beyond a ‘discourse of vulnerability’ and see students from a refugee background as ‘resourceful, capable and skilled’.”**

  Vulnerability is an inescapable fact of existence for refugee background learners that can be respected, exploited, or denied (Brotherhood of St Lawrence, 2011). Refugee background students are extremely diverse in culture, language and life experiences: they cannot be seen as a single group or subset in the university community. They are also not the same as migrants, ‘new arrivals’ or any other ‘special needs’ group.
Theme 4: An Enabling Learning Culture

• **Offer a range of supports specifically targeting refugee background students, including scholarships, financial assistance, assistance to find part-time employment and access to safe and secure accommodation.**

Provision of an enabling learning culture is not solely confined to support for academic learning. Poverty, lack of safe and secure accommodation, lack of access to good public transport, and difficulty in securing part-time work due to discrimination were all factors that were raised by a variety of participants as major concerns in impeding retention of university students of refugee origin. If these supports are not in place, students are not able to focus on their studies and succeed to their fullest potential.

• **Provision of systematic academic and mentoring programs specifically targeting refugee background students throughout the duration of their studies and supported by ongoing funding.**

A small number of examples of academic and mentoring support programs which were specifically targeted at refugee background students in order to support their transition into university were cited by participants. However, they tended to be subject to the vagaries of short-term funding and primarily focussed on first year students. Moreover, there appeared to be no systematic approach to academic and social support for these students, and that which did exist, tended to be generic, ad hoc and inconsistent. As transition is not a single point in time but a process and as gaps in students’ academic language may emerge as their studies become more complex, systematic academic and social support throughout the duration of their studies is necessary.

• **Establish networks of key university, school staff and agencies supporting refugee background students to share expertise, strategies, resources and knowledge of what works in order to enable successful transition and retention.**

There were incidents where staff working in the same university learning and teaching unit were not aware of programs offered by other members of that unit to students of refugee origin. There appeared to be a lack of communication and awareness of
programs and knowledge of ‘what works’ between university and school staff; between academic, teaching and learning and student service staff; and between university and school staff and agencies supporting students. Frequently these three groups were working in isolation from one another. The establishment of networks of schools and local universities whose focus is on refugee background students as a specific group with discernible issues and assets would assist in the sharing of expertise, strategies, resources and knowledge of what works in order to enable successful transition and retention.

• **Awareness-raising and ongoing professional development for general and academic staff and management in relation to the issues that refugee background students face; the strengths and resilience they bring to the learning environment; and how to develop the necessary pedagogical, curriculum, assessment and intercultural communication skills to maximise students’ learning.**

Frequently university staff—both academic and support—were unaware of the complex needs and issues facing students of refugee origin as they transition into, and move through their university studies. Staff reported they felt ill-equipped and ill-prepared to support these students. There appeared to be little (if any) professional development offered to staff. One-off events do not work—staff need ongoing professional development programs which will assist them to build the awareness, knowledge and skills to provide an enabling learning culture for students of refugee origin.

**Theme 5: Politics, Policy and Identification**

• **Schools and universities to develop specific policies regarding support for refugee background students, establishing a repository of best practice strategies for this specific cohort of students in transitioning from school to university.**

The lack of specific policy provision for refugee background students across the three universities is striking and may be due in part to their small numbers and lack of critical mass. The lack of representation is rightly a cause for much soul-searching
amongst university educators, with the need to develop distinct policies, programs and resources dedicated to redressing their underrepresentation at university level.

• **On enrolment at university, students to be given the option to identify as of refugee background so that they could be offered the option of targeted support.**

Being able to identify students as coming from a refugee background gives staff the *possibility* of providing more nuanced support. On the other hand, there are ethical considerations, particularly in regard to respecting the confidentiality and rights of students who chose to identify or not as the case might be.

• **Institutions need to engage the government through advocacy, representation and research regarding policy and funding for underrepresented and disadvantaged student cohorts wanting to transition to university.**

Schools and universities need to engage the government not just about getting adequate and targeted funding for students from a refugee background: sustained funding was necessary, as was a strong equity staff or principal who was willing to support and sustain programs for these students.

• **Institutions should develop equity and access policies and practices that provide a supportive and caring environment for refugee background students.**

More attention should be paid to students’ emotional wellbeing as they transition from school to university. This recognition and validation of ‘place’ and ‘belonging’ is integral in order to prevent an individual’s diminished sense of self or identity.

**Theme 6: Transition**

• **Refugee background students need to be better engaged and supported during the transition from school to university.**

The transition from school to university for refugee background students should be understood as a process rather than a point in time. Universities should be encouraged to develop programs that facilitate greater awareness in the tertiary education system.
and must be encouraged to assist in this process through the provision of academic and social supports.

• Universities should be encouraged to develop more personalised links, ‘person to person’ support model as opposed to the ‘person to service’ support model that currently exists in tertiary institutions.

Universities should acknowledge that successful transition from school to university for refugee background students requires an ability to navigate institutionalised structures or systems. By encouraging students to engage with teaching and support staff on a person-to-person basis, along with developing family and community links, universities can bolster the expectations and experiences of refugee backgrounds students at university.
Introduction

Vast increases in student numbers have moved matters of diversity from marginal concerns into key issues for tertiary institutions (Brown, 2005; Deardorff et al., 2012). Since 1970, the number of young Australians with bachelor degrees has increased from three to 37 percent, with all accounts indicating a strong growth towards the national target of 40 percent by 2025 (Universities Australia, 2013). However, despite strong growth in university participation overall, individuals from low SES backgrounds, as a proportion of the total student population, remains below parity, with statistics revealing the proportion of domestic undergraduate students studying in Australia having decreased between 2001 and 2008 (Universities Australia, 2013).

In recent years, a push by the Australian Government to improve the representation of students from low SES backgrounds has made some progress, however, the change has been largely unimpressive (Moran, T., 2011). Thus, in 2008, the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education proposed that participation rates for all equity groups should be monitored and the under-representation of students from low SES backgrounds required specific attention (Bradley Report, 2008, p. 29). Consequently, the Australian Government set a target stipulating that by 2020, 20 percent of higher education enrolments at the undergraduate level would be made up of students from low SES backgrounds (Bradley Report, 2008, Recommendation 4).

Within this targeted cohort, refugee background students are a specific group. Despite aspirations to receive a university education, many of these students fail to attain the necessary levels of education required for access to, and participation in, tertiary education. While participation in tertiary education through on-campus support for refugee background students (such as programs of language support, study skills development and acculturation
activities) are currently being investigated\(^1\) access to universities, and thus, the pathways that enable such access are not understood (Naidoo et al., 2012).

Few universities, however, consider the distinct academic and social support needs that differentiate refugee background students from other low SES groups (Naidoo et al., 2012). This increased diversity in tertiary institutions poses new challenges for the engagement of this particular cohort who may find tertiary institutions to be a ‘culturally alienating place’ (Krause, 2005, p. 3; Earnest et al., 2007). Consequently, there is a strong imperative for tertiary institutions to improve support and transition pathways for this particular group.

The following case study report is the result of an Australian Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) funded project: Supporting school-university pathways for refugee students’ access and participation in tertiary education (SUPRS)\(^2\) — a cross-institutional study between University of Western Sydney (UWS), Charles Sturt University (CSU) and University of Canberra (UC). This study seeks to provide an insight into the distinct barriers, challenges and experiences faced by refugee background students arriving in Australia, as well as aims to get behind the insights to describe pathways that would enable the successful transition of refugee background students from secondary school to university (Naidoo et al., 2012).

**Project Overview**

Research into the specific aspirations, barriers and transition challenges faced by refugee students has shown that there are significant cognitive, economic, social and psychological benefits to their educational attainment (Kirk & Cassity, 2007). With education described as ‘an escalator of economic and social mobility for the most talented in society’ (Moran, T., 2011) there is a strong need for tertiary institutions to improve current transition pathways for refugee background students in order to redress the disadvantage and under-representation of this cohort at university.

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1. See, for example, OLT study, ‘Defying the odds: Establishing support systems to maximise university success for young people with refugee backgrounds’, 2011.
2. For the purposes of this report, the project will be referred to under its acronym.
Importantly, while refugee background students often encounter significant barriers to their educational achievement, many are highly resilient and hold strong aspirations for the future, particularly in terms of their own educational achievement and attainment (Morales, 2000). In fact, they frequently demonstrate enormous ‘courage and strength’ (Tiong et al., 2006, p. 8) and often ‘go on to thrive in their new country and surroundings’ (El-Bushra & Fish, 2004, cited in Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012, p. 58). These strong aspirations, however, are not always reflected in actual educational achievement and many refugee background students fail to attain the necessary levels of education required for access to, and participation in, tertiary education (NIACE, 2009).

Given the particular complexity and character of refugee background students as a group, there is a demand for research into improving pathways for refugee background students toward tertiary education, especially for those with severely disrupted schooling. While recent research investigating transition needs of refugee background students as a distinct cohort at university has emerged (Dooley, 2009; O’Rourke, 2011), too often stories are told about refugees where the emphasis is on the voice of the professional and not the individual (Rajaram, 2002). Qualitative research that directly involves the voice of those researched is limited.

Most of the research literature that exists focuses on specific areas of the refugee experience, namely, good school-community and family relationships (Naidoo 2011a; Scull & Cuthill, 2006), challenges faced by refugee background students in secondary schools (Cassity & Gow, 2005, 2006; Sidhu & Taylor, 2007), transition experiences of refugee background students into mainstream education and training (Naidoo, 2008; Brown et al., 2006; CMY, 2004; Apout, 2003), language learning needs of refugee background students (Dooley, 2009; Baxter & Sawyer, 2006), effects of trauma on student aspiration and retention (Flanagan 2007), current educational transition pathways (Moore et al., 2008), models of ‘good practice’ (Naidoo 2011b; Baxter & Sawyer, 2006; Brown et al., 2006) and the resettlement experiences of refugees (Flanagan, 2007; Francis & Cornfoot, 2007).

Significantly, few articulate the pedagogical strategies that inform teaching and learning or identify pathway programs and strategies that ensure success in transition (Rutter, 2006; Matthews, 2008). If present patterns of low educational access and transition to tertiary
education for refugee background students are to be altered, research that endeavours to develop and model effective teaching and learning practices is required. This project, therefore, makes a unique contribution to the existing research by identifying successful and effective school to university pathways that work for refugee background students to ensure more students remain engaged at university so that they, and the nation, can realise the social and economic advantages associated with successful pathways to, and completion of, tertiary education.

Current Programs and Pathways in ACT and NSW

Despite a lack of targeted research into the pathway programs and transition strategies that ensure successful tertiary transition, a number of current transition support and pathway enabling programs within the ACT and NSW provide an example of how barriers to university transition reported by refugee background students—such as an inability to negotiate the maze of administrative policies related to access and participation—can be minimised through effective school-university partnerships.

One of the most successful programs originating in New South Wales is the award-winning Refugee Action Support (RAS) program, a program that assists refugee background students with homework and study assistance in secondary schools within western and south western Sydney (Ferfolja & Naidoo, 2010). Established in 2007, the RAS program began as a collaboration between the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF), UWS and the NSW Department of Education and Training. Its success over the following years has seen the program expanded to further partnerships with CSU, The University of Sydney and UC (Ferfolja & Naidoo, 2010; ALNF, 2009).

Under the RAS program, university student tutors, as a component of their teaching practicum, provide after school tuition and in-school assistance to refugee background students in order to develop their literacy skills, improve achievement of syllabus outcomes and improve their participation and engagement in schooling. Before beginning their placement, the university tutors are provided with approximately 20 hours of training by the ALNF. After completing literacy training that utilises scaffolded literacy and situated practice strategies as well as EAL/D scales to guide students through skills in discourse, the university students work with a group of no more than three young students, providing three hours of
tutoring per week for 12 weeks (Ferfolja & Naidoo, 2010; McCarthy & Vickers, 2012). A further half hour is allocated for debriefing sessions after each tutoring session with the RAS coordinating teachers (McCarthy & Vickers, 2012, p.157).

The success of the program in demystifying the Australian educational system was evidenced in several of the interview responses, as well as through past studies that indicate over 80 percent of refugee background students were found to have improved ‘significantly’, ‘quite substantially’ or to an outstanding degree (Report, 2008). Additionally, as Ferfolja & Naidoo (2010) highlighted:

...the effects of the RAS program can extend beyond the academic. The participant voices illustrate how RAS in these schools provides a vital context for the development and enrichment of cultural literacy. Moreover, it offers much needed social and emotional support to these young people who have been through so much instability in their relatively short lives (p.27). Thus, overall, students who participated consistently and continuously in RAS displayed a marked improvement in their academic skills and were able to participate more actively in classroom activities (Brace 2011).

In 2011, a needs-based mentoring program that supports refugee background students from NSW secondary schools in their transition to higher education was set up by Macquarie University in partnership with the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC), and seven secondary schools within western and south western Sydney. Funded primarily by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) with support from the DEC, the Macquarie University LEAP (Learning, Education, Aspiration, Participation) Mentoring program is another successful pathways program that aims to ‘broaden the aspirations’ of refugee background students and to help refugee background students engage in school life by matching refugee background secondary school students with Macquarie University student mentors (NCSEHE 2013, p. 35).

The LEAP Macquarie Mentoring program helps refugee background students plan their transition to tertiary education by developing study and research skills, awareness of school and university cultures in Australia and better understanding of educational pathways available in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The program uses student volunteers from Macquarie University to act as mentors to current secondary school refugee background students. Each mentor works with two students on a weekly basis throughout the university
semester to ‘bridge the gap’ between secondary school and university and to support refugee background students to ‘take ownership of their education’ (NCSEHE 2013).

The success of the LEAP Macquarie Mentoring program has been highlighted through a number of participant surveys, with over 90 percent of program participants indicating that their participation in the program had increased their desire towards tertiary education. More importantly, the program has ‘raised awareness among staff and students about the issues refugees and asylum seekers face in their everyday lives’ (Singh & Tregale, 2014), while over 50 percent of participants have reported an increased level of confidence in their own academic abilities and have indicated that their belief in their ability to complete higher education had changed positively (LEAP 2012; NCSEHE 2013).

In addition to the two programs highlighted above, a number of school-based pathway programs and university-based mentoring programs that aim to support refugee background students in their various transitions—such as work, TAFE, and university—operate successfully within the ACT and NSW. While not strictly within the scope of this case study, a brief overview of a number of these programs highlights the importance of such pathways for refugee background students’ transitions.

School-based programs

- Refugee Bridging Program (Dickson College, ACT)
  The Refugee Bridging Program at Dickson College was established ‘as a response to the interrupted schooling’ of many young refugee background students entering the ACT college sector (Dickson College, 2014). Open to students aged over 16 years with a refugee experience, the Refugee Bridging Program is a ‘year 11 and 12 course studied over a possible three years’ (Dickson College 2014). The main strength of the program lies in its flexibility, ‘strong mentoring, cultural orientation and life-skills components’ (Philips cited in Mooney, 2012), as by supporting refugee background students in fulfilling the requirements of a year 12 certificate, the Refugee Bridging Program helps refugee background students plan their transition from secondary school into further education, training or employment.

- Targeted Refugee Support Program (Holroyd High School, NSW)
The Targeted Refugee Support program at Holroyd High School aims to support refugee background secondary school students in their transition from ‘intensive English programs into mainstream high school…to further education, training or employment’ (Holroyd High School, 2014). By assisting refugee background students in developing their English language and literacy skills, numeracy skills, curriculum concepts and study skills as well as an understanding of the various educational and vocational pathways available to them, the program provides additional teacher time to assist refugee background students to develop the necessary learning skills and cultural awareness required for success in the Australian educational and workplace context (Holroyd High School, 2014).

- **Refugee Transition Program (Fairfield High School, NSW)**
  The Refugee Transition Program at Fairfield High School is supported by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Hewlett Packard and Wetherill Park TAFE. Through the program, refugee background students are introduced to future employment and education pathways through short programs such as the 8-week ‘TAFE tasters’ program. In addition, the Refugee Transition Program at Fairfield High School encourages refugee background students to develop community links and offers free after school tutoring and swimming lessons (Fairfield High School, 2014).

**University-based programs**

- **Equity Buddies (UWS)**
  The Equity Buddies program was established at UWS in 2012. Designed with support from an OLT grant as a social network to provide support to refugee background students, Equity Buddies is a permanent for-credit cross-level student mentoring unit offered through the School of Education that provides academic and social support for first-year students, particularly those of refugee background (Vickers, 2012; Zammit & Vickers, 2013). With a network of students from a range of varied cultural backgrounds, Equity Buddies provides opportunities for refugee background students to engage with students from similar backgrounds and encourages cross-cultural connections between students (UWS 2014; Vickers, 2012).
Methodological Framework

A major challenge in studying the teaching, learning and cultural needs of refugee background students transitioning to tertiary education was the variance in their experiences. Distinct prior life experiences, economic and social contexts, demographic, geographic and political differences can all impact on a student’s needs (Windle & Miller, 2012). With these confounding external factors, conducting a project that would be readily and reliably generalisable was difficult. Thus, in order to frame the understandings from this project, it was necessary to draw on a number of methodological approaches and frameworks.

Overall, a case study approach was chosen for its ability to explain, describe and explore events in the everyday contexts in which they occur (Yin, 2009), to provide an in-depth exploration and description of a complex phenomenon (GAO, 1990) and to ‘comment on the issues and reflect on the main points’ (Fry et al., 1999, p. 408). While case studies are not intended to be generalisable, they allow researchers ‘to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events’ (Yin, 2003, p. 2) that can be selected purposefully ‘in virtue of being information-rich, critical, revelatory, unique or extreme’ (Patton, 1990). This case study, therefore, provides a multi-perspective analysis. In this way, the research is able to consider the voices and perspectives of those interviewed, as well as interactions between them (Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2011). Thus, it is useful in building an in-depth understanding of areas where little research has been done.

In order to frame the case study, a qualitative case study approach ‘that facilitates [the] exploration of a phenomenon within its contexts using a variety of data sources’ (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544) was employed. Chosen for its ability to focus on the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions without needing to manipulate the behaviour of those under study, a qualitative case study approach provides a means to analyse the case—successful university transition of refugee background students—without separating the analysis from the contexts in which these transitions occur (Yin, 2003). As a qualitative case study approach ‘consists of a detailed investigation, often with data collected over a period of time’ (Hartley, 2004, p. 323), it is by its very nature, idiographic, inductive and interrogative, aiming to offer insights into how individuals in specific contexts make sense of a given phenomenon.
Additionally, a broad interpretivist research methodology that is compatible with a historical as well as a post-modern framework for analysis was employed. Centred on the idea that an individual’s ‘knowledge of reality, including the domain of human action’ (Walsham, 1993, p. 5) is socially constructed, an interpretivist research methodology allows the researcher to capture ‘multiple realities’ rather than a single ‘objective reality’ (Guest et al., 2012, p. 6). It therefore attempts to ‘understand phenomena through accessing the meanings that participants assign to them’ (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991, p. 5) and focuses on their cultural and historical context. As these phenomena are frequently related to experiences of personal significance, the methodology has particular salience with regard to refugee research.

Using the frameworks described above, the project sought to develop a deeper understanding of refugee background students by using their own experiences combined with the experiences of others—such as secondary school teachers and university academics—to unpack their own preconceptions of the refugee experience. A close examination of the phenomena under investigation allowed the researchers to draw on personal accounts from participants who were expected to have certain experiences in common with one another, while inductive processes allowed the researchers to explore questions where the answer was not expected but rather emerged during analysis. The use of a broad qualitative and interpretivist methodology therefore allowed the researchers to examine how refugee background students’ transition into tertiary education is understood in a given context and from a shared perspective (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

To define the case, carefully formulated research questions informed by the existing literature and prior understandings of the contexts and issues of refugee background students interviewed were used to clarify the nature and scope of the project (Stake, 1995; George & Bennett, 2005). The case was then selected because of its uniqueness and intrinsic nature, that is, its ability to investigate how the issue impacts on the understandings of those researched.

Qualitative data from research participants was gathered using a combination of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Approached as a means of flexible, open-ended inquiry, the research adopted a facilitative rather than an interrogative stance. In this way, the nature of the research was to be exploratory. That is, in addition to observations during interviews, analysis was to be conducted after and across the interviews. The purpose of this
analysis was to identify themes and topics not identified in the set of questions and value prompts but those brought up in conversation by the participants themselves.

Using a series of stages, the interpretivist process for this research project began with a detailed verbatim transcript. In the first stage, themes that expressed the experiences and concerns of the participants, such as ‘geographic contexts, a supportive learning culture, building social capital, access and participation, and acculturation’ were identified and coded in considerable detail with key phrases, statements and comments labelled and categorised according to their content. In the second stage, rather than using a site-based framework for analysis, connections and patterns between the codes were identified and arranged according to eight emergent themes: (i) language; (ii) supportive learning culture; (iii) social, economic and geographic context; (iv) prior life experience; (v) social capital; (vi) politics and policy; (vii) identification; and (viii) transition. These themes were then subsequently divided into three cohort groups for analysis: (i) secondary school and university refugee background students; (ii) secondary school teaching and support staff; and (iii) university teaching and support staff. Grouping the data into broad cohort groups rather than sites allowed researchers to identify similarities and differences across the eight themes, and three universities. Finally, these themes and initial analyses were then refined and grouped under six broader themes: (1) prior life experience; (2) language; (3) social capital (resilience, and aspiration); (4) an enabling learning culture; (5) politics, policy and identification; (6) and transition, thereby allowing the themes to be translated into a narrative account (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006).

To analyse the data, phenomenological descriptions and interpretations needed to be grounded in participant accounts. A critical discourse analysis was therefore used to maintain transparency and provide a perspective that explains how discourse is able to construct versions of the social world and position subjects in terms of power (Rogers et al., 2005, p. 371). Indeed, as ‘discourse’ is by its very nature ‘interpretive, descriptive and explanatory’ (p. 370), critical discourse analysis attempts ‘to bring social theory and discourse analysis together to describe, interpret and explain the ways in which discourse constructs, becomes constructed by, represents, and becomes represented by the social world’ (p. 366).
SUPRS Project Methodology

The aim of the SUPRS project is to show that targeted learning and teaching strategies can be particularly beneficial educationally for refugees aspiring towards tertiary study with the potential to meet academic and broader developmental goals of education. Specifically, it sought to:

1) Identify teaching, learning and cultural needs of refugee background students which may enable and/or constrain their access to tertiary education.

2) Develop models of university engagement with schools which enhance the skills and understanding necessary to prepare refugee background students for tertiary participation.

3) Inform university learning and teaching practices which support improved access to, and participation in, tertiary education for refugee background students.

Additionally, it sought to investigate the possible pathways available to this cohort and provide examples of positive practices of teaching and learning (Naidoo et al, 2012).

The SUPRS project used qualitative data collected through conversational-style focus groups and semi-structured interviews with staff and students at three universities and seven high schools across three main educational regions: (i) Greater Western Sydney (GWS); (ii) Albury/Wagga Wagga (regional NSW); and (iii) Canberra (ACT). The sites were chosen for their demonstrated experience in providing targeted programs for refugee students, significant refugee support programs with schools in the local area and high refugee populations (Naidoo et al, 2012).

As noted above, while collecting data for a case study can be observational, semi-structured interviews and focus groups are frequently used to capture the conversation, along with transitions between conversations (Silverman, 1993). The benefit of semi-structured interviews is that prepared questions are able to provide uniformity and the open nature of the interviews does not limit respondents to a set of predetermined answers. The use of semi-structured interviews, therefore, provides valuable information from the context of individual
participants. In a similar way, focus groups allow the researcher to study participants in a more natural conversational pattern. For refugee background secondary school students, in particular, this approach was beneficial for its ability to break down the formal nature of one-to-one interview methods in order to discuss and explore various answers and experiences.

For this project, sets of prepared questions were used as a guide for the researcher in both the semi-structured and focus group interviews. While key questions were asked of those interviewed, the semi-structured and focus group formats allowed and encouraged the researcher to probe value issues (Kahn, 1999) and interject with additional questions, as appropriate. More importantly, however, the use of semi-structured and focus group interviews allowed the flow of the interview/s to be primarily driven by the participant/s. The participant/s therefore was asked to talk openly and freely about whatever he or she viewed as important and was encouraged to elaborate and direct the conversation.

In the first phase of the SUPRS project, the researchers sought to relate the personal experiences of teaching staff, support staff and refugee background students in the Australian education system, to broader social trends towards increasing diversity, representations of refugees, and government policies in education resettlement. Questions to refugee background students at secondary schools and universities focused on their educational and language acquisition experiences, family support, transition challenges and future aspirations. In addition, university students were asked about their views on support for access and transition to university while secondary school students were asked about their aspirations for higher education and knowledge of the Australian higher education arena.

University teaching and support staff were asked about the major factors inhibiting access and participation of refugee background students in tertiary education. Questions focused on factors that promote participation, policies and provisions, data collection, current transition pathways and the identification of transition barriers and constraints. Secondary school teaching and support staff were similarly asked about the major factors inhibiting access and participation of refugee background students at secondary schools. Questions focused on factors that promote participation, provide support, learning and professional development, and approach current best practice.
At universities, semi-structured interviews were conducted with refugee background students along with two focus groups: (i) teaching staff, and (ii) support staff. Different approaches were taken by each research team and at each university with a combination of snowballing and direct recruitment used. At the University of Western Sydney, staff and students were sourced through existing networks established by the primary researcher, as well as through cold-calling students from a list obtained from the university’s admission office that provided information on student enrolments, particularly those on (or previously on) humanitarian visas.

At UC and CSU, a different approach to recruiting students was required as the universities were unable to provide access to the universities’ databases of refugee background students. At UC, lecturers were asked to place an advertisement on their unit homepages, place posters around the university campus, contact the Academic Skills Centre and place notes on the International Students Association’s Facebook page. After a lack of response, the researchers identified students who had been successful for scholarships through past issues of the UC bulletin, *The Monitor*, and approached them individually. CSU used mainly snowball sampling, that is, researchers contacted a number of young refugee background students who would then nominate others. Lecturers and support staff interviewed were also asked to nominate refugee background students and the researchers then contacted these students.

In secondary schools, focus groups were conducted with support staff, teaching staff, and refugee background students. In contrast to the recruitment processes used at universities, secondary schools were approached through requests sent to the school principal. Once a school agreed to participate in the research project, students and staff were recruited by contacts within the school (usually someone working in an academic support role with contact with refugee background students in the school). Thus, while there was an element of screening in this process, this approach was considered the best to address concerns of establishing trust with the researchers.

In total, nine male and five female refugee background university students and 14 male and 22 female refugee background secondary school students participated in the study. All participants had arrived in Australia as humanitarian entrants with many having spent between three to sixteen years living under refugee status prior to their arrival.
The refugee background university students interviewed came from a range of countries (in alphabetical order), such as Bhutan, Bosnia, Burma, Iraq, Iran, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan, Sierra Leone and Sudan, and represented a variety of academic disciplines, for example, arts, business, business management, commerce, medical imaging, nursing, public health, radiography and software engineering. Similarly, refugee background secondary school students (years 7-12) had arrived from Afghanistan, Burma, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Nepal, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Thailand, with almost all revealing high aspirations towards tertiary education.

Background

A refugee is defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as:

… a person, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. (UNHCR, 1951, 1967)

According to the UNHCR, there are still an estimated 45 million refugees and displaced persons around the world (UNHCR, 2009; UNCHR, 2013). For those classified as refugees, few durable solutions exist. As its first preference, the UNCHR promotes a solution of voluntary repatriation that assumes the original causes of flight have been sufficiently ameliorated to allow the safe return of displaced refugees. Where this is not possible, an attempt to integrate refugees in a neighbouring country, in what is known as ‘countries of first asylum’ is considered. As a last resort, refugees are resettled in third countries. However, despite the large number of people displaced worldwide, resettlement is granted for only a very small percentage (less than 1 percent each year) of the refugee population as a whole and is aimed, theoretically, at those with the greatest need of protection (UNHCR, 2010).

It is often thought that developed countries are becoming increasingly ‘burdened’ by the numbers of refugees applying for humanitarian protection and resettlement on its shores. Recent debates in Australia, for example, have focused on the ‘genuineness’ of those applying for resettlement (Taylor, 2013); highlighted the supposedly negative impact of refugee arrivals to Australian society (Wright, 2007); and stressed the need to ‘look after our own’ (Hanson, 1996, quoted in Whiteman, 2010). Similarly, government rhetoric has focused on
the so-called ‘burden’ of refugee resettlement by emphasising the limits of Australia’s generosity, ‘We have 30,000 already so we have already taken the lion’s share of the burden’ (Truss quoted in Attwood 2014).

While Australia is one of only 20 nations worldwide that formally participates in the UNHCR’s resettlement program (Phillips & Spinks, 2010), the number of refugees accepted for resettlement in Australia ‘remains relatively small by global standards’ (SMH 2013; RCOA 2013). In fact, according to United Nations, of the 9.9 million registered refugees globally at the end of 2012, only 30,000 (0.3 percent) had resettled in Australia. Instead, the vast majority of refugees were hosted by developing countries, for example, Pakistan is host to 1.6 million (17 percent) refugees of the global total (RCOA, 2013).

In 2012-2013, the Commonwealth Government increased Australia’s Humanitarian Program intake to 20,000 places, reflecting an increase of 6,250 from 2011-2012 (DIAC, 2011, p. 1). Significantly, of all applications lodged in 2012-2013, approximately two-thirds (64 percent) were by young people aged 30 years and under (DIAC, 2013, p. 1). Applications for refugee status visas and resettlement in Australia, however, are particularly onerous. For example, in 2012-2013, only 20,019 visas were granted of the 50,444 lodged (DIAC, 2013, p. 1). Thus, while recommendations for resettlement may be made by the UNHCR, the decision to grant an individual a refugee category visa and the right of resettlement in Australia ultimately lies with the relevant immigration authorities (currently the Department of Immigration and Border Protection).

Statistics from 2012-2013 reveal that the main countries of birth for those resettled were: Afghanistan, Bhutan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Iran, Pakistan and Syria. Refugees arriving from these countries will have experienced significant conflict and persecution prior to leaving their home countries. Many will have been subjected to, or have experienced, civil conflict or war, destruction of their homes and communities, violence and terror, forced separation from loved ones, political and societal instability, food deprivation and malnutrition, conscription and rape and sexual assault (Sigsworth, 2008; Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture, 2002). In addition, many will have taken extreme risks to reach safety, while others may have become separated in the process of escaping, or may have escaped in secret, often without the chance to say goodbye to their
family and friends (NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors [STARTTS], 2004).

As the number of refugees and displaced persons worldwide continues to rise (Sherwood 2014), it is inevitable that the number of refugee background students in Australian classrooms will increase. This is a trend that will shift the profile of refugee background students in Australian tertiary institutions over the next few years.

In the following case study, the challenges and opportunities experienced by refugee background students, both in their transition from school to university and experiences of university, will be explored through a series of themes: (1) prior life experience & education; (2) language; (3) aspiration, racialisation, and social change; (4) an enabling learning culture; (5) politics, policy and identification; and (6) transition, derived from our analysis of data.

Beginning with a synopsis of the prior life and education experiences of refugee background students arriving in Australia, Theme 1: Prior Life Experience and Education provides an overview of the refugee experience. While the refugee experience for each student was unique, many of the refugee background students interviewed described complex journeys and significant displacement, often passing through several countries on their way to Australia. Building on the understandings established by Theme 1, Theme 2: Language explores the language learning difficulties and language acquisition processes of the refugee background students interviewed. Indeed, language proficiency emerged as a significant issue for refugee background students transitioning to university. Theme 3: Aspiration, Racialisation, and Social Change highlights the constructions of refugee identity—the way refugee background students saw themselves, and were seen by others. With some exceptions, the majority of refugee background students interviewed displayed high aspirations and motivation, with many expressing a desire for tertiary educational attainment. Theme 4: An Enabling Learning Culture explores the strategies adopted at tertiary institutions to best meet the teaching, learning, cultural needs and assets of refugee background students. By examining the roles that teaching and support staff at both secondary schools and universities, play in enabling and/or constraining the entry, negotiation and progress of refugee background students, the enabling culture at tertiary institutions is established. In Theme 5: Politics, Policy and Identification, the various educational and political factors that enable
and/or inhibit access and participation of refugee background students to tertiary education are considered, so that future support mechanisms can be developed to produce desired educational outcomes for refugee background students transitioning from secondary school to university. Lastly, Theme 6: Transition focuses on the difficulties faced by refugee background students transitioning from secondary school to university.

To conclude, themes have been drawn together to highlight the key aspects of this case study into refugee background students’ transition into university and their retention within academe. We now turn to Theme 1: Prior Life Experience and Education.

**Theme 1: Prior Life Experience & Education**

**Introduction**

As Christie and Sidhu (2002, p. 5) write, despite research identifying the ‘highly differentiated’ prior life experiences, educational backgrounds and schooling practices of refugee background students arriving in Australia, refugee background students often find that they are grouped together as a homogenous bunch and are expected to perform at the same level as their native born peers (Contreas, 2002). Unsurprisingly, the theme of prior life experiences emerges as a key factor in understanding the distinct teaching, learning and cultural needs of refugee background students.

Data obtained from interviews with refugee background students at secondary schools and universities revealed that many refugee background students arriving in Australia found the process of adapting to a new life in an unfamiliar country to be challenging and daunting. The need to acquire new language skills and adapt to new cultural norms, combined with racism, religious prejudice and a lack of understanding of their prior life experiences, often led to alienation, discrimination and hostility.

It is unrealistic to expect that refugee background students arriving in Australia after suffering years of conflict, displacement and trauma will be able to follow lessons in the same way as their native-born counterparts. Refugee background students arrive in Australia from different countries and cultures. They all share a history of conflict, trauma, displacement and loss. Many from this cohort will have fled zones of conflict, been subjected to violence or have
spent years living a transient existence. It is crucial that trust is established with refugee background students from their first contact with their new environment. This will encourage and facilitate success in their future endeavours.

Educators must be aware that despite many refugee background students displaying high aspirations towards academic achievement and educational success, one must not expect this cohort to immediately achieve the same outcomes as their native born peers. Instead, better understandings of prior life experiences, education and transition challenges of refugee background students will make a significant difference to existing pedagogical strategies without lowering the expectations and aspirations of refugee background students. As such, there is a strong imperative for Australian universities to increase their current understanding of the prior life experiences of refugee background students and to investigate the barriers and challenges faced by this cohort in their transition from secondary school to university.

Refugee Background Students

It is inevitable that refugee background students escaping conflict, persecution or trauma will have ‘experience[d] some degree of dislocation, deprivation, disruption and loss’ (UNHCR, 2002). Indeed, recent research found that many refugee background students arriving in Australia have: been subjected to violence, lived in countries controlled by exiles, lived in countries that have committed massive human violations and ‘lived in at least two countries as asylum seekers for periods ranging from two to 16 years’ prior to their final settlement (Ndhlovu, 2013, p. 427; RCOA, 2014). Thus, for the vast majority of these students, their arrival in Australia signifies the end of a lengthy period of displacement and uncertainty.

Accordingly, secondary school and university refugee background students interviewed revealed a range of distinct and significant prior life experiences. Data from the interviews revealed that many refugee background students at secondary schools and universities had arrived from countries devastated by civil war and violence, while others spoke of their experiences with ethnic and religious persecution:

Yeah, actually originally I came from Sudan. It’s currently called South Sudan and at age of nine I had to flee my country because of war. (B_student 1)
We are really at risk in Afghanistan, because in some particular places there are Shia people; we can do our religious practice, so in Sunni area or regions we cannot practice our religion because we should do as they do, otherwise they will hurt or they will kill us. (7_student)

In the following vignette of John—a current Australian secondary school student residing in the GWS region—migration provides an insight into the distinct and complex challenges faced by many of the refugee background students interviewed about their life experiences prior to their arrival in Australia.

In his home country of Kabul, John had been doing dangerous work for his employer, making and fixing weapons and heavy machinery. Increasingly, John’s employer was sending him to well-known danger zones, places where John couldn’t even pray. On one particular day, the opposition forces caught John along with a number of his workmates:

So on that day I was feeling very bad, so when I went there and on the way they stopped us; you know on that way even they shoot on the tankers and they stopped our car – we were three people – and they caught us. They took to their houses and they were asking everything about our religious and about why you are working with … I was really scared there and during the night we decided to escape from there. So this was a big chance for me and … they were older than me so they decided we should escape from here otherwise they will kill us. (7_student)

After managing to escape in the middle of the night, John told his uncle what had happened. Due to his escape, and fearing that they would come back to find him, John’s uncle advised him to flee to Pakistan telling him it would be risky to return.

So on that time we escaped during the night and I came [through] – I was very scared – I came through to my house and I said to my uncle [unclear] it’s like this. They said you did – it was a big job, it was very hard to do this; it’s dangerous for you even to be in Kabul, you should go somewhere else so he decided to send me to Pakistan. Yeah, I spent about one month in Pakistan; then my uncle called me to, you should [unclear] somewhere else to live. Even you come here after two years or three years, it will be dangerous for you and also in Pakistan you are in danger. (7_student)

Importantly, John’s account of his risky escape from Kabul to Pakistan describes just one part of his lengthy migration journey prior to his arrival in Australia. In fact, in addition to

3 Pseudonyms have been used for all names
revealing similar volatile migration journeys, secondary school and university refugee background students’ spoke of long periods spent living within the confines of a refugee camp or in a stateless and transitory existence.

Okay. Like actually I was born in [Bhutan] and maybe I think I was – when we were smuggled into Nepal I might have been maybe six months or seven months, I don’t know actually. We lived in Nepal for like 17 years as a refugee. (B_student 4)

Then we came; and at that time they were deciding about refugees as well that days; like they don’t accept us or they will accept us, and you just; yeah didn’t know what to do. Will they accept? Will they; we were so… (7_student)

While refugee camps may provide safety, shelter and a sense of stability for refugees who have spent years displaced from their home countries, they are frequently home to hundreds of thousands of displaced persons and lack sufficient shelter and educational facilities. Conditions in the refugee camps and neighbouring host countries are often substandard with the UNHCR reporting that many (including the elderly and disabled) are housed in makeshift tents for up to six years (UNHCR, 2013). Additionally, poor hygiene and inadequate sanitary facilities, a lack of adequate health services, meagre food supplies and limited social and recreational opportunities present numerous challenges (UNHCR, 2013). Nevertheless, despite the challenges and inadequate conditions within the refugee camps, many refugees in what the UNHCR classifies as ‘protracted situations’ have no other option (SBS, 2012).

This continued instability and prolonged displacement inevitably creates a number of unique challenges and difficulties for refugee background students. According to Stewart (2011, p. 42), many refugees who have spent a significant amount of time living in refugee camps develop a sense of despondency where they are forced to focus on what has been lost. This sense of despondency and loss not only affects the educational and life aspirations of refugee background students, but also has significant effects on the psychological wellbeing of those displaced. Stewart’s (2011) observations support similar assertions made by Pfister-Ammende in 1973 who contended in her observations of refugee camps in the aftermath of the Second World War that many camps had a ‘deeply pathological’ effect on the mental and psychological health of refugees.

This western deficit model of understanding refugee experiences as ‘hardship, deprivation and distress’, rather than as a ‘normal’ response to abnormal situations is however, problematic,
because refugee background students, once resettled, display a high level of resilience and often go on to succeed in their adopted home despite their often difficult prior life experiences (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012, p. 58).

Research into the refugee experience has revealed that refugees frequently display a positive attitude (Khawaha, White, Schweitzer & Greenslade 2008), are adaptable (Brough, et al, 2003), and are focused on the future rather than the past (Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2009). Thus, as Hutchinson & Dorsett (2012) highlight, the dominant ‘Western deficit model’ defining refugees as ‘traumatised victims’ neglects to acknowledge the inherent resilience of refugee arrivals (p. 55) and fails to understand their ‘strengths and capabilities’ (p. 56). Many refugee background students who were interviewed were able to view their future lives with a strong sense of self-identity and hope, despite traumatic backgrounds.

‘Resilience’ is understood here as the ability to focus, adapt, develop and flourish, despite difficult circumstances. The focus therefore is on ‘educational resilience’ rather than an individualistic psychological emphasis or focus. While resilient young people have typically been found to display attributes such as social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy and a sense of purpose, there are also external factors and structures that can work to enable or constrain, such as family life and the particularities of their learning environment. ‘Resilience’ in this study should therefore not be seen as exclusively the domain of an individual: rather, it concerns a complex network of interdependent structures, institutions, policies and practices.

The following vignette of Yuri, a refugee background student currently studying at an Australian university, provides an example of the complex challenges faced by refugee background students living within the confines of a refugee camp and provides further insight into the often indefinite periods of displacement face by this cohort.

_**Yuri recalls that his father, a fighter within the defence forces, would frequently take him to the refugee camp before leaving to join the fight again. His mother, along with him and many other boys, would be left there until his father returned.**_

So it’s been a very terrible situation, almost every family got one person lost or more than that. (C_student_3)
With no way of knowing if or when his father would return or when their situation might improve, Yuri and his family were forced to live a day-to-day existence, not knowing if or when they might have to escape.

What Yuri’s story highlights is the importance of family. As indisputably one of the most significant and important aspects of people’s lives, family is not only an individual’s ‘most intimate social environment’ (Gifford & McDonald-Wilmsen, 2010), but is the fundamental social structure from which one derives social values, customs, traditions, beliefs and languages (Bogenschneider, 2002).

Family plays an essential role in providing support to refugee background students on a number of levels: financially, physically, emotionally, legally and spiritually (Summerfield 2001; Batrouney & Stone 1998). In particular, the transnational family, as Yeoh et al. (2005, p. 308) explains, is an entity which ‘derives its lived reality, not only from material bonds of collective welfare among physically dispersed members, but also a shared imaginary of “belonging” which transcends particular periods and places to accompany past trajectories and future continuities’. Therefore, family provides benefits to the health and wellbeing of refugee background students and can effectively make settlement far less traumatic.

For refugee background students who are separated from their family, the lack of family support or family separation can severely impact on their psychological health and well-being, creating a barrier to successful settlement. Indeed, for many refugee background students at secondary schools and universities, anxiety over the whereabouts and welfare of family members left behind in their home country maintains a sense of helplessness and powerlessness, which is linked to depression, anxiety and diminished self-worth (VFST, 1998; Schwitzer & Melville et al., 2006).

Family is of particular importance because not only are ‘immigrant cultural orientations rooted in the social structure of the immigrant community, but they are also responsive to social environment surrounding the community’ (Zhou & Bankston, 1994, p. 841). Families are therefore able to mobilise ongoing support for other families in their community and effectively alleviate a sense of powerlessness, thus enabling their children to attend school and achieve good grades despite being economically and spatially marginalised in poor, degraded urban areas (Zhou & Bankston, 1994).
For a vast majority of refugee background students at secondary school and university, an ‘almost universal consequence’ of their refugee experiences ‘is the destruction of the family unit’ (McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford, 2009, p. 2). While Yuri’s story revealed the daily stress of not knowing whether his family would be safe, John’s escape from Kabul highlighted the impossibility of maintaining ties with his family unit during periods of conflict. Indeed, as John’s story revealed, often family members are forced to flee immediately as a direct response or strategy to help them escape from imminent danger, while in other situations, family members may be forced to flee along ‘different routes … [or] based upon available opportunities and resources’ (McDonald-Wilmsen & Gifford, 2009, p. 2). Thus, while some refugee background students may arrive with members of their family, others often arrive alone or with no way of getting in touch with people from their country of origin (Gifford & McDonald-Wilmsen, 2010).

While many refugee background students arriving in Australia will have suffered the loss of a family member, parent or close friend, it is important to understand that all will have suffered a degree of loss. Indeed, in addition to the loss of friends and relatives, refugee background students may have suffered: the ‘loss of a way of life’; ‘the loss of a home’; the loss of ‘school … social … and family networks’; ‘the loss of languages and customs’ and in addition, they might have ‘lost their childhoods … [or] lost their pride’ (Stewart, 2011, p. 43). This loss can often manifest in a student’s perception of his or her own abilities and self-worth. As one student of refugee background interviewed for the study commented:

I used to feel that I didn’t have the right to aim for something good, something great.
(A_student 6)

Nevertheless, despite such loss, many of the refugee background students interviewed displayed a high level of resourcefulness, resilience and high aspirations towards educational attainment.

An understanding of these motivations is crucial as these factors (aspirations, resourcefulness and resilience) can strengthen refugee background students’ capacities to ‘cultivate networks … [and] shape futures’ effectively increasing a person’s ‘ability to access, benefit from and transform economic goods and social institutions’ (Sellar & Gale, 2011, p. 116). Moreover, as Theme 3 will show, resilience is often hidden by the trauma narrative (Papadopoulos, 2001);
thus, ‘aspiration’ is not so much about students conforming to a socially-accepted, majority-defined, upwardly mobile aspirational future as it is about the potential to imagine any kind of future—whatever that might be.

In fact, a vast majority of the refugee background students interviewed expressed gratitude at the opportunity to attend university, with several participants noting that it would not have been possible in their home countries. The vignette below provides an example of such aspiration and resilience.

Rebecca, a student of refugee background currently studying at an Australian secondary school has aspirations of attending university. She expresses her surprise at the numerous opportunities that are available to her, noting that in her home country of Afghanistan, her educational choices had been limited simply by the fact that she was female.

In Afghanistan, it was really hard for girls to study; some family problems and the religion there. Boys had more rights than girls. It was the same; they used to treat you like – it was real strict. (1_student)

Educational attainment was thus identified as one of the most important goals for refugee background students.

Importantly, this goal of educational attainment and recognition of the ‘numerous opportunities’ offered to refugee background students was not unproblematic. In fact, analysis of the case study revealed that while many opportunities were offered, the terms on which these opportunities were offered were frequently problematic. For example, university learning and teaching was based largely on mainstream notions of the homogenised (white, middle class) Australian student (as shown in Theme 5). Crucially, despite expressing a high level of aspiration towards educational achievement, many refugee background students revealed that their desire and aspiration towards tertiary education was frequently impeded by a number of significant barriers and challenges.

Joanna, a refugee background student currently studying software engineering at an Australian university, arrived in Australia after a period of prolonged migration and transient existence. Before arriving in Australia, she had moved through several countries and as a consequence, experienced many educational systems. In Pakistan, she recalls that students ‘just have to learn’ by means of rote learning and memorisation. Unlike the Australian
educational system, there was no need to do any type of experiments or non-written assessments. In the same way, she notes that in Afghanistan, there was no conception of Western notions of plagiarism. Rather, the emphasis was on rote learning as a mark of respect for the knowledge imbued in texts and conveyed by the teacher, which is a very different form of learning. Arriving in Australia, however, she found that education was totally different and therefore she had to work very hard as ‘the patterns [of learning] were quite different in every country’. (C_student_1)

As Joanna’s experience demonstrates, many refugee background students arriving in Australia face considerable educational challenges, particularly in terms of learning as the environment they now exist in is one where the style of teaching, language used, curriculum and method of communication may be completely different from what they are familiar with (Igoa, 1995) and be considerably at odds with their particular culture’s ways of knowing (Brownlees & Finch, 2010). This was supported by data obtained from the interviews which showed that many refugee background students arriving in Australia were not only unfamiliar with the Australian educational system but often had previous educational experiences that impeded and obstructed their educational aspirations.

Jonathan, a current refugee background student studying at an Australian secondary school, hopes to attend university after he completes his secondary schooling in Australia. Having spent a number of years in a refugee camp with limited educational facilities and prospects, he recalls the constant pressure to perform well as education, particularly a good education, was not free.

Yeah, our school is like different. If you want to go very good education you have to pay a lot of money. Yeah … No, we don’t have some free school. Yeah we have to pay at least 100 baht, in Thai baht; 100. (7_student)

As the vignette above highlights, students who have spent long periods in refugee camps or among the local population of their host country have often had limited or no access to education.

Yes and during that time I don’t think there was something as education because that was when the violent and war in my country [SUDAN] was high escalation – because it broke out in 1984. Yeah, there was a bit tough for us. (B_student_3)
Furthermore, refugee background students who have spent much of their lives in a transient existence often arrive in Australia having had severely disrupted education experiences (Woods, 2009).

Yeah before I came to Australia, because we were moving from one place to the other and education wasn’t really – how can I put it – stable. We didn’t have like a stable place. From time to time we kept going from one school to the other wherever we found ourselves. (A_student_5)

Importantly, therefore, there is a need to understand that the educational abilities of refugee background students are often significantly affected by their experiences prior to their arrival in Australia (Ferfolja & Naidoo, 2010). Understanding the prior life experiences of refugee background students allows educators to look for, and combat, deficit modes of thinking. This understanding not only facilitates participation and encourages aspiration but facilitates the types of academic, financial and social supports that refugee background students may need to access.

Secondary School Teaching and Support Staff

Data collected from interviews with teaching and support staff working in Australian secondary schools and universities revealed that a vast majority had only a limited knowledge about the prior life experiences of refugee background students arriving in their classrooms.

So you’d study about it, but when it goes into practice is so much more different. I was staggered by the scope of what some of the kids can and can’t do. How you’d have to bust something down. I’d be trying to bust things down, and going oh no, I don’t know where to go from here? [2_EAL/D specialist]

I mean we do have programs and I know a couple of years ago we had a whole school program where we all did two professional development days about refugees but the problem is that it’s not ongoing. So they do it once and then we have – the next year we have 10 new staff that come into the school and they haven’t been professionally developed, they’ve got no idea and it’s not consistent. (4_teaching staff)

Many teaching staff expressed a sense of being overwhelmed and a number of secondary school teachers expressed an awareness of the gaps in their knowledge, including the impact it might have on students within their classrooms.

I think if you are actually taught to look for the signs that would be a good help because … with History I know when I was teaching History last year … especially teaching
about war that you will see certain signs and they will, if they are open about it they will share their experiences, but if they are not, they will close up and they will disengage and they will play up in your lessons as a way to disrupt the lesson. (4 _teaching staff)

Maybe you don’t need the finer details, but you need to have an awareness. You need to know who they are at the very least so you are mindful of what could trigger them, or what support they actually need. (3 _teaching staff)

In addition to an awareness of the gaps in their knowledge, many teaching and support staff highlighted a number of difficulties in teaching and supporting refugee background students. As one teacher noted, the prior life experiences of refugee background students often have an impact on their capacity to engage with the content taught in her classroom:

I’m trying to teach hospitality; they haven’t been to a five star hotel or experienced a fine dining setting so trying to teach them that and get them to write about those experiences is quite difficult. (5 _teaching staff)

Crucially, the curriculum itself presents cultural challenges because what seems to be ‘everyday’ curriculum knowledge is actually part of cultural practice and is not necessarily known to English language learners. Learning routines in Australian institutions are similarly culturally constructed where teachers’ expectations of learning habits may not be shared by students with other schooling experiences or students with limited schooling experiences (Hurst & Davison, 2005). As Harris and Marlowe (2011, p. 187) revealed in their study on educational challenges facing African refugee background students in Australian universities: ‘Australian universities can … constitute a foreign environment with challenges and obstacles that may not be evident to local students and staff’, thus students may lack the assumed knowledge and tools necessary in identifying and negotiating the expectations of the Australian education system. Similarly, academic staff lack the required knowledge to teach this specific student cohort.

The lack of a consistent or previous education, along with the need to adjust to a new life in Australia, was similarly identified as a significant immediate and long-term challenge for refugee background students. As a number of English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) specialists noted, for students of a refugee background, the difficulties of adjustment often came above an already traumatic personal history.
Lauren, Margaret and Samantha are part of the English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) teaching support staff at a local NSW high school. As part of their job, they work with students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), including a number of students from a refugee background. One of the main issues they highlight, as a barrier to successful transition, is the lack of schooling that refugee background students have had prior to their arrival in Australia.

For all of them it’s holes in their background. Some of the kids who come from the refugee camps have phenomenal algebra skills, because obviously who was teaching them though that was really special and important, but then they would have never done the area of a square before, or they’ve never done any trigonometry or – so they just have these huge holes where they’ve never seen or done that type of thing before, but they might be good at something else. (7_EAL/D specialist)

The gaps identified in the vignette above were further compounded by the fact that the educational curriculum differs all over the world. Thus, as many of the teaching and support staff identified, such gaps are unpredictable. Indeed, as the journey for each student is individual, the development of curricula for them is more challenging. It is important, therefore, for teachers to avoid broad assumptions and to be aware of, and expect, such knowledge gaps (Ferfolja & Naidoo, 2010, p. 12).

Overall, the secondary school teaching and support staff agreed that there was a need for greater education into the cultural backgrounds and prior life experiences for both school teaching and support staff. More importantly, further education and training into the prior life experiences of refugee background students needed to be ongoing and to involve all staff members.

Understanding that they’ve had high trauma, which makes it difficult to focus, which might help you understand why they want to sit under a table or on the floor and why that might be okay not to focus on it and keep going. (4_EAL/D Specialist)

I also think maybe [pre-service] students would benefit from teachers who have had experience in the area like especially when we’re teaching in south western Sydney, going in and telling them what it is like and giving them a realistic idea about what they’re going to face …. When you get school like this and you get turfed into a classroom and you’ve got some kid who’s suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, you’ve got no idea how to deal with it. (4_teaching staff)

I know when I did university I had to do an ESL course before I could graduate, but here some of the teachers didn’t go through that system. So they would be lacking those strategies that would help, especially for someone like a maths teacher or science teacher.
where they don’t have that English background or English teaching background. (3_teaching staff)

University Teaching and Support Staff

Data obtained from interviews with university teaching and support staff revealed a comparable lack of knowledge for those working with refugee background students.

I think there is a lack of understanding of dealing with people like that. (C_teaching staff)

Unfortunately some of these things are out of our control, like some teachers might be unprepared, especially in a regional area, due to lack of experience. Because our communities can be relatively homogenous culturally, I believe that not all students have had that access or exposure to students from a whole lot of culturally and linguistically different backgrounds. So I believe that unfortunately, as we all know, the teachers don’t always have funding for professional development either. (B_support staff)

In reflecting a similarity with the interview data obtained from secondary school teaching and support staff, many of the university teaching and support staff expressed a need for greater support and professional development.

We need to be educated. I mean we need a support from the counselling services. (A_teaching staff)

… however it’s done but something that actually introduces people such as academics, particularly at first year level, to perhaps, the issues that are being faced by refugees where what we do could be placed within that. (A_teaching staff)

… it was just that the whole cultural thing, that in a training program it’s important that particularly local Australian staff become aware of the cultural background issues and also the possible stories. (A_support staff)

In addition to a need for staff to develop a greater general understanding of the prior life experiences of refugee background students, interviews with university support staff revealed a need to understand the deep-seated impact that such prior life experiences could have on refugee background students in the long term.

Because you cannot turn off the light, you cannot suddenly open the curtain. You can’t turn off the light to see the projector. That is something we don’t do. (A_support staff)

So I’m the only equity officer for the whole uni, so perhaps if we had a few more staff, we might be able to provide more ongoing support, just check in with them every so often, things like that. (B_support staff)
Following from the need to develop a greater awareness of the prior life experiences of refugee background students, data from the study revealed that the importance of family and its influence on students’ university experiences was raised a number of times by university support staff.

According to Naidoo (2014), university often represents a student’s and his or her family’s ‘grand visions and career paths’. Thus, first and foremost, isolation from the family in order to undertake study at the university level was seen as a significant source of stress for many refugee background students. In fact, a number of university support staff noted that:

… the whole family is in a refugee sort of situation, then they may move away from home to attend University … wanting to go home and be part of important family events … [it is] … an emotional burden. (C_support staff)

Furthermore, it was found that the intensity of family ties could lead to students not wishing to be separated from their family. Hence, for many refugee background students, the choice of university was influenced by how geographically close it was to where the family resided.

Interestingly, the geographic location of the university was also claimed to influence levels of participation in university life. As one university support staff member remarked:

Location of the university has a lot to do with, if they’re going to participate or not. (B_support staff)

Importantly, interview data revealed that refugee background students attending regional universities far from home could lead to enormous anxiety and stress.

Parents were so anxious that for four years, virtually every weekend Mum or Dad came to … [ regional town] … to see that they’re okay … [They were] … anxious about the availability of food that they can eat … are my family members secure in this tinpot little place. (B_support staff)

Additionally, a number of support staff interviewed felt that family expectations with regard to academic success could place enormous stress on students because university education in Australia was not often seen as an individual achievement, but rather, represented:
… a huge family investment … the children were the first that have had, even heading towards proper employment in Australia, such huge family expectations … nobody in their families had worked in Australia. (B_support staff)

Indeed, transnational families were ‘acutely aware of the status that university education and professional qualifications would bring’ (Naidoo, 2014) and attempted to enhance ‘social, cultural and symbolic capital’ through the education of their children (Yeoh et al., 2005, p. 312). Thus unsurprisingly, many students chose future careers based on their family expectations.

It is important to note that there is a significant point of difference between the types of support, considerations and accommodations required for international students as English language learners and refugee background students who have experienced significant trauma and displacement. While refugee background students are frequently resilient, their exposure to trauma can often have a continuing psychological impact on their mental and physical wellbeing (STARTTS, 2004; Brough et al., 2003). Traumatic experiences, such as human rights violations, threats to life, loss, and dispossession are in fact significant predictors of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Momartin, Silove, Manicavasagar & Steel, 2003). Moreover, as Porter and Haslam (2005) show, refugees who have spent periods of time in institutional accommodation with restricted economic opportunity, whose conflict in their country of origin continues to be unresolved or who have been displaced internally, often display worse educational, economic and health outcomes. An understanding of the effect and implication of post-traumatic stress is therefore critical, because isolation from family and traditional support structures ‘where everyone’s gone through the same thing or similar experiences’ could aggravate feelings of despair and isolation for refugee background students.

I think there’s an element too of the post-traumatic stress that starts to become evident years later. Perhaps when a certain stress is taken off and then working through those difficulties and in an environment where perhaps it’s not as acknowledged. If they’ve come from a community where everyone’s gone through the same thing or similar experiences and they’ve come to a university away from it there’s an element of isolation with that as well. (C_support staff)

This is where a focus on building relationships between students and staff (academic and professional), as well as with other students could make a significant difference in minimising the challenges of such isolation.
Lastly, interrupted schooling was also raised by a number of university support staff as posing a significant barrier to refugee background student learning at the tertiary level. Again, how universities recognise and deal with students who do not fit the continuous schooling model is critical.

[Interrupted schooling … can be a barrier, because we have students coming from other countries that might have been in Year Ten in Iran three years ago, but then they come to Australia and they need to start in Year Nine again. So they’ve probably had to relearn some of what they might have already learnt … They’re required to go to an intensive language program before they attend school. (B_support staff)

The impact of such disrupted schooling is often hard to quantify and often this lack of previous education creates immediate and long-term challenges for refugee background students. While some may lack basic literacy skills, others may be unable to perform at grade levels in specific subjects. Most importantly, many of these refugee background students struggle to catch up to their native born peers and to integrate into new forms of learning (Sadler & Clark, 2014; Ferfolja & Naidoo, 2010).

Fostering trust in each new setting and ensuring continuity of support between settings are two of the key elements for ensuring the building of pathways to support transition of young people from refugee backgrounds (Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2007). Indeed, disrupted education, difficulties navigating different education systems and transition from Intensive English Centres (IECs) to mainstream education are some of the key issues affecting young refugee background students (RCOA 2010). Taking into account these considerations means that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ generic model of academic support is inadequate because it will not meet the specific and unique needs of such students.

Discussion

To summarise, Theme 1: Prior Life Experiences & Education highlights the need to understand what Christie and Sidhu (2002, p. 5) identify as ‘highly differentiated’ prior life experiences of refugee background students arriving in Australia. As data from the research revealed, despite having faced similar experiences such as conflict and prolonged displacement, the circumstances and experiences of each refugee background student is different. Fostering trust in new settings and ensuring continuity of support between them are
two of the key elements for building pathways to support the transition of young people from refugee backgrounds (Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2007).

While refugee background students were very clear that they had been disadvantaged due to a lack of opportunity to gain exposure to continuous learning in appropriately equipped settings, it is unlikely that staff in either setting were fully aware of the complicated nature of the interrupted schooling these students have experienced. Indeed, data obtained from the interviews revealed that while secondary school staff had some awareness of the impact that refugee background students’ prior schooling experiences may have had on their learning, university staff, while similarly aware of the interrupted schooling experiences of refugee background students, did not articulate how such experiences might impact on student learning or how they may adapt their teaching in response to this knowledge.

Taking into account these considerations means that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ generic model of academic support is inadequate, as it will not meet the very specific and unique needs of such students. An understanding of the distinct and varied migration experiences of refugee background students is therefore essential for developing an understanding of the barriers and challenges they faced when arriving at Australian universities (Naidoo et al, 2012).

Recommendations

• Ensure that teaching and support staff are aware of the cultural dimensions of refugee background students’ prior life experiences and the impact this may have on their learning and transition at university. Refugee background students come from a range of ‘highly differentiated’ prior life experiences, educational backgrounds and schooling practices and should not be classified as homogenous. Teaching and support staff should respect and be aware of how cultural and educational diversity may impact on the university experience for refugee background students.

• The prior life experiences of refugee background students should be viewed as assets with possibilities for the academic and social cultures of universities rather than problems to be solved.
The distinct and varied prior life experiences of refugee background students can add significantly to the academic and social cultures of universities. Staff should acknowledge refugee background students as an essential part in celebrating diversity and be encouraged to see the prior life experiences of refugee background students as an essential part of the educational experience.

- **Academic staff should be encouraged to embed cultural understandings and support within their courses in order to maximise retention and ensure successful transitions.**

Academic discussion and debate should not take place in a disembodied sphere, rather, academic staff should acknowledge the value of the broad range of prior life and educational experiences refugee background students are able to bring to the intellectual endeavour.

We now turn to Theme 2: Language in order to examine how language is not only a powerful communication tool for refugee background students, but is linked to literacy, culture and most importantly, a refugee student’s identity.

**Theme 2: Language**

**Introduction**

‘Language’ emerged as Theme 2 to help interrogate the factors that enable or inhibit participation in and access to tertiary education.

The literature confirms language proficiency as one of the main issues affecting refugee background students in educational settings. Language proficiency refers not only to a student’s ability to communicate and participate effectively in society, but in this study, it refers to the extent to which students are able to use Standard Australian English to succeed within Australia’s education system. Standard Australian English is defined as:

… the variety of spoken and written English language in Australia used in more formal settings such as for official or public purposes, and recorded in dictionaries, style guides and grammars. (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2014, p.8)
This section of the case study begins with an account of the ways ‘language’ was raised by each of the different participant cohorts—university staff, school staff and the students themselves. This is followed by discussing the similarities and differences between the cohorts with reference to their thoughts and experiences around ‘language’.

**University Teaching and Support Staff**

For university staff, discussion about language and language skills was often, understandably, embedded in a broader discussion about providing a supportive learning culture for learners. There was concern that generic learning support programs for all students were inadequate to meet the specific language needs of refugee background students, and scarcity of long-term funding for specific programs limited their effectiveness.

As discussed in Theme 1: Prior Life Experiences & Education, refugee background students come from ‘highly differentiated educational backgrounds’ with a wide range of schooling experiences and home circumstances (Christie & Sidhu, 2002, p. 5). However, despite these differences, they are often grouped together as a homogeneous group (Contreras, 2002) or grouped with other non-native speakers of English, for example, international students and second-generation second language learners. This has significant consequences for the appropriateness of the language supports they are offered.

In this study, we found very few examples of academic, literacy and learning assistance designed and aimed specifically at refugee background students. Rather, support was provided under the more general umbrella of student equity groups, a move which tends to render young people of refugee origin ‘invisible’ as a group (Sidhu & Christie, 2007, p. 12). This invisibility may well be due to a range of reasons. In the research, two out of the three institutions had small numbers of refugee background students, indicating a lack of critical mass. It may also be due to insufficient funding to employ the necessary support staff to design and provide more targeted assistance programs. In one of the participating universities, for instance, there was only one general equity officer for the whole university, an institution which had more than 30,000 students spread across a number of campuses.

A key concern for teaching staff across the three universities was the academic language skills of refugee background students. Discipline knowledge is constructed through language, and
as such, the language of each discipline differs, not only in its vocabulary, but also in the text structures it requires and the grammatical structures it favours (Haneda, 2014). For example, the instructional verbs in the Sciences will include ‘solve, compute, rank’ whilst the instructional verbs in the Humanities are more likely to include ‘discuss, explain, critique’ (Sherris, 2008). These verbs in turn will require different text types with their own particular schematic structures, for example, the literature review as compared to the laboratory report.

It was generally noted that a critical component of language acquisition is not only a student’s ability to communicate and participate effectively within the higher education system, but is also linked to the acquisition of distinct and specialised knowledge in academic subjects.

Within Standard Australian English there are registers that describe the different ways of using English according to audience and purpose, for example, the social language of informal classroom interactions and the academic language required for formal classroom tasks, such as essays. In particular, specific content/subject area literacy (meta-language), comprehension and communication skills were highlighted as inadequate, requiring a lot of scaffolding. A university teaching staff member commented:

They do not have adequate language skills. Their reading skills may be appropriate. But lots of law teaching and lots of law learning is oral. It involves being able to understand what’s being said and to be able to present orally, rather than just read. So if your learning is based on reading, you have trouble. (C. teaching staff)

English language support in tertiary institutions is usually situated outside the faculties, and in general, within Academic Skills support units (Bielenberg & Filmore, 2005). As such, academic language tends to be taught as a generic skill to be applied across any discipline area. A consequence of outsourcing academic language support beyond the discipline area is that academics teaching in their discipline areas may assume that support is being given elsewhere. Another consequence is that staff in general academic skills may not have the expertise in the discipline specific language demands faced by the students.

In one university, an effort was made to address this through an ‘opt-in’ program offered to refugee background students in their first semester. Sessional tutors drawn from the students’ specific discipline areas were paid to tutor the students in their subjects. This model was in
contrast to the more generic forms of academic support that are frequently provided by support services. Staff observed:

The students … were strong advocates … for that more in-discipline support. So last year we matched students up with sessional tutors from within their discipline area which seemed to work better …The academic skill centre is great but it’s just not – they don’t have enough support on offer for students. Particularly these kinds of students that require more in-depth work and repeating … (C_support staff)

Another formal support writing program piloted in one of our university case studies provided specific individual support to refugee background students within their discipline areas. It was found to be effective in meeting the needs of some refugee background students who were struggling in their studies. However, the program was discontinued ‘because things happened and then other projects just took priority’ (A_support staff). Competing demands for scarce funds appear to be a critical issue for these kinds of support programs.

Staff reported the availability of academic study skills support programs online. One site in particular reported the use of generic study subjects designed to act as an introduction to university education and which are provided through online platforms. The assumption is that new students would have completed them prior to commencing their studies. In this excerpt, teaching staff describe this support initiative:

Female 2: I mean the Study Skills programs online are for pre-commencement or concurrent study while you’re here. They cover a range of topics but they are optional, so it’s up to the student to self-identify and participate. (B_teaching staff)

Female 1: We push – we have it pre-printed on offers, we push it out through announcements that go out, course based announcements that go out prior to the start. We have it pushed out through – subjects that rely on that information will push it out through the [Interact] sites before – and in the first couple of weeks of session. People, who look like they’re struggling, have you thought about – so it’s becoming very much part of the language of how we support students. Ultimately it comes down to them volunteering to do it. That – if there are lots of other issues going on then it may not be the highest priority in their list of things to do. (B_teaching staff)

Here, the notion of ‘pushing’ optional online study skills program appeared to assume that commencing students are a homogenous group with similar capital and capacity to manage the online university environment.
Support staff in the project cited examples of individual students they had worked with who were at very different stages of learning and development. They contrasted particular students who were ‘the top students in high school’ and other students who were ‘outspoken’ and ‘knowledgeable about topics such as masculinity and violence’ and ‘knew exactly what they had to do, but when they sat down, they didn’t know how to structure’ the content. The latter students were engaged in their learning for it was ‘tapping into those resources they already have … But we need somebody to be there [with them]’ (A_support staff). A significant component of managing the differences in language within and between disciplines is dealing effectively with the difference between informal speaking and formal writing. As noted by one teaching staff member, some of the students are ‘fluent speakers but when they write it makes absolute no sense and it’s not well structured’ (A_teaching staff).

In the following vignette, the difference between speaking and writing is exemplified as an orally fluent student from a South Sudanese refugee background struggles to understand the requirements of a written task and the supports put in place to support him.

Josephine is a university support staff member working in the area of library support. At one of these support sessions, a young student of refugee origin approaches her for assistance. He has an assignment due very soon and despite having excellent English skills, he lacks the necessary research skills to turn his project into a manageable piece of work. Josephine negotiates with the learning skills advisors and then the director of the unit to make an exception for this student and others like him. One-to-one meetings are organised for him and for several other students of refugee origin. Josephine continues to see the student until he has completed his project.

Most refugee background students have had disrupted education which exacerbates the English language challenges they face, as it makes the acquisition of English to an appropriate academic level even more difficult. These learners are required to not only learn a new language, but learn through that new language as well (Gibbons, 1993; Haneda, 2014), and often learn content that is assumed to be prior learning from high school.

It takes approximately seven years of informed teaching to reach proficiency in an additional language (Cummins, 1981; Thomas & Collier, 1997; Demie, 2012). Tertiary students with refugee backgrounds usually have less than seven years of English instruction. Thus, they
enter university still on their English language-learning journey. The Australian Assessment Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA, 2012) summarises the stages of progression in English language acquisition as follows:

1. Beginning English
2. Emerging English
3. Developing English
4. Consolidating English

Most refugee background students in high school, with aspirations of tertiary study, are likely to be in the developing and consolidating stages of English language learning, and have not yet reached the equivalent of native speaker proficiency. Therefore, they are still on their English language learning progression when studying at university.

As academic language demands increase, gaps in the English language skills will appear, for example, the academic language required for discipline-specific language tasks, such as essays, laboratory reports and formal oral presentations. For instance, one support staff member reported:

I just had a student come to me just before I came here who said I’m not sure if I did this right, this summarising the week one reading. She said I didn’t know what you meant by ‘summarise’ this reading … there’s stuff there that we just assume so much even if it’s someone with a different culture and a different language background. (C_support staff)

Alongside the need for explicit teaching of discipline specific content and language is the need to teach learning to learn cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies for the Australian university context. Cognitive strategies include understanding how to locate and select credible sources of information, and meta-cognitive strategies include successfully planning assessment tasks that are appropriately structured to meet the needs of the discipline area (Hurst & Davison, 2005).
These culturally specific strategies are frequently taken-for-granted practices among university educators, and thus, form part of the ‘hidden’ curriculum. They present cultural challenges as what seems to be ‘everyday’ curriculum knowledge is actually part of the cultural practice and is not necessarily known to English language learners. Learning routines in Australian institutions are similarly culturally constructed where teachers’ expectations of learning habits may not be shared by students with other schooling experiences, or students with limited schooling experiences.

The issue of plagiarism and students failing their courses were also raised in relation to discussions around language support. A staff member at one university noted that, unlike international students who were obliged to gain strong results in language tests prior to being accepted into bridging programs, students of refugee origin were accepted despite the fact that they may have low language skills. Even though there was some provision to support students before they moved into bridging programs, the support was not mandatory and not necessarily sufficient for their complex needs. Despite advice from learning support officers after viewing students’ first piece of writing and recognising that they were not ready and needed to do more academic English, one staff member claimed, ‘Some students’ response was, “No, no, we going to keep trying.” And that’s when we see plagiarism or they just fail … You feel so awful … The system isn’t doing the right thing by them in that case’ (C_support staff). As Arkoudis (2014) has noted, solutions to plagiarism issues include the development of English language skills to build a student’s capability in reading, skimming and scanning for information, followed by retrieving the relevant information and putting it into their own words.

Whilst there was much discussion about gaps in English language skills, what was less evident in the university staff’s discussions of refugee background students’ language skills was the acknowledgement of multiple language skills that these students bring with them to the educational setting. The silence around multilingual skills of this cohort of learners in the focus groups could suggest the participants were unaware of those language skills, or their benefits, rather than an active discouragement of the use of the students’ mother tongues.

It is important that refugee background students are recognised as competent language users as they already possess skills in a first language (or in many cases, multiple languages) which
should not be ignored but instead should be used to enhance acquisition of new knowledge. Many refugee background students will have already developed relevant concepts and skills in their first language or dialect. The focus of their learning is in transferring these understandings into English. Researchers (Collier, 1995; Lucero, 2012) suggest the use of the first language in English language settings speeds up the process of achieving the same academic results as first-language peers, because it allows students to gain subject-specific knowledge at the same time as learning a second language.

**Secondary School Teaching and Support Staff**

The school teaching staff in this study, across all regions, made specific and multiple references to the challenges their refugee background students had with the English language expectations of schooling. School staff attitudes, and the processes put in place for the support of students, are the starting place for successful transitions to university. This section examines the ways in which school staff understand the language demands of school and tertiary education and the supports they provide.

As previously stated, it requires at least seven years of effective teaching to become proficient in the language registers required for academic success (Cummins, 1981; Thomas & Collier, 1997; Demie, 2012). Thomas and Collier (1997) further suggest that students who arrive after the age of eight are unlikely to have had sufficient time in their school education to reach ‘native-like’ proficiency. Consequently, most refugee background students are still on their language-learning journey as they make the transition from secondary schooling to tertiary education.

Secondary school staff are keenly aware of the language challenges but mainstream teaching staff in particular appear to have an unrealistic expectation of how long support would be required. There was a perception that language issues could be ‘resolved’ with a longer stay in the IECs. This reflects findings of recent US research which showed that 70% of high school teachers believed that an additional language can be learned in two years (Petron, Ates & Berg, 2014).
Support staff have more realistic expectations of the need for students to receive continued support in the mainstream. They also agree that refugee background students in particular would benefit from longer stays in IECs.

Many of our refugee students, particularly students from African countries, do not spend enough time at the IEC. The teachers at the IECs do a wonderful job with settlement issues, language development and preparation for mainstream integration in the short time they are given. However, as many students are coming now with lower levels of proficiency in language, even in their first language, with trauma issues, interrupted prior schooling or sometimes no prior schooling, the jump from the IEC to high school is far too great. (1_support staff)

The general perception from school staff that language proficiency may be attained substantially through short-term intensive instruction has ramifications for the manner in which mainstream schools respond to meeting the needs of these learners. Furthermore, exacerbating this misperception is the fact that such intensive English programs are not available for all learners in Australian schools.

IECs were not available in two regional areas in this project. Intensive/Introductory English Centres operate variously throughout Australia as systemic responses to meet the needs of newly arrived English language learners. They operate substantially in urban areas where a critical mass of students with intensive English language needs enable the economics of establishing the centre. Occasionally, in regional centres where numbers of refugee background students are growing as a result of government resettlement initiatives, schools are able to generate enough staffing points to establish their own EAL/D specialist classes within the mainstream school (Wilkinson & Langat, 2012).

Refugee background students in high school may be at the ACARA identified stages of English language learning, however, most will not reach the equivalent of native speaker proficiency by the time they attend university. A significant question that universities must address is: Are they prepared to offer English language support for students who require it throughout their tertiary studies?

Although the school teaching staff indicated limited awareness of the length of time required to learn an additional language, many were aware that their refugee background students were struggling with particular kinds of language. One teacher described the following incident:
I was trying to teach them how to find the perimeter of a semi-circle. So I coloured it in green, drew a little animal and started talking about, what’s the length of the fence? I kept going on and on about this fence. I thought, I’m doing a really good job here; they’re really getting it, until one kid puts up his hand and goes, what’s a fence? To talk to – they had really quite good English skills, so I just assumed they knew what a fence was. (7_teaching staff)

Cummins (1979) provides a useful differentiation of language ‘types’ that students must become proficient in if they are to be successful in education, namely social language and academic language. Cummins describes social language as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and academic language as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) – ‘the linguistic ability to manipulate and interpret language in the kinds of cognitively demanding, contextually reduced texts that are associated with schooling’ (Haneda, 2014, p. 1).

Whilst staff in this study did not reference the theory or the literature with respect to language types, they were aware of the phenomenon. Staff across all the school sites mentioned academic language as the biggest challenge these learners face:

My biggest problem is meta-language of the subject, especially the kids that come in at Year 10, Year 11. They’ve had no chance of exposure to the language of science and they struggle mightily with that. (5_teaching staff)

Meta-language is crucial to the construction of the discipline itself, and discipline teachers are usually well aware of this. One teacher’s comments illustrated the importance of the language of the discipline as they recounted the challenge that such language presented to their refugee background learners:

Sometimes they come to me because we do have to use that meta-language – and sometimes these girls come to me – they don’t speak in front of the whole class – at recess and lunch or after class they come to me and say to me, ‘Miss, can you sometimes dumb the language that you’re using?’ And I say, ‘Yeah, I can explain it to you but that meta-language needs to be used.’ (3_teaching staff)

The ability to ‘take part fluently, effectively and critically in the various text- and discourse-based events that characterise contemporary semiotic societies and economies’ (Freebody & Luke, 2003, p. 53) is crucial because not having this language capacity presents a distinct obstacle to academic achievement, not only at high school, but also their preparation to manage the academic language registers of university.
Globally, language support programs for EAL/D students in schools fall upon a continuum from dual language instruction to monolingual instruction. Thomas and Collier (1997) describe bilingual programs as the most effective.

The secondary schools in this study did not offer bilingual support programs. Instead, the model included some EAL/D instructions with all instructions given in English in submersion programs. That is, the majority of the time these learners are taught by teachers with no specialisation in language acquisition.

Unlike university staff, school staff mentioned their students’ linguistic heritage, acknowledging the students spoke other languages and were not just ‘English learners’. Some teachers acknowledged that having access to the learners’ first language would make their own teaching easier. As one teacher noted about a bilingual teachers’ assistant:

I think the Nepali-speaking help in the class is outstanding. He’s great … it makes it so much easier when suddenly he explains what I just explained and suddenly there’s ooh, consensus and things suddenly start happening. (5_teaching staff)

The use of bilingual teaching assistants was mentioned by others as a useful support for teaching English, but participants noted that there was little planning around the appointment of bilingual staff:

We kind of fluked it a few years back with [x] taking on some of the ESL classes in the junior years and having our refugee students from an Iraqi background who were speaking Assyrian. She could pick up on what they were saying, things like that. But it’s not very often that you will get that. (3_teaching staff)

However, as this participant noted, using mother tongue or L1 in the classroom was not a default position. Mainstream teachers were less accepting of the use of L1 in the classroom:

At times you’ll see that even the students themselves will – if they can see one of their peers is not as equipped with the language – they will translate. I know I’ve used that before and sometimes I think, okay once they’ve already got a handle on that then we need start with removing the other support. Because it does become an issue where they’ll become dependent on somebody translating … (3_teaching staff)

Another teacher (EAL/D specialist) was less worried about the use of L1 in the classroom, considering it to be a useful teaching strategy:
Some teachers don’t like students to speak in a language other than English in a class, but I think if you encourage them to explain to each other – because usually someone gets what you’re talking about and you say, can you tell him the Persian word for that? So rather than just saying, no, you need to learn your English, practise your English, recognise that sometimes it’s useful for them to speak in another language. (7_EAL/D specialist)

Overall, refugee background students in this study could be described as ‘ignored bilinguals’ (Young & Helot, 2003), that is, their knowledge of other languages and the meta-linguistic knowledge that this generates is substantially unacknowledged and unused by the school and teachers. When it is acknowledged, it is more often used as an emergency adjunct to English language teaching, rather than a planned resource. This is an inefficient manner in which to build English language knowledge. Many refugee background students will have already developed relevant concepts and skills in their first language or dialect. The focus of their learning is in transferring these understandings into English.

All students, including those from refugee backgrounds, have cultural resources that give them alternative perspectives on issues and phenomena, as well as experiences and knowledge. These are resources to be drawn upon to add to the learning and experiences of all students in the classroom. There was little discussion of these non-deficit approaches to teaching from the teachers, but the idea was not completely absent from their discussions. Some teachers noted a number of pedagogical strategies which could be described as ‘non-deficit models of teaching’, where the additional language status of the learners is seen as a resource. As one teacher observed:

They have a wider understanding of other places in the world, and other cultures. They can use that as a benefit in some areas, so English I always try and include their culture in comparing it to Australia so we can understand things. They are able to have a broader perspective of things. (3_teaching staff focus group)

Refugee Background Students

Overall, all refugee background students in schools and universities interviewed identified their developing English proficiency as a significant barrier to their educational achievement. Despite competency in other languages, their newness to English provided a learning challenge as the following university students’ comments suggest:
The problem in Sudan is the national language was actually Arabic. So we didn’t have to learn English. (B_student 1)

My English was not very good because in Pakistan and Afghanistan, we just studied one subject in English, just one. All the other subjects were – in Pakistan it was in Urdu and in Afghanistan it was all in Pashto and Dari, so just one optional subject was English, and it was not that – the standard was not very high, it was just for the school students, this and that. (C_student 1)

We didn’t use to speak on a regular basis but we had one subject that relates to English. We had to do one... One subject.... All of them were written in English but when the teacher explained to us, they used to say in Nepali to make it more clear, like how we learn languages in here, like other languages, and then they explain in English to make...’ (C_student 6)

I would say even though I was able to read and write in English, my spoken English was not good at all because of – most of the time as a student we speak of our mother tongue. It’s … we were from the same culture. Or – so we tend to speak the language that we were brought up with rather than English. (mother tongue Dinka) (B_student 1)

Language is not only a medium of communication, but it is also linked to a refugee background student’s identity. This can have a tremendous influence on the ability of refugee background high school students to transition to tertiary education because language is more than just a communication tool. It intersects with literacy and culture and can affect different aspects of a refugee background student’s schooling life.

Somerville (2013) explores the concept of ‘storylines’ in order to think through a different conceptualisation of language and literacy in its relation to place. A ‘storyline’ within each knowledge framework is understood to be the skeleton of a significant cultural narrative structure ‘it was written in English but when the teacher explained to us, they used to say in Nepali to make it more clear’ (A_student 6) that informs patterns of thought and action and has the potential to connect children to their local places and communities through social practices of literacy (Somerville, 2013, p. 10).

The structural organisation of schools can impact on the refugee background students’ learning in the classroom (Naidoo, 2009a). By developing a rapport with certain school staff members such as EAL/D teachers and careers counsellors, refugee background students learn to build trust, making schoolwork much easier to understand. The provision of specialists who can work with the specific learning needs of the group is also crucial.
For English we – for my English I did ESL because I’m less than five years in Australia so they put me in ESL English, English as a second language. So we had listening paper, so what my tutor taught me how to use techniques to answer these questions…She taught me how to write basic essay, yeah … [For maths] we just went through the content, because I was a bit behind with the other class so during the summer holidays from Semester 4 of Year 11, so the beginning of Year 12, the beginning of year, back in uni, I had a tutor that he taught me everything. He taught me how – he gave me exam papers, HSC papers, how to answer them, also learning the content of the textbook, those practical things.’ (A_student 3)

The provision of specialist EAL/D support differed substantially across the secondary schools studied. Some had separate EAL/D classes during the day, while others participated in after-school programs with tutors. All specialist help was greatly appreciated by the students:

But when I came to [School 1], the ESL teacher they helped me a lot with my assignments and to go out there and all these things. A lot of opportunities; and this school has a lot. (1_student)

Yeah, yeah, yeah, we got ESL; two or three classes and we have to do them every day. Yeah, which makes it very better for us and we are learning a lot … Definitely. Without them I think we cannot survive with the studying. (7_student)

Others reported an in-class support person who could answer questions quickly and in context for students to comprehend. This approach was well received because the class did not need to be interrupted for English clarification, and on-site support allowed students to follow classroom activities without too much difficulty.

Male: Yeah, they come to our class and support us…they explain the thing which we are unable to get, and that way they are helping us. (5_student)

Almost the same as what he said. I got help from the teachers and in the class, they will come with us. When the teacher teaches, the supporting teacher explains to us what he is saying, and like that. (5_student)

Although refugee background students appreciated the EAL/D and homework help programs at their schools, many expressed a frustration that there was not enough time to receive the help they required. In particular, upper-level students needed more support because their subjects were objectively more difficult. The concepts and language were new; therefore, their workload was more intensive:

We have Homework Centre but that is not enough for continuing Year 11. I’m doing Year 11 and I’m doing hard subjects, chemistry and physics. Then there is only one hour support for all my subjects. That’s not enough. For example, today I have a Homework
Centre and that’s one hour in a week. I study one hour physics and then I think about chemistry, I have so many problems with chemistry as well. (2_student)

Students taking difficult subjects required increased support, especially if they aspired to attend university.

The students were keenly aware of the disadvantages afforded by their disrupted education. Many had spent time in refugee camps or experienced disruption during their education. Additionally, educational facilities were often limited while the curriculum and language of delivery usually followed that of the host country.

Actually I study in my country Iraq. I study for just primary school until Year 5 and then after that I moved to Syria and I studied Year 7 to Year 8. I missed Year 6 and Year 5 and I couldn’t believe it’s very good. (4_student)

Before I came to Australia I was in India and I didn’t go to school for one year. (1_student)

Some refugee background students, such as the Khmer (Boua, 1990), arrive in Australia with very little formal education and practically no literacy skills in their first language. They arrive with disrupted or limited schooling backgrounds and often have complex language learning needs. Furthermore, many refugee background students arrive to:

… find themselves in the precarious situation of learning print literacy for the first time, in a language that is not their first and in which many have only basic levels of competence (Woods, 2009, p. 83)

Many may have missed important educational milestones in literacy and numeracy and may struggle with basic literacy and find the acquisition of academic curriculum, particularly in the secondary schooling context, difficult (Allen, 2002; Cassity & Gow, 2006).

Me too, I missed school for a long, long time because I was meant to go to primary school when I came here but I couldn’t because they’re like your age because in Africa they don’t go by your age. As long as you’re smart you go up and if you’re dumb you stick in the same class. They don’t let me go. If you’re dumb … (2_student)

Before I came to Australia, I didn't have that many benefits for education. I couldn’t actually read before I came to Australia but now I’ve come to Australia I can read and I can write. (6_student)
Some refugee background students arrived in Australia with above average literacy skills in their home country; however, in Australia they found themselves in a pre-verbal and pre-literate position which underscored their vulnerable and dependent condition (Freire, 1990).

Oh, Miss, you see I’m Iraqi born and in 2006 when things get really bad I moved to Syria … I finished my Year 10, Year 11 and 12. You see when I finished Year 12 the Department of Studies there told me you can finish high school but you sit down at home, you can’t go to uni because there’s no place for you in this uni … What I didn’t – I couldn’t go to uni because of the Syrian people didn’t have a place at uni so I just finish my Year 12 and I worked. I didn’t use those [unclear] because my mum was … I was – I didn’t choose to this kind of life. In my country I was good but because there are problems and fights and war in 2003 and all the war, I couldn’t do anything. (4_student)

Moreover, due to interrupted or non-existent prior schooling, many refugee background students arrive with knowledge of several languages, as was the case in this study ‘I can speak very well in Koran. In Thai, not really good; but can understand, I can understand a bit and like Burmese, then English’ (7_student). The literacy development of high school refugee background students may therefore be impacted by both individual and structural factors.

As described previously, Introductory English Centres are available for newly arrived refugee background students in the urban regions of this study. Students indicated the IEC’s focus on intensive language teaching enabled them to focus on English language learning, and learn about Australian schooling systems:

It was my first year when I came to IEC, like I told you, I was really eager to do something, so it was IEC was learning language, so there was lots of other activities that I had never been exposed to in my country, because in my country, when you study school, when you go to school, you just go to school and you study, only study. But here it’s like [unclear] really nice diverse activities. You can make a magazine for the school. You can just be involved in the year book, designing it. (A_student 4)

However, the time spent in the IEC is restricted and for many, the time spent and support received in intensive language tuition centres is not enough to ensure a smooth transition into the mainstream schooling system (Cranitch, 2008) and then onto tertiary education.

When I came here it was really hard for me, the language and I didn’t know it good. (1_student)

Yeah I have problem with the English… My English is not very good. But my subject, with my subject I studied in my country and my experience before I came to Australia, but my problem is English so it’s difficult. Sometimes as you’re saying, we have like an
essay to write or this stuff, many people in my class like they have six or seven years here from the primary and so difficult for me you know. (4_student)

New to the country and unfamiliar with the language, refugee background students often face challenges with acculturation, finding it difficult to engage with the curriculum, style of teaching and language used (Igoa, 1995; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2002).

It was very hard to understand others and it is still a little bit hard and it was very hard for me. When the teacher teaches us and even from the book also, we need to write in our own way. I understand that and it was very hard to explain and to write in my own way. (5_student)

In the university context, interview data revealed that in addition to the challenges noted above, students are experiencing difficulties with autonomous learning skills, coping with a faster pace of language learning and feeling at ease with a broader range of learners in their lectures and tutorials (Fielding & Stott, 2012, p. 8). Many students expressed a desire for additional time to complete their tasks and to combat language or literacy barriers:

The main problem with the refugee actually here and what I can tell you, the big problem is the computer and the learning material, like a lot of – like lectures are not enough to most of the second language students. (C_student_3)

There is also a desire for more explicit instruction:

The teachers at uni, the lecturers and tutors, the tutors that mark the essays, they only circle or say, too long sentence, or they say, incorrect spelling or improper grammar. (A_student 2)

Many refugee background students highlight high levels of academic success in their native language, but find themselves receiving poor marks at school because of the difficulty they face in expressing themselves through the written English. They must compete with native English speakers while simultaneously acquiring the advanced and subject-specific vocabulary of the academic language (Haneda, 2006).

No, no I don’t have that. What I’m telling you is I know what is biology and what is a bit of biology; but I don’t know the vocabulary of biology in English. That’s a problem. You know the maths, the mathematics has a very big vocabulary and that is another problem; but I’m trying to get most of those vocabulary now. (7_student)
Using Cummins’ (1979) categories of language proficiencies, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), we can see these students are struggling, in particular with academic language proficiency, but also with the fast slang interactions that are typical of BICS.

Discussion

According to Sidhu and Taylor (2007), refugee background students in Australia are rarely distinguished or targeted through one specific policy. In this study, we identified a number of programs which were targeted at refugee background students including the Refugee Action Support program, Macquarie Mentoring and the Refugee Bridging program.

When refugee background students are identified and provided with specific supports, as is more often in the case of secondary school settings, there is a tendency to focus on the cohort as one homogenous group (McBrien, 2005) when their schooling, prior experiences and language competencies may vary considerably.

Taking into account these considerations means that a ‘one-size-fits-all’ generic model of academic and English language support is inadequate, because it will not meet the very specific language and literacy needs of a diverse cohort of learners.

Secondary schools in urban areas are generally able to offer specialised language support through Introductory English Centres and EAL/D classes; EAL/D support teachers in high schools are also available in regional settings. Whilst specialist bridging programs and IEC’s and programs in secondary schools were reported as effective by teachers and students, students are often removed from these programs after a designated period of time (6-12 months). For many students, the period of time spent within the specialist programs is insufficient and this compromises their ability to participate successfully within the mainstream school curriculum (MDA, 2011).

As problematic as the brevity of intensive English language support is in the schools, more concerning is the lack of specialised language support from qualified TESOL teachers once they enter tertiary institutions. Instead, generic academic skills programs are provided. These programs are not directed at supporting the language acquisition journey of a student on a
language learning progression, but rather with meeting more immediate needs around the submission of assignments.

University staff demonstrated a limited understanding of additional language acquisition, including the time it takes to acquire a language and the different registers of language that one must be proficient at in order to achieve success in university. Language acquisition refers not only to a student’s ability to communicate and participate effectively within the education system, but it is also linked to acquiring distinct and specialised knowledge in academic subjects. Cummins’ (1979) useful differentiation of the language ‘types’ of (BICS and CALP) appeared to be well understood in school settings (Haneda, 2014). However, they were less articulated in the tertiary settings. This is problematic, as CALP can be further differentiated when applied to disciplines within the tertiary setting. In other words, ‘academic language’ is not a monolithic entity; it is specific to discipline and is therefore learned best in the context of the discipline (Sherris, 2008). There were some reports of providing such discipline-based supports in tertiary settings, but they were not systematic.

School staff were more aware of these differences in language ‘types’, particularly those who worked in support roles and were more likely to have completed TESOL qualifications. Mainstream teaching staff were aware that their refugee background students were challenged by academic language demands in their courses but tended to have less realistic expectations about how these could be overcome. In particular, they appeared to have unrealistic expectations of the time required to achieve proficiency in an additional language, or the developmental progression typical of language acquisition. This lack of knowledge, shared also by mainstream university staff, makes it unlikely they will be able to implement teaching strategies supportive of the English language development of refugee background students. This is regardless of whether their institutions have policies requiring such support or indeed whether they have a personal commitment to the learning achievements of these students. Professional development in English language learning appears to be a key requirement for mainstream school and tertiary staff.

Burgoyne and Hull (2007, p. 21) note that language needs to comply with specific academic conventions but also to the significance attached to cultural assumptions about how learning is constructed in Australian educational institutions. Secondary teachers were more aware of
these differences in learning how to learn, and reported teaching such skills as oral presentations, research strategies and group work. University staff acknowledged that these were observed challenges for many refugee background students but offered fewer examples of how they had worked with students to develop these skills.

It is significantly more difficult to acquire literacy in a second language without the support of total literacy in the native tongue (Garcia, Dicerbo & Center, 2000). Ideally, this would occur through bilingual support programs but the diversity of languages in Australia makes this logistically impossible in education systems. Nonetheless, it is still possible to utilise students’ first languages to support the development of their English language proficiency. However, this was rarely reported in the secondary setting and not at all in the university setting.

Overwhelmingly, there was a lack of recognition from teaching staff in universities and schools that these students are already competent language users and learners. As one tertiary student noted, he had a passing competency in 17 languages as a result of his multilingual birthplace (and it is important to note that, globally, multilingualism in more common than monolingualism) and long journey through a number of countries which eventually brought him to Australia. School support staff were those who were most likely to use students’ first and additional language competencies in the classroom.

Staff in both settings were more likely to see a place for the students’ alternative perspectives and cultural experiences in the classroom, rather than their language. Overall, the refugee background students in this study could be described as ‘ignored bilinguals’ (Young & Helot, 2003), that is, their knowledge of other languages and the metalinguistic knowledge that this generates is substantially unacknowledged and unused by the school and teachers.

The refugee background students in this study generally reported receiving EAL/D instructions in secondary school, which they reported as helpful, before entering a tertiary system of ‘submersion’ where they appeared not to receive EAL/D instructional support. All could access general academic support, although university staff expressed frustration in getting the students to access it.
Given that the majority of refugee background students in tertiary institutions who transitioned from secondary school will still be learning English as they complete their studies, it appears that they are set up for failure if they are not provided with continued English language support as they move through their tertiary education. It begs the question: If English language support is deemed appropriate and necessary in the primary and secondary education sectors in order to provide equitable outcomes for learners, why is it not also appropriate and necessary in the tertiary sector?

To summarise Theme 2: Language, English language proficiency is a significant issue for refugee background students transitioning into tertiary education. These students are on an English language-learning journey that can take up to 10 years, however, staff in the tertiary setting seemed unaware of this.

As students are inevitably on an English language-learning journey, even when they attend university, they require specialist English language support, which they received in the school setting, but not in the tertiary setting. Instead, they were offered generic English language support programs targeted at either international students or other students who may typically access academic skills support (e.g. first generation university attendees).

All students and staff in the project discussed the challenge of learning a discipline-specific language. The English language support programs which were reported as most effective were those that were situated within the discipline and allowed specific support with the genres of the discipline, syntax and vocabulary of those genres.

**Recommendations**

- **Academic supports for refugee background students should be differentiated from migrants, international students or any other ‘special needs’ group to meet the diverse learning needs of the cohort.**

  Refugee background students are extremely diverse in culture, language and life experience. They should not be seen as a single group or subset in the university community.
• **Academic support for refugee background students** is best delivered within faculties and face to face, rather than in generic academic skills programs or through online modules.

Language usage is specific to disciplines and best taught within the discipline areas. Academic lecturers should see academic literacy, language and meta-language learning as their core business.

• **The multilingual skills of refugee background students should be acknowledged, nurtured and utilised.**

Refugee background students possess a valuable language skill set. They benefit from networking within their own cultural and language groups and using their languages of origin to understand and collaborate in the classroom. Other students in their classes benefit from the global perspectives these students bring to the classroom.

• **Refugee background students require English language support from staff qualified in teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).**

TESOL trained teachers are able to support the English language development of students as well as provide advice to academics on ways to support and incorporate the language skills and cultural knowledge of refugee background.

**Theme 3: Aspiration, Racialisation, and Social Capital**

**Introduction**

Aspiration, racialisation, and social capital also emerged as themes across the school and university staff, support staff and refugee background student interviews. While the refugee background students in this study often saw themselves—and were seen—as agents with social and cultural capital who could feasibly aspire to higher education, their understandings and actions were embedded in enabling and constricting societal and institutional processes.

‘Aspiration’ is used here to indicate the possibilities that the students in this study are able to imagine. That is, ‘aspiration’ is not so much about students conforming to a socially accepted, majority-defined, upwardly mobile aspirational future as it is about the potential to imagine
any kind of future—whatever that might be. The work of Appadurai (1996, 2004) has been influential in reclaiming imaginings as a significant aspect of immigrant life, as immigrants imagine themselves in a different life elsewhere, even as the poor and marginalised have a reduced capacity to aspire or imagine a future. Appadurai (2004, p. 60) explores the cultural capacity to aspire through a discussion of culture’s ‘orientation to the future’ in a move that speaks against more common understandings of culture as tradition, history and habit. In so doing, Appadurai is interested in the cultural capacity to imagine a future, and the ways that things such as class, gender, social norms and a lack of voice can limit this capacity.

St Clair, Kintrea and Houston (2013) found that low aspirations were particularly prevalent in disadvantaged and marginalised communities, and created a significant barrier towards future achievement and success. In relation to higher education, this means a broadening of the discussion beyond the limited understanding of aspiration that often appears in policy documents in which students who do not want to access higher education are deemed to have low aspirations. Preece and Walters (1999), in their study of English acquisition and refugee aspiration in British society, note that education is a vital step to gaining access to wider society.

Additionally, the aspirations of refugee background persons on the basis of their racial identity, engenders prejudices and discrimination against the ‘other’. Moran (2011, p. 3) argues that:

… the expectations and pressures that Australian society places on young people from refugee backgrounds are paradoxical – on one hand there are ongoing pressures from many sides to rapidly absorb into Australian society, and at the same time young people perceive and experience an over racialisation of their identities.

As the data revealed, most of the refugee background students interviewed found identity formation difficult as they had come to Australia from refugee camps or war-torn environments. This difficulty in identity formation further impacted on their social, psychological and personal development especially as they sought to negotiate different cultural worlds and contexts. As Arnot and Pinson (2005) contend, in society, refugees as a distinct migrant group are generally stripped of the majority of their identity, except their forced identity of being stateless and status-less.
In contemporary refugee discourses, the ‘Other’ are frequently constructed as ‘impenetrable, incomprehensible, sinister aliens’ (Bauman, 1999, p. 102), compared to the ‘us’ (mainstream), who share a common fate, common values, common behaviours. This effectively asserts that ‘the label is formed and reformed as part of a social compact between the state and its citizens so that we are all incorporated in the political project of making labels in convenient images, while keeping the refugees and other dispossessed people at a distance’ (Zetter, 2007, p. 190).

There are a number of tropes in Australia’s media, political parties and popular culture around ‘refugees, border protection, generosity and Australian culture’ (Wazana, 2004, p. 86; Neumann 2014). These includes the beliefs that Australian culture is Anglo-Saxon and white, that it is under a constant and growing threat, that Australia has a right to control its borders and that asylum seekers are ‘queue jumpers’ in search of a better life (Wazana, 2004). The most common issues for the students interviewed were a reluctance to identify as being from a refugee background and the lack of awareness of cultural differences and diversity both within the school and within wider Australian society.

While labels in themselves do not relate to identity, the impact they have on those being labelled ‘refugee’ can be tremendous. The student understands that the refugee label has the potential to ‘distance people further away from the nation and point them to another place of be-longing’ (Kumsa, 2006, p. 241).

Similarly, the social capital of refugee background students shapes their future life chances because people are apt to help members of their social networks, that is, those whom they consider as ‘one of us’ (Burt, 1992 in Behtoui & Neergaard, 2012). Social capital is difficult for refugee background students to obtain since it is reliant on participation in social networks (Naidoo, 2009b).

One’s social capital depends on ‘the size of the network of connections’ that can be mobilised for social benefit (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). In this way, social capital is a factor in education. One of Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977, p. 5) central tenets is that ‘pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power.’ The concept of symbolic violence is significant for this study through its connection to education because as individuals become aware of their social position in a field
and their limited amounts of cultural capital, their identities are affected by this developing ‘sense of their social limits’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p. 115).

In this way, schools and universities play a key role in symbolic violence through ‘pedagogic action,’ as refugee background students internalize cultural messages of the institution through both official discourse and daily practices of the classroom, and become aware of their unspoken social limitations (Giroux, 1997, p. 61). Although social capital is a desired resource that both individuals and communities can use for good ends (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 1993), it seems that for social capital to emerge, a high degree of homogeneity is required: empirical evidence suggests that communities with high levels of racial and cultural diversity have lower levels of interpersonal trust and formal and informal networks (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2002).

The student subjects in this study were from a range of cultural and SES backgrounds. While some had achieved high levels of academic competence in their home countries, others had received little formal schooling. It is important, therefore, that these students are not seen as a homogenous group with the same concerns, capabilities and hopes for their future life. Bourdieu’s (1986) analogy of the ‘field’ of education to that of a ‘game’ illustrates how the relative social capital possessed by refugee background students can create a network of advantages or disadvantages within the Australian secondary and tertiary education systems. Importantly, regardless of refugee background students’ own personal aspirations toward higher education and the support they receive from teachers and schools, language and cultural barriers still prevent many from pursuing and succeeding at university. Many of the university refugee students acquired social capital by going back to the school counsellors, teachers and friends and in some cases older siblings to seek advice about higher education. Ransom (2009, p. A22) suggests that non-compliance with language support needs is required to inform strategies for increasing participation in support programs while Reberger (2007, p.8) noted that a greater focus on engagement for at risk students was required. University refugee background students need clear guidance and advice about university courses but also about the acculturation to the Australian higher education system.

As Morrice (2009, p. 664) notes, Bourdieu’s concept of ‘field’ thus enables us to look at refugees’ experiences through a different lens; rather than seeing refugees as deficient or
lacking, we can consider what the field fails to recognise and that could, alternatively, be seen as an asset. While refugee background students in the study typically aimed high educationally, and viewed themselves as possessing skills and valuable networks, educators and support staff at secondary and tertiary institutions often viewed these students in relation to deficit models and a ‘discourse of vulnerability’ (Gately, 2013).

Secondary School Teaching and Support Staff

Some support staff and teaching staff at the various secondary schools studied, reported that students from a refugee background in their classes had unrealistic expectations about their capacity to get into university. Disrupted and limited schooling was common, although for many students their aspirations were not affected by the constrictions that their educators and supporters saw. In many instances, however, the perspectives of the schooling staff were very noticeably gendered and they consistently observed higher aspirations amongst the male students:

The boys have very high expectations from the parents and themselves and they don’t have the English, they don’t have the language to access, not just English ESL, which I teach, but also other KLAs. There’s little support offered and it’s not the classroom teacher’s fault, it’s the fact we don’t have the resources to support the students and the structure itself of the HSC is very difficult for them to attain that ATAR to become what they want to become – a doctor, a lawyer et cetera. (4_support staff)

Some teachers also noted that there were particularly high expectations for students who had social capital through parents with tertiary education themselves. They also felt that these familial expectations varied, depending on country of origin, and whether children had arrived by themselves or as part of a family unit. Family aspirations, which were usually high, had a significant effect on the aspirations that students had for themselves:

Female: Because many of the students don’t actually have any idea of what going to university is all about.

Female: Oh no, they don’t. They’re somewhere to go. They say what are you going to do there? I’m going to go. What would you study? Oh …

Female: Medicine.

Female: I don’t know – yes. A lot of them …

[Over speaking]
Facilitator: So you’re saying they most want to be doctors?

Female: Yes. Their parents want them to be doctors, don’t they? (1_support staff)

Female: Probably and I would say as well they’re coming as a family. A family unit, whereas…

Male: They’re not as disjointed.

Female: A lot of the students coming from Africa are coming…

Female: … with aunties or uncles and they’re not a family unit so which is why then they’re having to take on family responsibilities. Whereas at least there are families coming who have had parents too … they have had tertiary experience and they’re not being recognised in Australia but they come in as a family unit so they have the parents doing the parents jobs…

Female: They have a high expectation of their kids.

Female: … and they have high expectations.

Female: Whereas Africans they don’t even have parents. (1_support staff)

Teachers and support staff also reported that, for some, the field of aspiration was narrow, specific and based on perceived status and financial rewards. This was despite the students themselves having only a vague idea of what their chosen professions involved:

They have high expectations. They want to become doctors, they want to become dentists but there’s no way that they can become because they need to have schooling for many years. (1_support staff)

Especially coming from parents who are engineers, who were engineers in Iraq, who were doctors in Iraq, who were very – who are very educated. So they have those expectations as well, to do the same in Australia. (4_support staff)

One problem that support staff and teaching staff reported is that students aspire only to go to a university and do not see the TAFE or CIT as a desirable or appropriate ‘stepping stone’:

Female: The students have that expectation that they will be able to meet the requirements of senior study, without having that basic education behind them. They have very high expectations of what that is really; to get unrealistic expectations of what it is to actually get into university. Some of them have very negative opinions about TAFE, which they get from community – a lot of community members.

Facilitator: Can you clarify that [name]?

Female: They feel that the TAFE system is a very inferior system to the university. Parents often – or the people they’re living with – often push the idea that they must go to
university without having the basic education that’s required to get there. (1_support staff)

They do but for some students, they see that [TAFE] as not even as a fall-back, they see it as it’s not that they’re not worthy. I’m blanking out on the word. They want to do well and they see if you go to TAFE then you’re not successful. The only way in is to go and do Engineering at university. You’re not doing well, you’re not being successful, you’ve failed if you go into TAFE. So they don’t even want to consider it. It’s a bit of a closed tunnel view. (4_support staff)

School staff reported that they encouraged students to seek alternative pathways, such as TAFE, to help them meet their goals. The excerpt below is notable for the fact that the female staff member sees TAFE as a ‘stepping stone’ that will help a particular student meet her goals, and for the fact that the male staff member sees these goals as unrealistic, possibly because of extant trauma related to the student’s background as a refugee:

Female: You know, one of our students wants to be an airline hostess but she’s been encouraged to …

Male: She gets frightened at the sound of thunder so she’s not going to be good in an emergency.

Female: She’s been taken over to the TAFE courses so that she can learn what the – you know what TAFE courses are available to give her some idea of what might be – give her training in hospitality along the way because airline hostess might not be exactly where she ends up.

Male: No, just can’t see that.

Female: But she’s been encouraged to do other courses when she moves school. She’s been lined up with part-time work in the industry and been supported through that so – but there’s lots of support for them. (5_teaching staff)

Within some cultures and migrant groups, sex and gender was also seen as a factor that influenced and inhibited aspirations for tertiary study. It is difficult to determine from this excerpt if female students are seen as unlikely to progress to tertiary study because of prejudice in their family or because of prejudice in the teaching staff. However, it is worth emphasising that lower expectations were consistently held for female students:

I probably teach more female students in the senior year and probably family would be something because a number of the girls have become pregnant, you know, and they’re looking down the family side of things rather than tertiary studies so that could be something that would inhibit them going further. (5_teaching staff)

Sometimes, staff also encouraged students to aim higher in their career aspirations.
In the vignette below, ‘Michael’ is seen as capable and ‘clever’. While the character of ‘Michael’ is an imagined composite of several students, the quotations from teaching and support staff reveal a gender bias:

Michael is a young man from Afghanistan, who is attending an Intensive English Centre as part of a Refugee Bridging Program. He is here without his parents and lives in a house nearby with two other students, who are also here on bridging visas, like himself, and don’t yet know if they will be eligible for permanency. The support staff at his school do their best to help Michael to manage day-to-day tasks: like many adolescents, he is sometimes not adept at managing basic domestic and administrative chores:

Well, some of them have the food there but because they’re teenage boys and their mum’s not there to say, have you had breakfast? They’d just rather sleep in and then go to school, but then there are others who perhaps might be in a family situation but money’s a bit tight so they wouldn’t have much for breakfast. (7_support staff)

Despite his lack of formal education, Michael is fluent and literate in several languages and his Australian teachers feel he has a natural aptitude for the sciences:

Female 2: Well, I’ve talked to him. He’s actually interested in – first of all he said construction and I said, no, but you’re cleverer than that, so now he’s thinking engineering or architecture.

Facilitator: He’s never been to school before?

Female 2: No, but he’s really a very clever boy. (7_teaching staff)

But I’ve said to him, I’m going to assume, young man, that you’re going to go as high as you can go, so I want you to do these subjects. (7_teaching staff)

With the encouragement of teachers and support staff, Michael hopes to go to TAFE and then to university. However, he has many obstacles to overcome. Not only is Michael here on a temporary visa; most of his immediate family are in Pakistan and are refugees themselves. Michael must negotiate the English language and Australian culture, as well as serious bureaucratic and financial difficulties, before university entrance becomes an attainable goal.

Teaching staff reported that, for other students, university studies were not something they aspired to. For some students, the cost of going to university was an inhibitor. Getting a trade or running a business was seen as more attractive because they would earn a wage sooner and/or have greater status within their families and community:
But thinking of these boys … there are a couple of boys who can easily manage going to uni, but they are talking about being an electrician or a plumber or a builder, they want to do that. They can easily become an engineer if they want to… They want money. (7_support staff)

Female: I feel when I speak to some of the students, it's their cousin or a family friend or a member in their community who have done it, who has come in and is successful or is running their own business. I think they want to be like them. Or their parents say, that’s a good job, there’s money in it, it’s a job that you should be doing … (3_support staff)

Teachers and support staff also noted that some students, because of their prior experiences, were not in a position, at this time in their lives, to think ahead about university studies and a possible future career because they were preoccupied with the challenges of just surviving in a new country:

I believe that education is not their priority. That’s last on their list … food and other things are their first priority and then thinking of going to university, probably they can’t even make up their minds. (1_support staff)

Past traumatic experiences, many of which are extreme, were seen as a factor that inhibits aspiration and the acquisition of social capital for the future, as well as school study in the present:

Female: But can I just say on that that some students who do have parents who are … engineers or whatever, it doesn’t translate. It’s nothing about him. I think because of the transition experience, because of the war and all of that, he’s off the rails and it doesn’t translate and that’s clearly because of migration and refugee issues and war.

Facilitator: So it doesn’t always, yeah …

Female: It doesn’t always and there are a few students I’m thinking of who do have parents who were engineers or whatever and they’re not academic or interested at all and I think that’s because they are refugee students. (4_support staff)

School and support staff taught a highly diverse group of students from diverse backgrounds with varied experiences. While some students experienced trauma and racialisation as an inhibitor, others appeared more determined to enter university and succeed because of past and present hardship. Some teachers reasoned that past trauma and racialisation was actually a factor in fostering motivation and resilience:

Female 1: With a lot of them coming from such a hardship, they’re more motivated to succeed.
Female 2: Yeah, they’re really positive students.

Female 1: So they are really positive and motivated and they work hard to achieve more than what they’ve ever had. So I think that that’s commended really. (2_support staff)

There is a lot of resilience from the boys, especially the refugee boys because they’ve gone through so much themselves … (4_support staff)

I know that most of the students have – are from Afghanistan. I know that some of them have been through some horrific and traumatic experiences, which they have confided in me, such as losing people in front of them. Yeah, some pretty awful, very heavy experiences. I would say that generally they are just the most positive, motivated, beautiful students who really appreciate everything that you do for them. They want to do well, yeah, they’re good kids. (2_support staff)

For many staff, there was a difficult balance to negotiate in acknowledging the past trauma and racialisation experienced by their students and celebrating their strength, tenacity and motivation.

University Teaching and Support Staff

‘Family’ has been discussed in Theme 1 (Prior Life Experience & Education) as a form of social capital for young students of refugee origin when it came to transition and participation in university. Staff noted that an investment in a university education was not simply an individual achievement but:

… a huge family investment … the children were the first that have had, were even heading towards proper employment in Australia, so huge family expectations for them. Nobody in their families had worked in Australia. (B_support staff)

This example illustrates the ability of some disadvantaged minorities to ‘build social capital in a context of socioeconomic marginalisation and discrimination’ (Thapar-Bjorket & Sanghera, 2010, pp. 260-261), that is, to use education as a tool to increase their chances of social mobility.

Support staff noted that students would often choose universities that were located close to their families and home communities. In this sense, it could be argued that students were involved in a form of ‘class-matching’ (Ball et al., 2002, p. 53), that is, matching lifestyle and taste to the choice of the three case study universities which sit well outside the prestigious halo of the research intensive Group of Eight—Australia’s eight top-ranked universities. Hence, refugee background students’ lifestyle and choice of university were influenced by the
sub-text of class (Ball et al., 2002, p. 53). However, explanations of ‘class-matching’, while
relevant, do not completely capture the trauma and stress experienced by students and their
families when geographical distance separated them from those who shared their backgrounds
and understood the circumstances of their lives.

Students’ ethnicity, past experiences of racialisation, present networks and bonds impact on
their aspirations for the future, as well as their ability to realise these aspirations. Bonding
with school teachers as mentors was identified as a ‘big’ factor when it came to building
student confidence and mentoring them through the complex and bewildering process of
university admission. Indeed, students sometimes returned to their mentors for advice and
assistance a number of times after commencing university, particularly if they could not
identify support staff or services at the university level. Staff noted:

[T]his is a big one I find with students I speak to – if they’ve had teachers or some sort of
mentor in the school who’s been able to take their hand and guide them through the
process of applying to university … for an access scheme, if that’s what is applicable.
(B_support staff)

Of the different factors that affect access to and participation in higher education, Sellar and
Gale (2011, p. 116) have identified aspirations, mobility and voice, stating, ‘We argue that
strengthening capacities to cultivate networks (mobility), shape futures (aspiration) and
narrate experiences (voice) increases people’s ability to access, benefit from and transform
economic goods and social institutions.’ Teachers appeared to play a particularly important
part of a network that strengthened students’ capacity to aspire towards and access university
studies.

Watson (2011) argues that teachers prefer the cultures, beliefs and values that they perceive to
most resemble suburban-ness or middle-class-ness. Some responses given by university
lecturers in this study indicated that they saw networking within the cultural and language
groups of students of a refugee background to be problematic, rather than building on social
capital. One lecturer talked about how they explicitly encouraged students to ‘get out of the
ghetto’:

For whatever reason, I think they’ve felt confident enough to get outside the – and I
apologise for the term – get outside the ghetto. They’ve moved outside their immediate
sort of ethno-religious affinity group or support group and started engaging with other
people, which in turn I think builds their confidence, which gives them more capability, which builds their confidence. (C_ teaching staff)

Universities have traditionally been focused on the delivery of expert knowledge, rather than the perspectives that the students themselves bring to the learning contexts. This vignette, focusing on ‘Patricia’, a university lecturer, illustrates how, despite good intentions, her deficit thinking leads her to focus on the disadvantages faced by her students from a refugee background rather than on their social and cultural capital. While Patricia obviously does not represent the perspectives of all university lecturers, as a composite character, she does encapsulate the perspectives of several of the university teachers that were interviewed:

‘Patricia’ is a lecturer of Anglo-Australian origin, in her thirties, who teaches several courses as part of a Bachelor of Business and Management degree at a suburban campus. She has a number of students in her undergraduate classes that are of African, Middle Eastern and South East Asian origin. Some of these students are refugee students, although they don’t always identify as such. Patricia is regularly frustrated about a number of issues with these students. She feels that they are poorly prepared for university, that they lack critical thinking, and an understanding of the learning style that they need to succeed in her classes:

Some of the East African students and also some of the Middle Eastern students … have a learning style that is dooming them, unless they change it, a style that is dooming them to either failure or to really bad results.

Because it’s a learning style based around recitation. It’s a sort of memorization … it’s rote learning. (C_teaching staff)

Patricia is concerned both about the academic and the cultural issues that this cohort faces, and recognises that there are ‘issues with social capital’:

The research indicates this is a real issue for a lot of people in a sort of sense, like, all right, people like me don’t go to university. (C_teaching staff)

Patricia feels that her students from a refugee background lack a critical perspective and are ‘more knowledge oriented and more prepared answers and so on’ (A_teaching staff). She also worries about writing and language difficulties and that the support at her campus is ‘opt in’, so that the at-risk students are not accessing the help that they need. Moreover, there are cultural difficulties: she feels that some male students don’t respect her as a female academic (B_teaching staff) and sometimes she doesn’t know how to approach intersecting issues with cultural and learning styles. She knows that students from a refugee background
can have trauma issues that impact upon their ability to learn, but not what she should do about it:

One student, she came here, she was 10 years old, by boat, Vietnamese student, again, the culture difference. I encourage them to kind of participate. She gave an incorrect answer, I acknowledge saying that now then, I’m so glad that this is a common mistake made by students rather than downgrading, she started crying because in her culture there’s no way – and she was silent for the rest of the semester. How many times I tried to encourage her … (B_teaching staff)

Patricia feels pressed for time and doesn’t feel that language teaching, studies skills teaching and counselling are part of her job. However, she worries that students from a refugee background have endemic disadvantages that will make it challenging for them to pass her course.

Patricia is subscribing to what Gately (2013) terms a ‘discourse of vulnerability’, seeing her students as vulnerable and lacking agency and self-determination, rather than as resourceful, capable and skilled. While she understands that refugee background students have needs that differ from mainstream Australian students, she has a tendency to culturally homogenise and lump refugee background students into one group. Patricia doesn’t seek to build on the cultural diversity within her student cohort as a strength and a means to build skills in language and learning. Instead, Patricia primarily sees the refugee cohort in her classrooms as unable to adapt to the Australian university environment. Education policy in Australia broadly reflects positions such as Patricia’s: typically, refugee education has been subsumed and invariably conflated with the needs of migrants, ‘new arrivals’ or EAL/D learners (Sidhu & Taylor, 2007; Taylor, 2008). Policy therefore works to inform and reinforce a perception of ‘who counts’ in the sphere of Australian education and refugees have typically been excluded, or had their more complex educational needs sidelined (Keddie, 2012).

For refugee university students, education is the single most powerful element that gives them hope for the future. Universities need to be committed to serve the region and engage young people in need of a university education.

**Refugee Background Students**

Studies conducted in the United States show that the aspirations of refugee background students and children of immigrants tend to be higher than the national average (Kao &
Tienda, 1998). In this way, aspiration can be understood as important educational and social capital for refugee background students in that it may compensate for other shortfalls, such as a low SES background, a lack of familial support and a deficiency in language (Gibson, 1988). However, while many refugee background students may have high aspirations, their aspirations may not be consistent with realistic possibilities for their future. Salikutluk (2013, p. 7) refers to this as the ‘aspiration-achievement paradox’, explaining that:

First, immigrants’ estimation of the probability of successfully completing higher education can be biased by a strong projection of wishes and unrealistic aspirations. The salience of hoping for socio economic improvement can induce a strong belief of education as key for upward mobility. Secondly, it may be possible that the aspired level of education by immigrants is not unrealistic per se. However immigrants may not be able to realise their goals due to language or cultural barriers in the country of residence.

Moreover, studies in Britain found that, unlike most other minority groups, refugees were often academically over-qualified for their jobs, but they lacked the language skills necessary for higher level positions (Further Education Unit). This disconnect between refugee background students’ aspirations and their probable outcomes highlights the need for more effective, targeted educational services (RCOA, 2010, p. 3).

I wanted to be a lawyer when I used to learn French but then I came here, the language is different so I don’t think I can … Yeah but like now I can’t because I changed to English and everything is different. (2_students)

I want to do law, not just when I came to Australia, I had that dream in Burma. So I feel like sometimes it’s not fair for me because the ATAR in here, it’s really high and the thing that I’m learning is English so it’s … I feel like it’s not fair for me. If I was in Burma, surely I would get to law very easily because it’s Burmese and I know it really well. Sometimes I feel it’s not fair. (6_students)

Education is highly prized among many refugees as leading to social and cultural capital that can be taken with the child regardless of the outcome for citizenship. Therefore, the goals and aspirations of refugee background students are often linked to their parents’ level of education or educational aspirations. Immigrant and refugee background students are more likely to aspire towards higher education and work towards achieving their goals as the value placed on education as a means to upward mobility is often high (Morgan, 1996) given that immigrant parents have high expectations for their children:

My mum actually went to university, she’s like do whatever you find is good for you but you have to go to university because she had experience there … Yes she’s been to
university and she’s been in a country where if she didn’t have the university degree she wouldn’t even survived. She’s like with my uni degree I earned a lot of money, I did a good job, but if I didn’t have it I wouldn’t do nothing then. With me she’s just get your uni degree. Yes because she had experience there, so she wants all of us to go to university and my father. (3_students)

They want me to work hard and be focus in my Education. Being an African and having the background that I have, it is very important for me to study hard and focus on my education because in my community we believe in success. (1_students)

According to Appadurai (2004), ‘aspirations’ are not exclusive to affluent groups in society. All groups, irrespective of social class, have aspirations or future goals. Those who aspire towards a university education may not necessarily fulfil their aspirations; but those who do not aspire may not get that university education at all (Shakya et al., 2010, p. 65). A study of refugee youth in Canada stated that they develop strong aspirations for higher education as a proactive response to overcome pre-migration experiences of forced migration and educational disruptions. In doing so, refugee youth straddle a thin line between vulnerability and empowerment as they negotiate post-migration shifts. So while aspirations are a necessary condition for subsequent achievement, the capacity to aspire, which is shaped by social, cultural and economic experiences, as well as the availability of ‘navigational maps’ to assist with directions for these aspirations, is not equally distributed. Bok (2010, p. 175) believes that the absence of navigational maps can be:

… understood analogously with the performance of a play. A map or a script provides the actors with direction that can help them produce the desired outcome. From this perspective, the capacity of low SES students to navigate their aspirations may be like performing a play with no rehearsal – experiments and experiences – to prepare them and a minimal script that requires much improvisation.

This kind of ‘hot’ knowledge plays a significant role in the decision-making process of low-SES students, such as refugees, and can contribute to the disinclination to attend university (Smith, 2011, p. 166).

Also the side effect with second class language is when you do research, I think – and this is what happened to most of the refugee guys, I’m not really sure about what they got from this website and how to do referencing … What I’ve got here from C, most of the teachers don’t really worry about how the student can do the work. What they’re worried about here is they have to tell the student to take the work. But what I need them, as a refugee, is to worry that a student is not getting more information. (C_student)

I think what’s challenging a lot at the University is the amount of work given to students. Some students are okay with it but someone who have to learn language. Have someone
from my experience – we are not used to – I mean if you get the information, it’s hard to process it as – like someone with English as a first language. You have to make sure you translate it into different context and then understand it. So I find it that there’s so much work to be done at university. (B_student)

Yeah, so I studied in Pakistan, Afghanistan and now here. So everything totally different from here, Pakistan and Afghanistan, like Afghanistan and Pakistan are a little bit similar, but here it’s totally different for me. So I have to work hard here and I have to study. In Pakistan, we just – for the students, you have – just have to learn, like we don’t do any experiments and it’s – most of the time it’s written type, but here you have to do assignments and students have to do all the things. So there’s – the patterns are quite different in every country. (C_student)

The students’ quotes above demonstrate Bok’s (2010, p. 176) statement that:

Without such a script, and with less experience rehearsing the act, the capacity of students from low SES backgrounds to intuit their correct moves for the performance is hampered and the play becomes more difficult to perform.

The university refugee background students interviewed could be seen as being extremely resilient, from an educational perspective, with an ability to focus on adaptive resources despite their difficult circumstances. With such attribution, the students interviewed were able to perceive a future life of hope and positivity. A strong sense of self-identity and a positive attitude allowed these university refugee background students to succeed academically. Their self-determination allowed them to develop strategies to pursue academic goals. University students indicated that they appreciated and embraced the support they received from teachers, the school, peers and family and as such, showed a strong sense of responsibility towards the family, community and those who believed in them. Positive family relationships are known to improve students’ chances of success in school, particularly among those whose lives are challenged by severe adversity (Englund et al., 2008). Yeoh, Huang and Lam (2005, p. 312) note that transnational families attempt to enhance ‘social, cultural and symbolic capital’ by educating their children. Further, immigrant parents do not see their children’s future as downwardly mobile, and instead remain optimistic, consistently reinforcing messages about college plans throughout childhood (Raleigh & Kao, 2010, p. 1083). It is worth emphasising, however, that many of our interviewees spoke of gender stereotypes being reinforced by the beliefs, attitudes and expectations of their parents:

My dad really wanted me to be a doctor but now – because now he understands. Because in Nepal, like I said, if you’re a doctor, engineer or something, you can get a really good high pay and then so on … Yes, status. But in Australia everyone is equal. So whatever I
want, he’s happy with it....But he doesn’t want me to just stay home and then …. Have a university degree and do what we want to do, what you are interested in. (A_student)

Well, I didn’t decide. My mum, especially my mum, said teaching primary is especially suitable for girls because it’s like a – not really easy but it’s a good job for girls there, you can find any jobs anywhere. So I was just yeah, let’s do it, and now I’m okay with it, although at the beginning I didn’t like it but now I’m used to it. (A_student)

This framework of aspirations, while being culturally bound, recognises refugees’ inherent potential and their capabilities that encourage them to create circumstances for them to increase their effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities ‘they want to engage in, and be who they want to be’ (Robeyns, cited in Zeus, 2009, p. 42). The aspirations of refugee background students should be understood ‘as a series of flows, energies, movements and capacities, a series of fragments or segments capable of being linked together in ways other than those that congeal it into an identity’ (Grosz, 1993, pp. 197-198).

So it’s a nice experience and a nice exposure to be in a different world. It is also part of resilience because for me I have studied through hard and harsh conditions. I wouldn’t mind whichever condition I go through. I will struggle through it. (A_student)

Sometimes it is hard, but sometimes when you have a motivation, when you have passion, these difficulties we can overcome in life because you’re persistent and you keep doing and you overcome them. (C_student)

Discussion

With some exceptions, students in this study viewed themselves as highly motivated, capable and hopeful for the future. Many students highly prized tertiary education and qualifications. High school teaching and support staff were sometimes more cognisant of the challenges faced by their subjects and while they typically shared the students’ aspirations, they were conscious of inhibiting factors, and sometimes inclined to share deficit thinking. The transition to university, however, often led to difficulties with language, culture and the demands of tertiary study. This was often poorly understood by university lecturers, in particular. More work needs to be done on recognising, accessing and utilising the various funds of knowledge that refugee background students bring to tertiary classrooms and courses. In building on these various funds of knowledge, universities can work towards fostering an enabling learning culture for young refugee background students.
Recommendations

At a secondary level:

- **Encourage a strength-based approach, viewing students in terms of the languages, skills and experiences that they can bring to the Australian workforce and tertiary education sector.**

  This perspective recognises the resilience of individuals and focuses on the potentials, strengths, interests, abilities, knowledge and capacities of individuals, rather than their limits (Grant & Cadell, 2009). It is in this way that a strengths-based approach differs from traditional deficit models. Networks need to continue at tertiary institutions through mentor schemes to help with the negotiating and transitioning to university.

At a tertiary level:

- **Encourage academic lecturers to see academic literacy, language and meta-language learning as their core business, regardless of their discipline.**

  This model allows bilingual/multilingual refugee background students to take full advantage of their first language knowledge and abilities, to surpass the limits set by their more limited knowledge of their second language (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 1994). This implies that EAL/D students gain from networking within their own culture and language using their languages of origin to understand and collaborate in the classroom.

- **Encourage all education staff to move beyond a ‘discourse of vulnerability’ and see students from a refugee background as ‘resourceful, capable and skilled’.**

  Vulnerability is an inescapable fact of existence for refugee background learners that can be respected, exploited, or denied (Brotherhood of St Lawrence, 2011). Refugee background students are extremely diverse in culture, language and life experiences: they cannot be seen as a single group or subset in the university community. They are also not the same as migrants, ‘new arrivals’ or any other ‘special needs’ group.
Theme 4: An Enabling Learning Culture

Introduction

Theme 4: An Enabling Learning Culture emerged as a key factor in how best to meet the teaching, learning, cultural needs and assets of students of refugee origin as they transitioned from school to university. The principle of an enabling learning culture flowing from our case study is captured below:

*An enabling learning culture is built on nurturing positive interpersonal relationships with peers, teachers, support staff and the wider community combined with the ability to navigate the Australian educational system. It is a holistic process which extends beyond the formal walls of the face-to-face or virtual classroom and takes into account the needs and abilities of students. It encompasses assistance and targeted support at both individual and systemic levels. It builds on the strengths, resilience and assets that young people of refugee origin bring to their learning.*

Although the provision of an enabling learning culture in universities as part of young refugee background students’ transition from schools to universities may seem to be taken-for-granted and obvious factor in achieving success, the actual implementation and enactment of such a culture was less obvious, highly fraught and contested.

In the subsequent sections, there is an attempt to capture the nuances, complexities, challenges, gaps and commonalities when it comes to fostering an enabling learning culture in universities through drawing on the voices of key players and their differing subject locations in differing logics of practice at play in schools and universities.

Refugee Background Students

For refugee background children, the extent to which they can successfully adapt to school is very much dependent on the extent to which their family manages to adapt to the new host country (Anderson et al., 2004, cited in Hart, 2009, p. 360). Mainstream teachers, however, are struggling to cope with the increased demands of their refugee background students, who are mainly from various African countries (Taylor, 2008). There is limited professional development so it is not surprising that there is an emphasis on language support and less
attention to literacy needs across the curriculum. In an investigation by Windle and Miller (2012) into teacher experiences in Victorian secondary schools, they note that despite occupying a unique ‘space’, refugee background students are often unintentionally rendered invisible. Ali, a university student originally from Afghanistan, describes his transition from the Intensive English Centre to mainstream schooling and captures these challenges and the ensuing silencing:

When I was in Year 9, I just went from … [Intensive English Centre] … to high school and I didn’t have good English. I couldn’t speak. I used to just – I didn’t use to talk, I used to stay silent most of the time, if there were people from – especially Aussie people [laughs] and they have a different accent….and it was really hard to understand as well. (A_student 6)

University students reported that their relationships with some school teachers were characterised by warmth, concern and understanding. They felt that this had contributed to their academic engagement and school performance. These students continued to call on these important social connections for educational support after leaving high school and transitioning to university:

Yeah, the teachers there … [at my old school] … are really good. I remember I used to go to a particular teacher – my first teacher actually. Every semester I used to email her. I’d say I’ve done this in this units; which units do I need to do? She would email me back and say if you’ve done that you’re better off doing this because these units are harder or these are easier or you can do this or that. So she used to guide me right through to uni. (A_student 5)

School teachers in the IEC were an important factor in building one student’s cultural capacity to aspire and imagine a better life for themselves, a capacity that is frequently denied students of refugee origin or those from poverty-stricken backgrounds (Appadurai, 2004):

Well, besides like, the great help was in IEC, Mrs Andrews, or kind of head teachers and other teachers in IEC, they were really helpful. They were really friendly. They really pushed me, pushed my – motivated me to do something. (A_student 4)

Students thought that as many of them were the first generation in their families to attend university, academic support could assist them to confront the myriad of challenges they encountered. However, they appeared to be receiving incorrect advice or information in relation to appropriate courses, coursework and support. One student reported his struggles: ‘I tried to find where I can find the help so I can know where to do the hard work and how to do
the hard work.’ Many students reported returning to school counsellors, teachers and friends, and in some cases, older siblings, to seek advice about higher education.

University students need clear guidance and advice about university courses but also about acculturation into the Australian higher education system. As students remarked:

[W]hen I started uni in the first semester I was pretty new to the uni environment and pretty new to the educational system. The teacher comes there, gives you the lecture and then he goes. We don’t even know what to do in the uni. (A_student 1)

I think … [University B] … have limited support to students. I remember there’s a learning support down at – what’s it called, [unclear], down in [unclear], those guys, they’re only – they’re only expert at two things, that’s Maths and English, that’s it. [University B] don’t offer more than that, if you go there looking for help with finance, they’re not going to help you … I find it much better if I have an appointment face to face with someone, actually. If they send you something on an e-mail, you’re not going to know how to get that done. (B_student 3)

Another student offered the following suggestions to support beginning students of refugee origin:

Maybe if you can call all the people from the refugee background, probably have some talk with them in a group or individual and then ask if they need any help with assignment or other related – even they might have house problems if they are living without family or if they don’t have support from the family, they don’t live together and then that could be a problem that can hamper their study. If the staff could be more welcoming – because now, we don’t know all the staff … If they find out about it and if they can provide more support – other than the class, other than the tutorial classes – that might be useful. (A_student 6)

For senior secondary students who were aspiring to attend university, EAL/D teachers and tutors were deemed to be an integral part of their academic success⁴. To have staff dedicated to the purpose of helping students succeed demonstrated that the school supported the efforts of refugee background learners and wanted them to perform well academically.

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⁴ In 2011, the Commonwealth Government removed specifically targeted funding for ESL students in schools. This is of great concern, given the importance emerging from our study of ESL support for this highly vulnerable group.
The RAS program, in which university students studying to become teachers act as literacy tutors for refugee background students, has shown a great deal of success in secondary schools. The social aspect of the program was appealing to students and made support programs such as the ‘homework club’ less of a chore and more of a chance to see friends. The fact that the tutors were close in age to the students added to the informal feeling of the ‘club’ and put the refugee background students at ease:

So I was a bit surprised doing assignments as [unclear] whereas in Burma we didn’t do that kind of exam. We did in-class exams, not assessment tasks or assignments. It’s really very difficult for me and I get help from RAS tutor and ESL teacher. I ask them a lot of questions. (6_student)

Yes, when I started in year nine and 10, I had a RAS tutor help me with my assignments and preparing for exams … They also helped me with deciding where I wanted to – how I would work through my class work and managing time so I can spend enough time on past papers and class work as well as preparing for exams and assignments. (6_student)

School teachers and support staff echoed many of the observations of schools and university students noted above in regard to the provision of an enabling learning environment, but also revealed varying levels of understanding and skills of the complex knowledge and hidden cultural and social capital that students needed to negotiate in the university terrain.

Secondary School Teaching and Support Staff

School staff recognised that their students required additional support in order to achieve at school. In some cases, staff identified systemic, centrally funded programs. Other programs and support came from philanthropic organisations and universities, for example, the RAS program and the LEAP Macquarie University Mentoring Program. Other programs were specific to the school site, for example, Homework Centres. Many were dependent on initiatives and time of individual staff members. However, the availability of programs and capacity of schools to take advantage of those activities were not always well-matched:

Well, it depends when it comes down to staff and then timetabling. Are we able to facilitate the program? And if we can’t get the students actually there to be able to be part of it or we can’t get the release to have the staff members supervise it, we can’t simply do it. (1_teaching staff)

Support staff and EAL/D specialist staff were more likely to define their work as supporting the whole student, rather than simply supporting their school work. Rather than their
relationship with the student being ‘thin’ and ‘single-stranded’, as is frequently the case with mainstream teachers, they were cognizant of the varying worlds in which students moved and knew them as a ‘whole’ person, not merely as a ‘student’ (Moll et al., 1992, pp. 133-134). Noeline, a long-standing EAL/D support staff member, captured this differing relationship when she remarked:

The main thing too with supporting the students is my role is much different to a classroom teacher’s role because it’s the holistic approach and with any refugee person or any person, if they’re not safe at school or if they’re not happy in their environment, they’re not going to learn. So we really try and do as much as we can to make them feel comfortable at school, try and help them feel comfortable in the community and support them. (5_support staff)

In contrast, the ‘thinner’ relationship of classroom teachers (Moll et al., 1992, pp. 133-134) was revealed by mainly mainstream staff in schools. A consistent refrain was that the students were over-supported to the extent they were learning helplessness, as illustrated by the following remarks:

I didn’t know the best way to say it but we do far too much for them here. I’m sorry but it’s something that I’ve seen specifically in the last five years. That we do far too much. (1_teaching staff)

Sometimes I believe the amount of assistance they get in certain situations is actually a drawback. (5_teaching staff)

He’s [student] falling back into the, if I keep asking questions then all my work gets done for me without me having to do much of it myself, so I’ve had to draw a line. (7_teaching staff)

Comments made by the mainstream teachers above were at odds with other observations about the challenges that schoolwork posed for many of these students. Like some academic teaching staff (see final section), such comments demonstrate a lack of understanding of the long-term nature of language learning and its inherent difficulties for refugee background learners who may have limited literacy in their first language (Theme 2: Language). The comments also reveal a lack of awareness about the ways in which learning routines in Australian institutions are culturally constructed where teachers’ expectations of learning habits may not be shared by students with other schooling experiences, or students with limited schooling experiences.
There was general agreement that whole staff training for school teachers in regard to students’ welfare needs should occur and that it was insufficient for only some staff members to have this knowledge:

I went to a professional development course to do with welfare and it was a whole-day course about refugees, what they’ve gone through, personal stories that sort of thing and it gave you an idea, without going into specifics, about what refugees go through. If you did it with the staff I think it would be very beneficial because often staff members, they don’t know anything about refugees. If you go to a staff member and you say well, this kid has got problems, please be a bit lenient with him or don’t confront him, the staff member’s going to go well, why, which is a natural reaction. (4_teaching staff)

However, the ‘one-off’ nature of staff development programs was identified as problematic:

I mean we do have programs and I know a couple of years ago we had a whole school program where we all did two professional development days about refugees but the problem is that it’s not ongoing. So they do it once and then we have – the next year we have 10 new staff that come into the school and they haven’t been professionally developed, they’ve got no idea and it’s not consistent. (4_teaching staff)

Some teachers observed that differentiating the specific needs of these learners in a mixed classroom was just too difficult to accomplish under current school arrangements. This was exacerbated in regional schools where there were no intensive language programs and students were arriving to classrooms with very little English (c.f., Wilkinson & Langat, 2012):

Like we said, if you’ve got a class of 30 kids and you’re trying to teach kids who have been in the country for a matter of a couple of weeks maybe, it’s difficult. (5_mainstream staff)

Some of the sites were able to offer EAL/D classes to students because of the larger concentration of refugee background students and because of leadership decisions to use school funding in this manner. Teachers described these classes as EAL/D-specific pedagogies to support these learners:

Well, I know a lot of the times within our ESL classes there’s a lot scaffolding and modelling going on. I know a lot of the other teachers are doing the same thing, they will go that extra mile to make sure – if they can see they’ve got their needier kids because of individual academic gaps – that it’s broken down to a level where they’ll be able to access the information. (3_EAL/D specialist)

However, there were insufficient numbers to offer specialist classes for refugee background students, or the lack of will on the part of the school, preferring to mainstream EAL/D
learners rather than separate them, which provided substantial challenges for teachers who attempted to meet these learners’ needs:

Teacher: My Year 10 class has a number of refugee students and X comes in to support, which is fantastic, but the class is – there’re 30 students in that class, so it’s very big. Last year I had a Year 10 group with refugee students as well, but I had a much smaller group and it was a lot easier to get face-to-face with the students and really help them. (2_teaching staff)

Each site in the study was working with what resources they had to develop site specific supports for their refugee background students. The schools appeared to work in isolation from one another, which suggested they would benefit from sharing their different approaches to dealing with these issues within budgetary and system constraints.

One challenge that was recognised by all staff across all schools studied was the financial constraints these refugee background students faced, reflecting findings that financial pressures ‘can directly impact on one’s educational experience’ (Harris & Marlowe, 2011, p. 188):

A lot of them have problem juggling settlement with education and family responsibilities. A lot of them have part-time jobs as well to support their families. So trying to juggle everything and find the time to do everything. (2_teaching staff)

Most of the secondary schools studied had set up processes to minimise study costs and subsidise events such as excursions. While school staff felt that financial deprivation was less likely to impact on students’ high school education, they were clear that it was bound to impact on their tertiary education. This was a theme echoed across all schools and in other themes, such as Theme 2: Language:

The … financial cost of attending uni even if they have HECS covered for them – it’s still transport, it’s books. It’s all the other resources that you need. (1_teaching staff)

At two schools, unaccompanied minors living alone presented additional challenges, such as attendance:

Almost across the board, the attendance is shocking, and particularly with the 866 visas, the children without parents. I’m thinking about one guy in particular, so he was living six people in a two-bedroom flat in Parramatta, and sleeping in the hallways. (2_support staff)
It is inevitable that refugee background students will enter Australian schools with different educational experiences from those learners who have done all their schooling in Australia. As such, they may lack taken-for-granted knowledge and tools to identify and negotiate the expectations of Australian educators (Harris & Marlowe, 2011; ACARA, 2014). Uptin et al. (2013) describes this difference in terms of schools as social spaces in which young people learn acceptable ways of being. Learners from refugee backgrounds will have had limited opportunities to learn and conform to the implicit norms underpinning the expected ways of being. This is articulated by one teacher:

I think they lack the cultural capital that you need in Australia. They don’t really have an understanding of Australia or how things work. They’re catching up on all that background knowledge as well as trying to get the language. (3_teaching staff)

Support staff in the schools were an invaluable source of information because due to ‘insider’ knowledge, many were able to contribute:

Since I came from the same refugee camp I understand the quality of our students. So they have the English language and a problem with the English language skill. Back in the refugee camp they were taught English and the English they were taught in their first language. English was taught in Nepalese, just imagine … so it was really hard for them to build up their language skill. (5_support staff)

The teachers in this study were aware that their students were sometimes reluctant to participate socially in school activities; therefore, some teachers worked diligently to involve them, believing that integrating with the other students in the school would be beneficial. However, there appeared to be a lack of understanding from some teachers about why students may not be integrating:

They are generally very insular, talking their own language all the time which is not unusual and understandable but there’s no – not much fusion between the two groups within the school. I don’t think there’s a lot of friction but there’s no fusion and that would be invaluable for them to attain higher outcomes. (5_teaching staff)

Teachers noted that many students were rendered invisible within the classroom setting, without necessarily being aware of any resolutions to this. This was a common theme across the sites:

[I]t’s easy for some teachers maybe to have the kids in their class and forget about them a little bit because they’re generally well behaved and they’re quiet and they sit there and
they do what they’re told. When you’ve got 20 other kids that aren’t as cooperative then it’s easy to forget about those kids a little bit and easy to maybe not be all that aware of exactly where they’re at and what they’re capable of. (5_teaching staff)

This silence is not simply an effect of limited language or lack of social capital for negotiating the learning space, but because school becomes a place where, for the first time, students ‘face being identified as embodying difference, and embodying it in a way that … [is] … not acceptable to their peers’ (Uptin et al., 2013, p. 129).

Support staff were more articulate about solutions they offered students to overcome the social challenges, for example:

Whenever I have the opportunity … I’m trying to tell them that you do not have to fear any teacher. Just either in the class or in the school compound, approach a teacher and say – even in one word or two – that teacher may be able to follow certain things through. If you keep quiet yourself, you will never learn any. (6_support staff)

A number of schools offered a variety of social programs, including drumming, dance, martial arts and sports, all of which were very helpful in building social capital. These programs were often done with the goodwill of staff:

Get them involved in the sport. I got a Year 8 boys team – basketball team – together, of all the refugee boys and my son and a few other boys. They play on a Friday night. Knowing that I could go to X at Centacare and get the funding to enable them – I go and pick them up and get them there. (6_support staff)

This kind of community involvement is important for these learners, recognising the learners and their experiences as central, that is, a place-based education that recognises the assets they bring with them, rather than being a place to which learners have been delivered (Major et al., 2013).

University Teaching and Support Staff

The need to provide an enabling learning culture was overwhelmingly identified by university support staff as a key factor in enabling and/or constraining full access to, and participation in, universities for young people of refugee origin. However, it was acknowledgement that current practices, programs and policies were piecemeal, had considerable gaps, and might not be best targeting the specific needs of refugee background students.
Scholarships and access to finances were identified as critical forms of assistance. One support staff officer explained:

We … provid[e] … information on the website … referrals to students who might need extra support and assistance … learning skills or … mentoring programs … One of the major ones is scholarships and grants, so the government provides us with quite a bit of money to assist students who are in financial hardship. (B_support staff)

Another supportive structure for young refugee background students was identified as university access schemes, an area that is also examined in Theme 5: Politics, Policy and Identification. One example is the Educational Access Scheme (EAS) which provides bonus points for students of refugee origin applying for university study. A second scheme provided one of the few instances in which support staff were able to clearly identify and work with refugee background students to provide tangible, targeted assistance prior to university entry. Staff noted:

So if they apply direct to … [our university] … I actually assess those applications … So if they haven’t been successful in gaining extra points through the EAS … program, then I can advise students to apply through either going to TAFE and doing the … university certificate. (B_support staff)

Access to this kind of informed and strategic support is critical for young people of refugee backgrounds in navigating the myriad of complex pathways to university (RCOA, 2010a).

Given that university support staff work with a diverse range of equity groups, there was evidence of a broad understanding of teaching and learning as encompassing more than a set of distinctive academic skills associated with a particular discipline area. Support staff also displayed more ‘insider’ knowledge of students similar to school EAL/D teaching and support staff.

First year programs and mentoring were viewed as crucial practices to support new students generally. This holistic notion of a supportive learning environment was identified by support staff as critical for a range of students from different equity groups. However, personnel were often unclear about whether these initiatives support refugee background students. Staff observed:
[T]here is things [sic] that although don’t specifically target refugee students … would assist them anyway … [e.g.] … the student success team, so if a student is not logging onto the … [online] … subject sites, or if they’re showing to not engage in their studies in the first few weeks of university, then the … team give them a call … do you need any further help. (B_support staff)

One of the few examples of a formal program specifically designed to support new students of refugee origin and which combined case management of individual students and mentoring is illustrated in the following vignette:

*Margaret is a support officer who runs a mentoring program for refugee students in their first year of university. Students are identified through a list that is distributed each semester to support staff. Students opt to tick a box, agreeing to be identified to academic and support staff as being on a humanitarian visa. At the beginning of each session, Margaret runs an information session specifically targeted to meet the needs of the new refugee background students. The students are able to meet other refugee background students who have successfully navigated the barriers to university life and study. These mentors talk with the new students about the barriers they have encountered and the support systems that have assisted them to overcome these barriers.*

*Health and counselling officers meet with the students. Margaret and her staff walk the students around the campus and introduce them to key personnel in the learning skills unit who can support them. The unit staff follow up with new students, checking how they are progressing. At the end of semester, each new student’s results are checked and they are contacted by phone or email to suggest support, if needed. Appointments are made with students if they are willing to attend, and advice is given about how to proceed. As Margaret observes:*

> So once again promoting that face-to-face … They’ve met the person. They know that the … [Learning Skills Unit] … is a warm place. The people are friendly and then follow up …how did it go? … Checking at the end of semester on their results and emailing and phoning depending on which way their results have gone. Suggesting the support and advising them that making an appointment would be recommended. (C_support staff)

*Mentoring was viewed by support staff as a key aspect in providing a supportive learning program for young people of refugee origin. Mentoring can occur from a range of sources, and was identified in the above vignette as coming from older, more experienced students of refugee origin who had successfully negotiated the barriers to university learning. Moreover, employing more experienced refugee background students to mentor first year students*
provided powerful sources of inspiration as role models. Crucially, the mentoring provided to students was not ‘stopgap’, but occurred as part of a well-planned and well-targeted first year program designed specifically to meet refugee background students’ needs.

The provision of extra support included specialised tuition in study skills highlighted as critical in providing a supportive learning environment for young students of refugee origin. Too frequently, however, specialised support services for young people of refugee origin were not available, were ad hoc and/or required extensive negotiation to put support structures in place.

Flexibility was also highlighted by a number of staff who stressed that having casual drop-in centres that provided ‘more in-depth work and repeating’ for those students who needed it was an important complement to academic resource centres, which were not able to provide enough support. As one staff member observed, ‘flexibility’ of services was ‘so key to providing support to refugee background students’ (C_support staff).

Two key issues did arise when specifically targeted academic, literacy and learning assistance was provided for refugee background students: (i) inconsistency of funding; and (ii) lack of coordination and communication. For instance, a formal support writing program piloted in one of our university case studies provided specific, individual support to refugee background students. It was found to be very helpful in meeting the needs of some refugee background students who were struggling in their studies. However, the program was discontinued ‘because things happened and then other projects just took the priority’ (A_support staff). Competing demands for limited funds is a critical issue for these kinds of support programs.

Similar to schools, university services sometimes operated in isolation from one another. For instance, one experienced support staff member belatedly learnt through attending one of our focus groups about a very successful academic program for refugee background students that had been running for a considerable period in their own division. This kind of incident typifies how bureaucratic structures within universities may not be working to serve the needs and interests of their diverse clientele, particularly students who, for a range of reasons, may ‘fall between the cracks’ of university provision. These kinds of incidents suggest the need for greater coordination and communication between university support services working with
young refugee people. The following question needs to be asked: *If support staff were not aware of services within their own division, how could students be aware?* As one university support officer observed, ‘I think it might be just as important to have some kind of network of the staff involved in the various support programs … so people can get to know each other’ (A_support staff).

Linked to providing specific programs tailored to refugee background students’ needs is the rejection by a number of support staff of refugee background students as a homogenous ‘one-size-fits-all’ group when it comes to learning, teaching and university policies. For instance, staff noted that the majority of refugee background students in the past few years had come from the former Southern Sudan. These students responded better to ‘face-to-face in developing relationships … e-mails are not read … if they are read, the students don’t necessarily respond to us’ (C_support staff). In contrast, increasing numbers of students were now arriving from Middle Eastern countries, and they appeared to be ‘quite comfortable with appointment making in sticking to timetabling’ (C_support staff). Awareness of these differences was critical to how staff can sensitively tailored support for students. One staff member noted:

[T]he ones I’ve had contact with are more likely to ask for assistance when it’s in a relaxed situation. The concept of making appointments … they’ve said to me it makes it feel too formal … they’ll just stick their head in to say … hello … a lot of the refugee students we’ve been working with come from the cultural background where community is that face-to-face contact … *It’s through a relationship that you then seek help, rather than a title* [our italics]. (C_support staff)

Raising staff awareness concerning refugee background students’ existence and forming a distinct cohort within university clientele was seen as crucial. One support staff member noted that events such as World Refugee Day were important in highlighting students’ presence and the associated issues of civil unrest which might impact on their studies:

It was certainly raised at Refugee Day this year by quite a few faculty members. Wow, we had no idea that so many of our students came from a refugee background. So trying to increase that awareness but making sure that we’re ticking all the boxes with confidentiality … (C_support staff)

Similar to school personnel, mental health issues were reported by a number of staff as an area in which staff awareness and training were critical. It was noted as a particular gap in
support for people who have been traumatised due to the specific nature of the skills required by staff to work in that area. Knowledge about specific services that could provide this support and specific training was also viewed as critical for university support staff working in this area. A staff member recounted:

[T]hose students … may appear normal. But any instant can trigger their past … We did a drill trial and … [o]ne student just fainted because she heard the sound … we got emergency staff there and … this student … fell into the arms of … [the medical personnel]. (A_support staff)

Providing a supportive learning environment encompassed a broad set of understandings of learning as a socio-cultural process. When it came to developing an enabling learning culture for refugee background students, the responses by university teaching staff, in a manner similar to mainstream school teaching staff, varied from a lack of awareness to a more humane understanding of the complexity of the varied needs. For example, Robert commented:

I came across a case – one person who has a very traumatic background and also you mentioned the ladies, dealing with ladies, he’s a bloke … Now when his progress was being discussed about standard of assignments and so on and so forth, the level of communication was not really right. Like, I’m the teacher, I’m the lecturer, so therefore you have to abide by the criteria for assessment, assignment. This is what you should be and so on and so forth … I think what came to mind was how we really need to start asking, what really triggered that behaviour. If, for example, a different approach was used or a different person was used or if he was not put in a questioning, demeaning situation, would he be still around … I think there is a lack of understanding of dealing with people like that. (C_teaching staff)

However, similar to a number of school teachers who critiqued the amount of support that students were receiving and the learned helplessness this supposedly engendered, another academic took particular issue with students who were viewed as not being proactive in seeking assistance outside their immediate community:

I know this is really confronting but possibly we need to be a bit more proactive in terms of policy and say, all right, as a university student, someone who’s actually got through the gate, you have to take some responsibility for yourself. (C_teaching staff)

Join a study group that is outside your particular demographic. Talk to some of the Chinese kids, talk to some of the Burmese kids, talk to the Lebanese kids, whatever. Mingle with them, get outside your ghetto because if you’re staying in this nice little cluster of ex-Somalis, it’s not going to work. (C_teaching staff)
It is not clear from the staff response what she/he regarded as their role in creating conducive learning environments for students. How can staff attitudes and perceptions such as these be addressed so that an enabling learning culture is developed and nurtured in higher education?

At University B, academic staff recognised the ability or inability to identify targeted group of students through the university systems as impacting on the provision of enabling learning culture in a timely manner (further explored in Theme 5: Politics, Policy and Identification). They observed:

We don’t know that they’re a refugee student. So that they would only – that information is often only disclosed when there is an issue. So trying to separate out that from the kind of the background issues that students have across a number of areas. It can crop up in prep applications where they provide some additional supporting documentation around the fact that they may have only been here for 12 or 18 months, two years. We would certainly take that into account when assessing that. (B_teaching staff)

I think because it’s difficult to identify a particular student as a refugee student and a refugee student who has come through the Australian school system, even if it’s only for 12 months, as you say. It’s actually very difficult; I mean there’s no kind of tag that I’m aware of that we have for those sorts of students. (B_teaching staff)

We see so often that students don’t get appropriate or timely support simply because the staff member doesn’t know what support is available. That’s where it often gets directed to Course Directors or to Heads of School and other staff. It could be done in a more timely fashion if staff knew when a student says I’m a refugee and I’m having this issue then yes, legitimate concern, these are the support mechanisms. (B_teaching staff)

Discussion

The preceding responses of students, school and university staff suggest that students’ movement from a close-knit personal schooling field to a more distant and impersonal field of universities constitutes a need to learn about, and negotiate with, the distinctly different logic of practice which shapes the relationships between players (students, professional and academic staff) in the university site (Bourdieu, 1990). A new set of cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political conditions prefiguring (but not predetermining) students and staff practices must be encountered, negotiated and mastered (Kemmis & Wilkinson et al., 2014). Learning to ‘play’ (and master) the ‘game’ of power (Bourdieu, 1990) in the university context requires learning a new logic of practice. It is a knowledge that includes proficiency in the language registers required for academic success, that is, the distinct and specialised knowledge of a variety of academic subjects, as well as effective
communication and participation within the university system. It requires recognising and negotiating the hidden curriculum of assessment and learning, and accessing and investing in the kinds of social capital that will allow refugee background students to gain access to information, power and identity (Adler & Kwon, 2000).

The practices of school and university teaching and support staff play a major role in enabling and/or constraining the entry, negotiation and progress of refugee background students from schools into this new and bewildering terrain. The programs and policies they create, implement and/or influence are critical in building cultures that enable or disable students’ access and retention.

Recommendations

• **Offer a range of supports specifically targeting refugee background students, including scholarships, financial assistance, assistance to find part-time employment and access to safe and secure accommodation.**

  Provision of an enabling learning culture is not solely confined to support for academic learning. Poverty, lack of safe and secure accommodation, lack of access to good public transport, and difficulty in securing part-time work due to discrimination were all factors that were raised by a variety of participants as major concerns in impeding university retention of university students of refugee origin. If these supports are not in place, students are not able to focus on their studies and succeed to their fullest potential.

• **Provision of systematic academic and mentoring programs specifically targeting refugee background students throughout the duration of their studies and supported by ongoing funding.**

  A small number of examples of academic and mentoring support programs which were specifically targeted at refugee background students in order to support their transition into university were cited by participants. However, they tended to be subject to the vagaries of short-term funding and primarily focussed on first year students. Moreover, there appeared to be no systematic approach to academic and social support for these students, and that which did exist, tended to be generic, ad hoc and inconsistent. As transition is not a single point in time but a process and as gaps in
students’ academic language may emerge as their studies become more complex, systematic academic and social support throughout the duration of their studies is necessary.

- Establish networks of key university, school staff and agencies supporting refugee background students to share expertise, strategies, resources and knowledge of what works in order to enable successful transition and retention. There were incidents where staff working in the same university learning and teaching unit were not aware of programs offered by other members of that unit to students of refugee origin. There appeared to be a lack of communication and awareness of programs and knowledge of ‘what works’ between university and school staff; between academic, teaching and learning and student service staff; and between university and school staff and agencies supporting students. Frequently these three groups were working in isolation from one another. The establishment of networks of schools and local universities whose focus is on refugee background students as a specific group with discernible issues and assets would assist in the sharing of expertise, strategies, resources and knowledge of what works in order to enable successful transition and retention.

- Awareness-raising and ongoing professional development for general and academic staff and management in relation to the issues that refugee background students face; the strengths and resilience they bring to the learning environment; and how to develop the necessary pedagogical, curriculum, assessment and intercultural communication skills to maximise students’ learning. Frequently university staff—both academic and support—were unaware of the complex needs and issues facing students of refugee origin as they transition into, and move through their university studies. Staff reported they felt ill-equipped and ill-prepared to support these students. There appeared to be little (if any) professional development offered to staff. One-off events do not work—staff need ongoing professional development programs which will assist them to build the awareness,
knowledge and skills to provide an enabling learning culture for students of refugee origin.

It is Theme 5: Politics, Policy and Identification that we now turn to.

**Theme 5: Politics, Policy and Identification**

**Introduction**

In its 2013 report on asylum seekers, refugees and human rights, the Australian Human Rights Commission (2013, p. 4) highlighted that the policy in this area is not only ‘one of the most contentious issues in contemporary Australia’ but also the frequent shifts in politics, policy and identification make it harder to understand. Theme 5 explores the politics, policy and identification with regard to factors enabling or inhabiting participation and access to tertiary education by students of refugee origin. In this case study, we use the notion of identification to suggest ‘How?’ and ‘In what ways are students of refugee origin identified and supported at the institutions where this research took place?’ As stated at the beginning of this case study, the basis for the research included university teaching and support staff, school teaching and support staff and the students themselves.

**University Teaching and Support Staff**

If, at its simplest level, policy is defined as ‘a strategy to solve a problem’ (Walker, 2002, p. 337) and it is the product of politics, then a lack of specific policies with regard to refugee background students in the three universities suggests that there is no problem when it comes to their educational provision and participation. Yet, our combined case studies suggest that the opposite is true. The lack of specific policy provision across the three universities was striking and may be partly due to their small numbers and lack of critical mass. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students also comprise small numbers of university students and their lack of representation is rightly a cause for much soul-searching among university educators, with distinct policies, programs and resources dedicated to redressing their under-representation at university level. At University A with the largest number of refugee background students, one support staff conducted a keyword search in regard to policies for refugee background students and ‘couldn’t find anything’ (A_support staff). She posed a question to the interviewer: ‘The first question that you asked … was … are they
identified … [at university level]? … My answer … is no’ (A_support staff). Another officer noted the resourcing and staffing implications that specific policies for students of refugee origin would usher in. She observed:

[University support staff] are … a fairly generalist group, we do lots of different things … if the university was to have policies around supporting refugee students, it would need resourcing and staffing to actually do it, amongst 101 other things that we’re asked to do and report on. (B_support staff)

One of the few exceptions to this lack of specific policy provision, visibility and recognition was the university entrance scheme, Educational Access Scheme (EAS), which provides bonus points for students of refugee origin applying for university study. However, knowing that the scheme existed and filling out the complex paperwork left refugee background students vulnerable and frequently dependent on school teacher mentors who possessed the cultural capital necessary to complete the process. Not all students have access to teacher mentors, nor should they or their teachers be left to carry out this task unaided. Refugee background students’ ‘precarious’ social status is again illustrated in these examples (Siddhu & Christie, 2007, p. 12).

A teaching staff member thought the constant changes in university policies added to the problem of a lack of adequate support for students with extra needs. The staff member explained that:

Universities generally, I think, and certainly in this place, we concentrate on process rather than outcome. Rather than saying, well, we have a policy – look, it’s a beautiful policy, it’s been launched by DVCs. We have policies up to the eyeballs. (C_teaching staff)

The staff acknowledged the need for policies but decried the fact that they are hard to keep up with and that some of the policies were never implemented properly.

One is, we do have policies. We must have policies because that’s a requirement. But to what extent people are aware of those policies and thirdly, to what extent those policies have been implemented. (C_teaching staff)

I’m a bit critical about having policies for the sake of having policies. What’s the benefit behind that? Not just like looking at documents, well, that looks very impressive. But to what extent they are made aware of and to what extent they’ve been applied, that’s a big question, question mark. It is. (C_teaching staff)
On paperwork it looks good, as part of a qualitative assurance procedure, look we have got this and that. But I don’t think we are very good at implementing it, we are not. (C_teaching staff)

The lack of specific policies for refugee background students in the three universities raises questions about power relations and which groups in our society may be afforded a voice in debates about education provision and participation.

Regarding a policy for identifying students who come from a refugee origin, a number of the staff interviewed felt that the inability for them to access and identify student backgrounds through using the university data systems makes it harder to provide targeted support to refugee background students who may be struggling in their classes.

Basically it’s looking after, not just the academic issues, they do come and see me with expressing those. Although our title is academic advisor, with lots of private problems as well. My main concern, especially the ones who already been to counselling services, apply for special provisions. Academics receive list of students enrolled in their units with special provisions but what is the content of that special provision? Not it’s confidential. (A_teaching staff)

Giving a possible reason why identification could become useful, a teaching staff cited a recent experience at University B:

So I mean, for example, with the riots in Phnom Penh last week every B student who had place of birth or nationality – because they can obviously be different – as Cambodia – received an email. Just saying, just checking you’re okay and the family’s okay. Let us know how you’re going and if you need any assistance. Again the email response to that has been thanks so much for asking and they’re telling us what’s happening. Now… some of those could be refugee. Some of those are international students studying here. Some are Australians but they still had grandfathers, grandmothers in Cambodia. (B_teaching staff)

The issue of identification of students, however, appeared to be more complex than just having access to university students’ data systems as other teaching staff felt that ethical considerations should take priority. This is especially crucial in situations where some students chose not to be identified as a refugee, for example, due to a fear of being stigmatised.

I don’t know if people would like themselves to see, are you from a refugee background but we can probably start with a question like that and then if it’s confidential, they will say yes. But some people will say I don’t want to be identified. (C_teaching staff)
But I don’t know if people would like themselves to be identified as coming from a refugee background. (C_teaching staff)

Male 1: Because you’re already stigmatised. You don’t want to be self-identified to an official as being – for want of a better word – a victim or different. Some people really want to fit in. Some people don’t see themselves as refugee equals loser, refugee equals – the sort of people that Tony Abbott is trying to keep out of the country.

Female: Boat people. (C_teaching staff)

Female 2: If you’re self-identifying that’s fine. (B_teaching staff)

I guess that the other side of that is that there may be students who don’t wish to be identified. (B_teaching staff)

To identify or not identify as coming from a refugee origin was a vexed question for students and university staff who wished to provide adequate support. It was a consistent thread woven through focus groups of university support staff. On the one hand, being able to identify students as coming from a refugee background gave staff at least the possibility of providing support. On the other hand, there were ethical considerations, particularly with regard to respecting the confidentiality and rights of students who chose to identify or not as the case may be. At the level of power relations, there is a deeper question about representation, that is, the ways in which marginalised groups, such as refugee background students, may be oppressed by being identified as a ‘refugee’. For instance, the phenomenon of too little visibility, as well as too much is, according to Freire, a mechanism ‘used by oppressors to maintain the status quo and continue their dominance over oppressed groups’ (Wolfman, 1997, p. 175).

Practices between the case study universities varied greatly. In one university, students on humanitarian visas who were commencing their studies were given the option to tick a box as to whether they wished to have this information shared with faculties and course conveners. If they chose to tick the box, then academics, as well as support staff, were able to look up the backgrounds of these students on a specific administration section within the university’s IT system. In another case study university, this kind of information was not readily available. Students were only identified in admission information as coming from a non-English speaking background. This kind of de-identification meant that support staff were could not determine if specific students required more targeted support and on what basis. One staff member noted:
Now, when a student comes back to me I have no idea, because I send so many thousands of emails out … whether they’re coming to me because they’re a refugee or because they’re just in financial hardship … unless they actually tell me. (B_support staff)

Another staff member remarked that a restructure had led to the removal of individual appointments for students; however, refugee background students were an exception to this rule. The lack of ability to identify refugee background students and the fact that students were not aware of this exception meant that their individual appointments ‘did not eventuate’ and students were not able to benefit from ‘individual attention’ (A_support staff).

Previous studies have noted that, despite occupying a unique ‘space’, refugee background students are often unintentionally rendered invisible and grouped into the much broader category of ‘ESL and equity’ (Sidhu & Taylor, 2007; Windle & Miller, 2012). However, this kind of invisibility may be sought out in an attempt to find a safe space from the stigma and stereotyping associated with the appellation ‘refugee’. A number of staff members observed:

Interviewee: I can think of instances where I have discovered one way or another that they are students from a refugee background but they’ve said no I’ve got residency and they’ve been anxious to insist that they’re not on a humanitarian visa…
Facilitator: …and therefore no longer a refugee … (C_support staff).

Secondary Teaching and Support Staff

Teachers and school support staff reported that the uncertainty in policy was having an impact on the ability of students to envisage a future in Australia, let alone to aim for tertiary education. At School 7 in the ACT, the Refugee Bridging Program had accepted a number of young male asylum seekers who were being detained in the area. The program was initiated because one of the teachers who had been working in the existing Secondary Introductory English Centre perceived a gap and applied for funds from the department. The program was initially financed by the college:

Facilitator: You’ve been involved with SIEC before you had a Refugee Bridging Program, and you instigated it, so you must have felt something wasn’t working before that needed to change. What was it before that …?

Female 1: In 2008, I came out of the classroom and I did some work on transitioning refugee kids to primarily high schools at that stage, and I wrote a submission to the department. I tracked a few of the older refugee kids and I’d lose them; they were out of the system, they were dropping out. So I thought, well, high school kids are captive
audiences, you can’t lose them, but the college kids we are losing. They’re just stopping and they’re becoming cleaners, literally, they’re just cleaning toilets. So that’s how it started.

I spoke to the principal at the time … who was great, she was wonderful. She basically said, what would it look like? Then she found the money. So really, school_7, they funded it initially. It was a bit of a gamble really. It was quite an expensive gamble because it meant they had to employ me and a few other people to get things – obviously I was still working the SIEC so it was a bit of a gamble initially. But … we had money coming from various ways, so we’re pretty much self-funded now, but we certainly weren’t for the first few years; it was just solely at the goodwill of the college to fund it. (7_teaching staff)

While teachers working with students at the Refugee Bridging Program continued to ‘assume the best’, both staff and students were aware that, under current policies for asylum seekers, aspiring to enter university was probably unrealistic:

There are certainly a couple of boys who are actually asylum seekers, so this opportunity probably won’t ever be offered to them, but they are capable of university, I have no doubt … there are probably three of them, off the top of my head – that without a doubt are university possibilities, but they will probably never get there, sadly. However, we don’t look at it that way. We do our best and we assume for the best. So I’m going to get them through … Yes. If they are put on temporary protection visas they are not eligible for free education and they will never be able to afford it. (7_teaching staff)

Many staff members spoke of the issues surrounding the funding for programs to adequately support refugee background students. While all schools received support for EAL/D learners, some did not distinguish between these learners, that is, those from refugee backgrounds and other students with special needs. There was also no clear policy about how particular programs were funded:

Facilitator: Any school policies?

Female: None specifically that I can think of. I know the whole school plan tends to integrate supporting students with all needs, regardless whether we label them as refugee, ESL, international, disability. It’s supporting all student needs, but I don’t think it goes right down to a specific set policy.

Male: I don’t think there is a policy at that sense. (3_teaching staff)

Some staff members suggested that funding models that assist Indigenous students would be valuable for refugee background students as well:
I think if there were more – like there’s many Indigenous scholarships, there’s so many things on offer for Indigenous students. I know that there’s teaching scholarships for Indigenous students and things like that. If there was more for refugee students and it became a kind of widespread thing like it is for Indigenous students then maybe we could get greater access to tertiary institutions. (4_teaching staff)

The other thing I think, there should be more financial support for the ESL kids – or your refugee kids and ESL kids going to university – I think there should be if we want to have an inclusive representative population. (5_teaching staff)

However, many staff argued that it was not just about getting adequate and targeted funding for refugee background students, but sustained funding policy was necessary, as well as a strong principal who was willing to support and sustain programs for these students:

Female: One of the things that’s not – well it does interfere with it too is that funding changes all the time, so for things to be sustainable you don’t know whether you’re going to have the funds to be able to sustain it the next year or the staff there to do it.

Female: Or even the whole year…

Female: Or the whole year…

Female: Our funding has changed…

Female: … from term three to term four it’s changed dramatically. What we had available for term three…

Female: You can’t plan ahead all the time.

Female: And so something might be successful but then you just can’t keep doing it because you don’t have the staff or the money to keep that going. (5_teaching staff)

**University Refugee Background Students**

With most university refugee background students interviewed, identity formation was difficult as they came to Australia from refugee camps or war-torn environments. This impacted on their social, psychological and personal development, especially as they had to negotiate different cultural worlds and contexts. As one university student commented, ‘If people don’t speak English or if they look different, especially if they live in an area where they’re a minority and they might be bullied about it, that’s a big pressure too’ (A_student 2). Arnot and Pinson (2005) contend that in society, refugees as a distinct migrant group are generally stripped of the majority of their identity, except their forced identity of being stateless and lacking in status. In Australia, refugees are
represented in public discourse as the ‘other’ defined against the ‘us’ who belong (Tilbury, 2000). ‘The construction of “us” and “them” is framed within discourses of belonging and un-belonging’ (Tilbury, 2000). Additionally, Tajfel and Turner (1979) assert that references to group social status affect ethnic identity and self-esteem. Identifying with a socially marginalised group may induce low self-esteem, or even self-hatred (‘I used to feel that I didn’t have the right to aim for something good, something great’ [A_student_6]). Zetter (2007, p. 190) asserts that ‘the label is formed and reformed as part of a social compact between the state and its citizens so that we are all incorporated in the political project of making labels in convenient images, while keeping the refugees and other dispossessed people at a distance’. While labels in themselves do not relate to identity, the impact they have on those being labelled ‘refugee’ can be tremendous, as indicated in the words of a university student: ‘I don’t want to feel different from other people’ (A_student interview_6). The student understands that the ‘refugee’ label has the potential to alienate and isolate those of refugee background.

There’s a tendency of giving African refugees a special consideration. But I find it partly to be dirty and partly discriminatory. One, the universities could establish clear parameters as of how do we grade someone who has backlog in their education system. The more you keep, from my personal experience, defining me as vulnerable the more I feel vulnerable… But, the more you challenge me to get out of my vulnerability the better. So my suggestion is how can we challenge them rather than sympathise with them? Because it makes someone – I never like someone who has empathy over me [laughs]. (A_student 7)

I’ve also met lots of Australian kid who are nice but some were not very helpful to me. So – but it didn’t really bother me as long – another thing too is some kid they would say some bad comment about you. That could hurt you sometime … It starts all the way from high school to university but it was a minor thing. Maybe it’s just friendly thing. (B_student 1)

I actually, to be honest, I don’t like saying refugee in front of my friends … It’s not because – I feel ashamed saying refugee, I’m embarrassed to say refugee. It is because – I don’t want to feel, I don’t want them to feel pity on me. Yeah I don’t want to feel different from other people. If there’s some opportunities coming up, I don’t want that opportunity only because I’m a refugee. I want to achieve this because I deserve it. (A_student 6)

However, as the quotations from university students below reveal, successfully shifting self-identities to meet the disparate expectations of the different cultural worlds (parents and the host societies) could lead to academic success (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Universities need to
work on the centre-periphery relations (i.e. how/in what ways are refugee background students perceived with regard to economic, political and/or cultural) in the realm of knowledge (Connell, 2007, p. viii). This is important because self-identification depends on one’s role as well as others’ perceptions of them in the hierarchy of centre-periphery and that movement from periphery to centre of collective and individual identities.

I learnt English in short time just from coming to Australia. That’s when I develop – it’s quite different – the English that we speak in Africa is quite different than what you – we speak in Australia. Yeah, so I try to be adapting to a culture, a language and a new place. (B_student 1)

We are born and brought up in that really disadvantaged place, that’s why we know how to do hard work and prove that we are the right person to be in that position. (A_student 1)

Also if my brother can’t do his uni degree, I will definitely survive my – sacrifice myself for him to do that, so I would go out, I would start working, give him the money that he needs to study and get his degree through and then I can come back again, because I have that stubborn that I really want to do – when I do want to do something, I will do it. It doesn’t matter when I’m 60 years old, I will still do it. Because I’m stubborn. So that’s why I don’t want him to go through like that, so I will definitely sacrifice myself. (A_student 4)

Bracken (1998, p. 4) argues that labelling disadvantaged refugee youth as ‘victims’ with associated mental trauma issues has negative outcomes for refugees that have proliferated and can be profoundly disempowering and stigmatising. Even the Australian media (Pickering, 2001, p. 170) indicates that the language associated with refugees emphasises that they are a problematic and deviant population, a perilous addition to local communities and a matter of national concern. A recent UNICEF report examining support for separated refugee children in the United Kingdom found that success in education is rarely dependent on previous educational experience, but rather depends on individual ambition and the support the children receive in helping them to engage with the system (Brownlees & Finch, 2010, p. 95).

As one university students remarked:

I believe that given all their sources, given all the facilities these students can do more than you can think. The other factor of life is if universities can invest into giving the potential to these students to have the level of self-discovery and self-determination – what we learnt back home like building confidence and esteem among our children. As long as you can build self-esteem and that self-confidence you will always feel like life is worth for you. (A_student 7)
It can be established that the experience prior to flight, as well as post-exile, determines educational success and outcomes. Schools, however, become the most important stabilising force in the lives of refugee background students because they provide social and emotional development needs, structure and routine (Hek, 2005, p. 29); foster friendships and language acquisition (Rutter, 2001) and provide a supporting environment for refugee children experiencing trauma and mental health issues (Rutter & Alexandrova, 2012). For refugee background students to ‘feel like life is worth living’ and aiming to succeed, universities and other educational institutions need to ensure that relevant policies and guidelines regarding pastoral care and student wellbeing are put in place. Such policies will create a conducive learning environment, especially for students who are transitioning from school to university.

**Secondary School Refugee Background Students**

According to Fullilove (1996), the recognition and validation of ‘place’ and ‘belonging’ is integral in order to prevent an individual’s diminished sense of self or identity. Thus, the extended exposure of refugee background students to violence and trauma has significant ramifications for their emotional wellbeing while transmigration factors often pose risks to their development (Ahearn & Athey, 1991), which can lead to displacement and loss.

Yep. I just feel like not belonging to this school, yeah. (5_student).

I couldn’t speak English, so the first time I went there everyone just – you know they were looking at me – in our school they didn’t have a lot of people my skin colour. Probably I was the only person that had the darkest skin, so I didn’t find a lot of friends. I used to sit by myself. I used to get angry so I used to like do a lot of bad stuff because no one cared. Sometimes I would just walk and go home because my house was just right there. So I felt left out …(1_student)

For refugee background students, the experience of displacement can manifest into one of the most significant traumas and loss that they face, and can impact in multifaceted ways. The effects of these losses are further compounded by the resettlement process, cumulating in not only a series of losses, but also a series of continuous stressors in adjusting to life in the host country. For example, there are structural adjustment difficulties connected with language acquisition, finding employment, low SES standing, understanding the new culture, its norms, laws and educational systems and adjustment to separation and role changes within the family system, alongside ongoing experiences of racism.
Female: Even her sisters, they just like fights. So it’s bully for me, and not only her but primary school I used to have a lot of bullies. I grew into [it], I used to bully people too. (1_student)

Ah, sport. I remember when I was in Year 9 there was one girl in my class, she was like a bully. She used to make fun of my accent. She used to make fun of my accent and I’m not really good at sport because I’ve never played sport ever before. So I chose sport science because I didn’t know what it was. I thought it was science with fish and stuff. So I chose the subject and I used to play sport with her and she used to make fun of me. Whenever I dropped the balls or whenever I couldn’t catch the ball. I used to skip the class a lot in Year 9. My attendance was low, like below 70 per cent. (1_student)

Refugee background students’ identities are in a constant state of flux as they inhabit different spaces. Their familial identities may not be well defined, depending on their past experiences, and their cultural identities shift as they grow accustomed to Australian culture and language and form new groups in their schools and neighbourhoods. Yeoh et al. (2005, p. 308) describe the complicated identity of the transnational family as:

… deriv[ing] its lived reality not only from material bonds of collective welfare among physically dispersed members but also a shared imaginary of ‘belonging’ which transcends particular periods and places to accompany past trajectories and future continuities.

Refugees also negotiate their identities through a lens of achievement and aspiration. Mosselson (2006) notes that educational underachievement is a significant contributor to greater stress and ill health, whereas educational attainment and education itself are compelling factors that assist in the reintegration of identity and allow successful transitions into a new life. In this way, ‘education is a vital tool for refugees, both in terms of their adaptation to the new culture in which they live and in terms of their ability to cope with their traumatic experiences of war and flight’ (Mosselson, 2006, p.23).

You know what, some of the white girls when they see your hair is short they come and touch it. They ask you, do you have AIDS or HIV or cancer? One of the students came to me and she touched my hair and said, do you have cancer? I said, no. (1_student)

According to Mosselson (2006), refugee background students are most ‘at risk’ in respect to general well-being and school performance. While they undergo the physical, emotional and sexual changes of adolescence, they must also deal with the trauma of their past experiences and acculturate to a new society with different cultural, educational and societal norms.
When I first came here it was difficult for me but actually my cousin was living here and they came here in 2004. So they learned to teach me how to be around white people, speak English when I’m going to school with them. They taught me to be like – taught me how to read and speak English well. (6_student)

Overall, all refugee background students interviewed expressed a lack of English proficiency as a significant barrier to their educational achievement. Significant differences in teaching pedagogy, assessment structure and modes of learning presented additional challenges. Participants identified the development of interpersonal relationships and social support networks as crucial to academic success citing that dedicated and accessible learning support was vital in addressing acculturation and achievement barriers. Many students expressed a desire for additional task completion time to combat language or literacy barriers. Students requested targeted information (especially in regards to university admissions requirements) and specialised teacher support in regards to available pathways that would enable their successful transition to university.

Discussion

There is considerable concern amongst educators and support staff about how best to identify and work with students of refugee origin as they are conflated with EAL/D learners and other equity groups. The study, however, underscored the fact that refugee background students have different and acute needs that require structured intervention programs and policies to enhance their education success in higher learning institutions. From the data analysed, it is questionable whether or not the policies and guidelines developed by the Federal Government in 1999 to increase the participation rates of the student groups with disadvantaged educational background in tertiary education have been fully implemented (DETYA, 1999). The responses from the participants show that some universities do not have specific policies for supporting some targeted groups; for example, this study revealed that refugee background students were exposed and vulnerable due to disadvantaged access to education in their early years. As mentioned in Theme 2: Language, equity policies and EAL/D programs in universities and schools respectively, serve students from many diverse groups. Without specific policies or strategies for the education of refugee youth in Australia, such students’ university education is ‘left to chance’ (Sidhu & Taylor, 2007).
A recent and ongoing shift in federal politics and policies on refugees and asylum seekers is not helping. The proposed funding models have had the effect of uncertainty in relation to sustainable support programs for refugee background students and other disadvantaged student groups. For example, the 2014 Federal Budget policy announcement may cause a shift in regulation and funding in higher education whereby government contributions to Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) are reduced (Australian Government, 2014). If budget announcements are implemented, the likely ripple effect is that most refugee background students and other students from low SES backgrounds transitioning from school to university will be further disadvantaged. Part of the federal politics and arguments around the proposed cut to CSPs is that universities will be required to offer more Commonwealth scholarships for disadvantaged students. The assumption here is that all universities have effective policies and clear guidelines regarding the identification and support for these groups of students. However, and even though this study cannot be used to generalise, the findings from the three universities revealed some inconsistencies and lack thereof in their policies with regard to identifying and supporting refugee background students:

Education policies have been influenced by neoliberal global policy trends, resulting in reduced education funding, reduced commitment to humanitarian aid and resettlement of refugees, and a general marginalisation of concerns about equity and social justice in education. (Taylor, 2008, p. 59)

Therefore, relevant university and school policies and cultures must be reconsidered, especially when developing support mechanisms that can produce desired education outcomes among refugee background students transitioning from school to university in Australia.

**Recommendations**

- **Schools and universities to develop specific policies regarding support for refugee background students, establishing a repository of best practice strategies for this specific cohort of students in transitioning from school to university.**

  The lack of specific policy provision for refugee background students across the three universities is striking and may be due in part to their small numbers and lack of critical mass. The lack of representation is rightly a cause for much soul-searching amongst university educators, with the need to develop distinct policies, programs and resources dedicated to redressing their underrepresentation at university level.
On enrolment at university, students to be given option to identify as of refugee background so that they could be offered the option of targeted support. Being able to identify students as coming from a refugee background gives staff the possibility of providing more nuanced support. On the other hand, there are ethical considerations, particularly in regard to respecting the confidentiality and rights of students who chose to identify or not as the case might be.

Institutions need to engage the government through advocacy, representation and research regarding policy and funding for underrepresented and disadvantaged student cohorts wanting to transition to university. Schools and universities need to engage the government not just about getting adequate and targeted funding for students from a refugee background: sustained funding was necessary, as was a strong equity staff or principal who was willing to support and sustain programs for these students.

Institutions should develop equity and access policies and practices that provide a supportive and caring environment for refugee background students. More attention should be paid to students’ emotional wellbeing as they transition from school to university. This recognition and validation of ‘place’ and ‘belonging’ is integral in order to prevent an individual’s diminished sense of self or identity.

Theme 6: Transition

Introduction

Over the past decade, there has been considerable growth in the significance and importance of the link between students’ transition experiences and university success (Nelson, Smith & Clarke, 2012). Successful transition, however, requires support ‘on both sides of the transition bridge’ (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012, p. 4), as students transitioning from secondary school to university are often required to ‘reorganise the way they think about themselves as learners and as social beings’ (Huon & Sankey, 2002, p. 1).
Research suggests that successful transition and participation in new educational contexts of refugee background students is inextricably linked to the development of positive interpersonal relationships with peers, teachers, support staff and the wider community combined with the ability to navigate the Australian educational system (Ferfolja et al., 2009; Naidoo, 2009a). Moreover, as ‘learner identity is not uniform’ (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012, p. 4), the successful transition for refugee background students into university involves identity shifts associated with the increasing participation in the valued practices of the institution (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007), along with the resituating of students’ existing knowledge in a new context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Consequently, there is a need to increase the participation of disadvantaged students in tertiary education (Gale et al., 2013).

Refugee background students are a distinct equity group with typical acculturation needs of migrants but whose lives have been characterised by experiences of war, crisis and trauma (Newman, 2012). For many refugee background students, transition to university involves much more than a decision to pursue higher education. Many are concerned with the challenge of studying independently, worried about how they will manage their finances and anxious about how they will balance their academic workload, along with other aspects of their lives, such as families, paid employment and social life (Briggs, Clarke & Hall 2012, p. 11). Thus, for refugee background students in particular, transitioning from secondary school to university can be isolating and complicated.

**Refugee Background Students**

Data obtained from interviews with refugee background students identified a number of transition barriers and challenges. A ‘fear of the unknown’ and a desire to remain close to established support systems and networks were identified by a number of students as a barrier to transition.

*Mei, a secondary school student of refugee background, recalled how her own transition into the Australian secondary schooling system was initially intimidating and frightening. The difference in Australian schooling practices meant that, instead of being surrounded by familiar faces and the entire cohort, Mei found that she was separated from her friends and groups. Inevitably, Mei felt that she had been thrust out of her comfort zone.*
I was scared of the people. They’re all different and they’re really weird … Like okay, they’re all in a group do you know what I mean but in my old school I’m just with everyone … Like separated each other they know what I mean. I was so [unclear] with everyone. I should have [groups] do you know what I mean? (2_student)

This ‘fear of the unknown’ was similarly identified by a number of refugee background students regarding the transition from secondary school to university. Indeed, despite a strong desire and aspirations to attend university, many students felt they were ill equipped to cope with the demands of an unstructured learning environment.

I have been to University of Sydney. It’s really big and it’s really nice. I see university life, it’s very different from school life. You have to do it on your own and you have to leave home and you have to stay by yourself. So I feel like it will – may be a bit more difficult. (6_student)

Because have some Nepalese people who went to university and I asked them, how did you find it? What are you studying there? They talking about, it’s too difficult to study there. It’s too hard to learn, too hard to understand the language. (5_student)

Additionally, a number of refugee background students revealed that many had found, or expected, the transition from school to university to be confusing and isolating.

If you request someone, like you’ve got difficulty … it’s not really quick to get feedback. (C_student 1)

Last term I asked my RAS tutor because I was a bit worried that there’s no tutor who can help me in university. (6_student)

Peter, an Australian secondary school student of refugee background, explains how the transition from one schooling environment to another can be difficult and isolating. Describing the transition from a specialised language area into a mainstream secondary school, he reveals that he is concerned about his age, fitting in and making new friends. In addition, while support for transition exists, he is concerned about where to find it and how to access information and support.

Yeah, because I don’t like to leave here. My friends; yeah it’s really hard for me, because I’m going to another environment; to a new; it’s hard. I don’t know what’s like; what would be like in CIT, there. Are they my age? Older than me? Yeah, it’s hard for me … Support? I have to learn; I didn’t go to CIT; like yeah I have to go and find the places to learn more information. (7_student)

According to Brady and Allingham (2007), secondary schools may be inadvertently hindering the transition process, for example, in the formation of close staff/student relationships which
are generally not duplicated at university. Thus, at the tertiary level, a successful transition process should ensure that refugee background students are guided to enable the sustenance of learners when study becomes challenging (Donnelly, 2008).

The challenge is to determine how one can deliver adequate teaching and learning support resources that are able to facilitate the learning and socio-cultural adaptations of this distinct cohort at the university level. While gaps may exist in the students’ knowledge, it can be said that at the institutional level, there are huge gaps insofar as transitioning refugee background students whose pre- and post-migration conditions are vastly different to other student groups at university. As such, the current support offered at universities for students in general is not relevant to this cohort of students.

Nevertheless, despite the isolation and difficulty, the vast majority of refugee background students interviewed revealed strong resilience and an aspiration to work towards tertiary attainment and further education.

Basically I haven’t done many computing courses but I will learn them bit by bit. The way the course is delivered by the teachers in college is really good. There’re so many examples in the materials. So it’s really worth it. (C_student 3)

It’s a very, very – I’ve got ambitions and stuff. I want to do this, so it’s like a very long goal, but I’m – I really want to do it, so that’s what I was – that’s what I did and that’s what I wanted to do. So hopefully, that will be enough. (A_student 4)

I manage university because of my hardship experience, otherwise it’s not easy. When I was in the camp I see people manage my cousin. I see them that managed families, they don’t have something to do. They work very hard in shops in town. (C_student 3)

Successful transition requires students to be able to navigate institutionalised pathways or systems (Ecclestone et al., 2010, p. 6). Therefore, refugee background students whose parents have little education are frequently ill-prepared academically to succeed at university, further complicating the act of transition. Many refugee background students lack the necessary information and support networks that bolster aspirations and expectations about higher education. Their difficulties are frequently compounded by inadequate information about university and career opportunities, how to access them, cultural differences, language barriers and discrimination as indicated by the interviews.
The main problem with the refugee actually here and what I can tell you, the big problem is the computer and the learning material, like a lot of – like lectures are not enough to most of the second language students. (C_student 3)

The teachers at uni, the lecturers and tutors, the tutors that mark the essays, they only circle or say, too long sentence, or they say, incorrect spelling or improper grammar. (A_student 2)

I remember my class, like the class I’m doing this semester, so far we had one girl miss class three times. The lecturers probably – they do pick up on that quite early and they should either do something with it. (B_student 3)

**Secondary School Teaching and Support Staff**

A number of secondary school teaching and support staff highlighted the ‘vastly different’ environments of universities compared to secondary schools. Staff noted that refugee background students at university are expected to manage their own funds, timetables and course structures. Furthermore, the large number of people, buildings and faculties can be intimidating. Accordingly, teaching and support staff noted that many refugee background students found the move from secondary to tertiary education challenging because supports and connections previously established could be lost, resulting in students feeling isolated.

Female: The thing is, accessing it later on when they’re no longer a school student here; they’re off on their own. A lot of them have struggled and we’ve seen – if we remember the […] family, particularly the eldest son in that family. He did make it to university, just barely scraped through, and completely drowned. (3_support staff)

Female: And for us it might be a little bit difficult because many of our children aren’t travel trained.

Female: Yes.

Facilitator: Oh yeah.

Female: They’re not used to getting on a train and travelling to North Sydney or getting on a bus and travelling you know it’s – we have to actually specifically teach how to do that so all of our students who are in Year 11 and 12 that do work place requirements for their subjects, one of our SLSOs often travel trains them.

Facilitator: Oh really?

Female: Takes them to the venue so that they know how to…

Facilitator: To get there.

Female: …link up buses and stuff.
Female: Or print out a map for them and step by step on how to get there. (4_support staff)

Talking with them casually as well, I have found out that even these buildings here are quite intimidating because when you think of what is back there. Perhaps under a tree, perhaps in one building where you stay there the whole day. But they find it quite exhausting moving from one room to another, up, down. That is what I have learned. It does affect in a way. So those are – to me – the two things that I see, language and the building itself, and then of course the size of the students in the school is large. (6_support staff)

A number of teaching and support staff reported that even after their former students had transitioned to a tertiary education setting it was not uncommon for them to return to the secondary school to ask for help, particularly with academic challenges:

Every school that I’ve been too, it’s apparently the students who are at university are still going back to school ESL and the best teachers or whatever and saying you know, can you help me with a university task? (4_teaching staff)

Mainstream teaching staff offered suggestions on how to improve the transition between secondary and tertiary study for refugee background students. Their suggestions included bridging literacy programs, foundational units and courses before entering a degree and combined professional training for secondary and academic teachers and staff:

Male: Maybe identifying the kids who struggle with the language and have them do some sort of writing course before they start.

Facilitator: Like a literacy preparation?

Female: Mm.

Male: Yeah like a literacy preparation to prep them for the literacy demands of university.

Female: Some students when they leave here I worry how they’re going to be able to deal with the literacy demands.

Male: Yeah. Some kids after high school they can’t put sentences together. (3_teaching staff)

I think also, though, maybe if students can’t go straight into school from uni [sic], is that pathway because their literacy skills aren’t developed? I wish I could say oh well, I wish they could do something with their experiences and access university that way but there also has to be a certain level of understanding for them to be successful in those courses. However, maybe you can do some kind of 101 course for a year or two, which is kind of where – went, and then in two years they can genuinely look at that but they’ve not lost their whole academic outcome in working. So keep this link with the uni, some base 101
one year, 201 the next year, going over essay writing, doing that for a semester. Something like that. (4_teaching staff)

University Teaching and Support Staff

Most refugee background students transitioning from school to university may face adjustment issues when copying with university learning expectations. Like all other students commencing studies at university, refugee background students ‘require a high level of encouragement and assistance, particularly in their first year of undergraduate studies’ (Silburn et al., 2008, p. 13).

Data obtained from participant interviews supports this assertion with teaching staff suggesting a number of best practice strategies that may help in creating and enhancing a supportive learning culture for refugee background students transitioning from school to university. These include: (i) provision of additional support; (ii) clear pathway programs; (iii) special consideration and academic integration plans; (iv) effective school-university communication; and (v) creating a positive ‘word of mouth’ culture.

However, according to one university teaching staff member, in addition to specific transitional support, there should be extra ongoing support:

… because they do improve. We find a lot of improvement from when they first came in to now but then they need that bit more extra to carry on to help them through the rest of the years. (A_teaching staff)

In the same way, explicit study skills instructions and approaches that are clear and unambiguous in design and procedures are needed to assist students to progress from the familiar to the unfamiliar or new learning spaces. Refugee background students should participate fully and have opportunities to self-monitor, direct their own learning and reflect on the progress (Naidoo, 2011b).

Many of the refugee students, in particular, say that they’re okay, they can write once they’re given precise instructions but standing in front of an audience and doing a presentation is a real nerve wracking experience for them. So they need a lot of help with that as well. So we run presentation workshops. (A_teaching staff)

Data from the support staff focus groups suggested that although there were a number of current programs and practices that specifically supported school to university transition,
overall support for refugee background students transitioning from schools was patchy, tended to be untargeted to refugee background students as a distinctive cohort, and generally lacked ongoing, consistent funds and staff whose teaching role was dedicated to the area of refugee support.

Financial support was identified as another critical factor for refugee background students’ successful transition into university study. Indeed, according to Harris & Marlowe (2011, p. 188), the lack of access to finances ‘can directly impact’ on the ‘educational experience’ of refugee background students. Financial support was offered, not only by the Smith Family program (which provides much-needed support for some university refugee background students through its Learning for Life program), but also by the universities themselves. The provision of university scholarships, for example, was highlighted through the interview data as having a powerful impact. One particular refugee background student currently studying medical science at university reflected:

Yeah, it had actually helped me a lot. That actually encouraged me as well. Before the exam – I found out that one before the exam, so I wanted to focus on the studies so that I can get the scholarship. (A_student)

This assistance was particularly important at the commencement of students’ studies, especially for refugee background students who may not have the bridging capital, which provides access into the kinds of informal networks frequently needed to secure part-time work. In regional centres, prejudice against those who are visibly different from the predominant Anglo-Australian monoculture was also an issue in securing work. A support staff member commented:

[I]t was more the struggle with the financial aspect of the study and living in the community, trying to find work … [when you’re from] … a fairly identifiable different … background was an issue. One in particular we supported financially for … about a year before he could actually secure some work here and in fact eased that issue for him. (B_support staff)

Schools and universities, therefore, play a part in the successful transition by helping refugee background students to feel less invisible by creating a safe validating environment where they feel supported and understood. In addition to the core tasks of education, schools can assist in the harmonious integration of refugees into new educational and cultural
environments (Naidoo, 2013). This is particularly important because once refugee background students are able to settle effectively into their new environment, they are able to find a degree of security and ‘belonging’ that is crucial for future achievement and engagement (Mosselson, 2006).

**School support programs**

According to the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), a key factor impacting the study and employment opportunities of young refugee background students is educational transition (RCOA, 2010a). One means to overcome the ‘significant’ educational and economic barriers young refugee background students experience in this transition is through the implementation of specific interventions, strategies and opportunities (RCOA, 2010b, p. 14), such as school-university partnerships. According to the Kruger et al. ‘an effective partnership constructs new enabling structures which span the boundaries of school and university’ that lead to ‘interruptions’ in the taken-for-granted local practices of both universities and schools (2009, pp. 10, 49).

Data from the research reflected this assertion with school-university support programs identified by a number of refugee background students, secondary school teaching and support staff and university teaching and support staff as highly beneficial to enhancing the transition experience. The RAS program was mentioned by a number of refugee background students as being extremely beneficial to their learning and transition support. It is collaboration between the ALNF, UWS and NSW Department of Education and Training. Using pre-service teachers in the Master of Teaching (Secondary) degree at UWS as tutors, RAS provides homework and study assistance to refugee background students in a number of high schools within Western and South-Western Sydney.

Research into the RAS program has shown that such school-university partnerships are able to ‘enhance the outcomes of multilingual, culturally or linguistically diverse or disadvantaged children’ by providing an environment where students are provided with opportunities to develop supports, improve skills and realise their aspirations (Ferfolja & Naidoo, 2010, p. 8).

Nevertheless, despite the development of a number of specific programs that address disadvantage, access to these programs remains challenging (Gale et al., 2013). More
importantly, data revealed that a number of university staff noted that tutoring support appeared to be pitched mainly at students in their first year of study.

I’ve seen that happening at … university where the school of business employed casual tutors to mentor first year refugee students. Also give them additional academic support.

(A_teaching staff)

Gale (2009) contends that students of low-SES backgrounds (such as refugee background students) are known to perform at or about the same level as their high-SES peers when given adequate access to higher education. There is, therefore, a need to rethink tutoring and mentoring beyond the first year of study, especially for ‘at risk’ student groups such as refugee background students.

In terms of school to university transition, there were a range of programs that were identified by university support staff as helpful in smoothing transition into university. These included academic mentoring, bridging programs and ‘at risk’ identification programs. However, according to data obtained, there appeared to be few programs that offered academic mentoring, including specialist tuition tailored to new refugee background student intakes. This is particularly important, as a critical component of language acquisition is not only a student’s ability to communicate and participate effectively within the higher education system, but is linked to the acquisition of distinct and specialised knowledge in academic subjects.

In bridging programs, students completed a pre-university qualification prior to transitioning into university. Staff observed that one of the strengths of such programs were teachers who did not have simply an instrumentalist approach to teaching skills but who:

… have some sort of background or understanding of multiculturalism … empathetic teachers who aren’t just thinking we need to teach these skills to get these grades. That’s very much secondary to building self-confidence and making people feel welcome and valued. (3_support staff)

University awareness programs in schools were cited as helpful for the transition of refugee background students into university in a number of ways, including familiarising students with available university support staff and services and providing a much-needed, familiar face. The following vignette captures this process:
Jo and Brian are support staff who run a series of ongoing university awareness programs for senior students in schools in their local area over a number of years. They have built up excellent relations with the local schools, the career advisors and senior staff who often will call them for advice about university processes and systems. One day they are approached in their workplace by two of the local school refugee background students who have been involved in a recent university awareness program they have run at a local school. The students greet them and tell them that they’ve not yet heard from the university about their applications for admission and don’t know who to contact about this. Recognising Jo and Brian from the program, they have built up the confidence to approach them for assistance. Jo and Brian walk the students to the University administration office and organise the paperwork from them. Later they remark with satisfaction, ‘These students are more likely to be the students who engage with us and the support when they come across to the university.’

Another example of programs that were seen as particularly valuable for transitioning students from different equity backgrounds into university were ‘early intervention’ programs. The practices described below appeared to produce effective partnerships, characterised by ‘new enabling structures’ which ‘spanned the boundaries’ of schools and university and led to ‘interruptions’ in the taken-for-granted local practices of universities and schools (AITSL, 2009, p. 49). Support staff described the programs as:

… working with the communities … in the middle high school years and involving all the … groups … every year … doing an event … and students attend as they’re going through high school … having those sorts of events open to invitation for the community … so they have a good idea … instead of … you’re in Year 12 or you’re now ready for university. (C_support staff)

The idea of a clear pathway program for refugee background students was explored by a number of the university teaching staff interviewed. In particular, staff at one university (University B) emphasised the need to strengthen its ‘University Diploma in General Studies’ because it gave school leavers and refugee background students an alternative form of entry to courses at University B. According to staff at University B, there was a high success rate among students who joined University B through the programs. How the particular program at University B works is explained in the following vignette:

School leavers who want to study at University B but do not meet the entry requirements or require refresher courses in preparation for university education are enrolled in the Diploma of General Studies. According to University B, the Diploma allows students to study TAFE
and university level subjects for a session (17 weeks). The Diploma is a joint partnership between University B and selected TAFE institutes. Students are enrolled in eight subjects that are equally drawn from Bachelor level subjects at University B and from TAFE’s Certificate IV in Tertiary Preparation suits of subjects. The main objective is to provide students with a strong foundation to be able to manage university education.

In highlighting the rationale for the university pathway initiative, one staff member who has taught refugee background students in one of the pathway programs explained:

There’s also the University Pathway Program. So for those who don’t meet the criteria to get in they are defaulted or automatically now offered a place in the Pathway Program....It’s the University Diploma in General Studies which is offered concurrently with our local TAFE. It’s also offered online now but this is the first year of online offering, so we don’t know how successful that’s going to be. Four TAFE subjects, four university subjects where they spend part of their time at the TAFE campus and part of the time on the University campus in each of our geographic locations.

They graduate with a Cert 4 and a University Diploma. It gives them – as long as they successfully pass the Pathway program – gives them a guarantee entry into non competitive B courses. So it wouldn’t get them into vet or Dentistry but it would get them into the majority of courses in the University. Those students actually have a really high success rate. (B_teaching staff)

Other reasons why the pathway program may appeal to some students:

It’s often because they’ve been disadvantaged at an educational level before or up to sitting their HSCs. It’s not because they’re not capable of it. They just haven’t had the opportunity. (B_teaching staff)

Also if a person is not doing well in this particular course I think they’re still able because the expectation is great, than our role is not to just force them to do well but really look at other options. For example, could that person have done better – it’s not a step backwards, but really looking at, maybe even a TAFE type program. Not just a full course, maybe one unit. (C_teaching staff)

I believe success breeds success. So if that person is successful in one unit at TAFE, gradually you enable that person – through a bridging program or whatever – to come and embark on his program. (C_teaching staff)

Citing personal experience and caution, another staff member provided a further insight into the pathway program. The staff pointed out that not all students enrolled in the program successfully completed the pathway course—and should not be the only mechanism to be considered.
My experience with the Pathways group … The ones that come, you definitely – there is a definite attitude that they have which is – they resent authority and they resent being told what to do. That’s the reason why they’re out and probably pressure from their parents to going through the Pathways thing.

I said, phew, fail if you like, go for your life, I’ll teach you if you want to learn. So – but also there tends to be a lot of peer group pressure and you’ll have students that were quite capable, have ended up there as a result. They’re the ones that you do appreciate being there where they’ve got away from their peer group pressure and that peer group pressure is probably right through the schools … Of course they have a [unclear] change here after a while. (B_teaching staff)

It would appear that students transitioning to university should be given more information regarding the potential benefits of undertaking a pathway program. A staff member stated that the sort of understanding among students regarding the benefit of strengthening one’s academic skills through pathways programs does not exist. This is where a stronger partnership between school and university is needed.

Discussion

Refugee background students are often not a priority for the education system and universities in particular. Thus, difficulties in transition are not only de-prioritised, but are often exacerbated by various factors such as a difference in pedagogy between education within their home and host countries. These difficulties can become a source of frustration for refugee background students and their families (McBrien, 2005; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010).

Many refugee background families, for example, have little knowledge of the Western education schooling system. This lack of knowledge means that some families may express concern that their children are not receiving a good education in that the Western system does not focus sufficiently on academics or homework while others may find the system confusing. Along with a lack of understanding from teaching staff, this often stymied the educational advancement and transitional experiences of refugee background students (McBrien, 2005; Nykiel-Herbert, 2010; Naidoo, 2009a).

Educational institutions have been found to be an important place for the aspirations of young refugee background students to emerge and therefore are a powerful resource for them and their families (Cassity & Gow, 2005; Naidoo, 2009a). Research has shown that refugee background students who are able to attend university and participate fully in their studies
show increased levels of psychosocial wellbeing, student satisfaction, and higher retention and graduation rates. More importantly, these factors inevitably assist further by allowing refugee backgrounds students to acculturate to their host country (Earnest et al., 2010).

For learning and teaching to be considered in light of students’ subjective prior life experiences, it is important for universities to recognise the strengths, resources and support systems that refugee background students bring or possess and build on (Crossan et al., 2003). It can therefore be reasoned that educational institutions must play a role in assisting refugee background student transitions to university through the provision of academic and social support.

**Recommendations**

- **Refugee background students need to be better engaged and supported during the transition from school to university.**
  
The transition from school to university for refugee background students should be understood as a process rather than a point in time. Universities should be encouraged to develop programs that facilitate greater awareness in the tertiary education system and must be encouraged to assist in this process through the provision of academic and social supports.

- **Universities should be encouraged to develop more personalised links, a ‘person to person’ support model as opposed to the ‘person to service’ support model that currently exists in tertiary institutions.**
  
  Universities should acknowledge that successful transitions from school to university for refugee background students, requires an ability to navigate institutionalised structures or systems. By encouraging students to engage with teaching and support staff on a person-to-person basis, along with developing family and community links, universities can bolster the expectations and experiences of refugee backgrounds students at university.
Conclusion

In conclusion, analyses of Themes 1-6 indicate that there is a need to rethink how refugee background students can be better supported in their transition from secondary school to university and in retention at university. As data revealed, complex and varied migration experiences, combined with acculturation difficulties, demand extraordinary levels of resilience and determination in order for refugee background students to successfully move from secondary school to university. While refugee background students invariably display high aspirations towards educational attainment and a strong desire to succeed academically, second language acquisition was a major barrier to educational acculturation and transition.

The creation of social and cultural relationships inside and outside the classroom is needed, and teaching staff should work proactively with other student support divisions within their universities to better understand the refugee background students’ aspirations and commitments and to facilitate a conducive environment for greater classroom participation. Moreover, successful transition participation and access to new educational contexts were inextricably linked to positive interpersonal relationships with peers, teachers, support staff and the wider community, combined with the ability to navigate the Australian educational system. Therefore, relevant university policies and cultures must be reconsidered, especially when it comes to developing support mechanisms that can produce desired education outcomes among refugee background students.
Key Principles

1) Refugee background students face distinct barriers and challenges due to their prior life experiences. Broad national and cultural values and attitudes should not be applied to individual students.

2) Working with refugee background students should be seen as promising rather than problematic with an orientation towards intercultural sensitivity and creativity that is more than a reflection on the self, others and the world.

3) Support programs for refugee background students must be specific to the needs of these learners which are different from others from EAL/D backgrounds (e.g. international students) or from other students who may typically access academic skills support (e.g. first generation university attendees).

4) Language learning is a journey that requires up to seven years of effective instructions. For refugee background students, often operating within an extremely disadvantaged framework and a history of interrupted schooling, the process can take up to 10 years to develop (Garcia Dicerbo & Center, 2000). Therefore, English language and academic literacy supports must be in place throughout the student’s time in secondary and tertiary settings, and instructions must be cognizant of the developmental nature of language learning.

5) The language of each discipline is specific to the discipline: genres, discipline favours, syntax and vocabulary of those genres. Therefore, programs must support English language development in relation to the content and language demands of the discipline that students are studying within.

6) Refugee background students may be learning English, but they are already competent language users (usually of at least two other languages). They should be seen as language experts rather than ‘non-English’ speakers, and their language expertise should be acknowledged and utilised as a tool for acquiring English.
7) Learning is culturally situated. Expectations of how students will demonstrate learning are specific to the cultural context; therefore, these expectations need to be explicitly taught. At the same time, teachers should be aware that there are other valid ways of learning and demonstrating learning, and to be open to these.

8) An enabling learning culture is built on nurturing positive interpersonal relationships with peers, teachers, support staff and the wider community, combined with the ability to navigate the Australian educational system. It is a holistic process that extends beyond the formal walls (face-to-face) or virtual classroom, and takes into account the needs and abilities of students. It encompasses assistance and targeted support at the individual and systemic levels. It builds on the strength, resilience and assets that young people of refugee origin bring to their learning.
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