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Hard Yards and High Hopes: The Educational Challenges of African Refugee University Students in Australia

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This paper considers the experience of a small group of young adults who were born in Africa, entered Australia under the humanitarian entry program, and are enrolled in tertiary education. It investigates the expectations and experiences of these students and the associated teaching staff at a South Australian university. This body of students comprises a diverse group of individuals, and their educational success is equally varied. In focus groups many of the students revealed a range of pressures such as challenges adapting to new educational contexts, high community expectations, and difficult home environments for study. Students recounted a mixed educational experience with staff as they interfaced with practical issues of seeking academic support, accessing study materials, and studying in another language. Perhaps reflecting the determination and self-reliance that has brought them to this point, they primarily speak of academic success as their own responsibility, as well as their best support being other students from the same background. An awareness of, and a response to, these issues may help to ease refugee students' transition to tertiary study.

Introduction

The experiences of refugees entering tertiary education are largely absent from the academic literature. More attention has been given to refugee children and young adults in primary and secondary education (see for example Kirk & Cassidy, 2007; McBrien, 2005; Russell, 2005) and to international students in tertiary settings more generally (Adams, 2007; Kennedy, 1995; Moore & Constantine, 2005; Quintrell & Westwood, 1994). While there are several studies that inquire into international migration arising from humanitarian situations and the experiences of higher education in a new host country (DasGupta, 1999; Tobenkin, 2006; Stevenson & Willott, 2007), there is still a relative dearth of information pertaining to this distinct student body. This research was designed as a scoping study to better understand the educational experience of this specific group of students, as well as to indicate whether further research or special support is warranted. The project concerns the encounter between academic staff and students from African refugee backgrounds who are enrolled as students at a university in South Australia. These students (and their communities) have high hopes for their lives in a new country, but they must put in 'hard yards' (the distance and numerous obstacles that must be traversed) to achieve those hopes.

Previous studies on international students in Australia highlight the numerous academic, cultural, social, and linguistic differences that such students encounter (Burns 1991; Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010; Samuelowicz, 1987; Taylor, Craft, Murray, & Rowley, 2000). More broadly, the difficulties that students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds encounter when English is not their first language are well documented (Harris, 1997; Quintrell &

Westwood, 1994; Samuelowicz, 1987; Taylor et al., 2000). However, Sidhu and Taylor (2007) acknowledge that refugee and international students represent different student cohorts, and thus greater understandings of the former are needed.

Acknowledging that refugees may have had a different educational experience from what most Australians and many international students would consider a "normal" education, this paper addresses an urgent need to better understand the educational aspirations, concerns, and contexts represented in this distinct student body. One quarter of Australia's university enrollments are international students (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008), thus students who have come to Australian universities through humanitarian immigration pathways find themselves within a diverse student body. In the increasingly complex tertiary education environment, diverse student bodies are raising questions and challenges for academic staff who are committed to positive learning processes and outcomes for their students (see Adams, 2007). Many teaching staff at this South Australian university informally express concerns about the quality of learning experiences and outcomes for students from refugee backgrounds, acknowledging that these students often come from educational, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds that differ starkly from the experiences of others within the broader student body. In common with other students, they also face a broad range of challenges working to equip themselves for an increasingly competitive employment market.

The research arises from the authors' experiences as academic staff members, which has led us to reflect on how to ensure quality learning experiences and how to develop effective support structures for staff and for

students from a humanitarian entry background (HEB). According to both groups, many HEB students are experiencing difficulties with academic work. Teaching staff within this university report concern about the lack of specific services available for this group of students, and they note that they most often respond to these students' situations on an *ad hoc* basis. This paper discusses a project that aims to develop a greater understanding of the experiences of both staff and HEB students in order to contribute to better tertiary educational practice.

Refugee Status and Study in Australia

The refugee label is essentially a legal designation (Malkki, 1995; Zetter, 2007) although it has adopted a number of different contextual understandings and meanings. This study applies the term as defined under the 1951 United Nations Convention and made universal under the 1967 Protocol (UNHCR, 2008) which states that a refugee is:

A person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political option; and is unable to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.

Annually, Australia grants 12,000 to 13,000 permanent visas to refugees as part of its humanitarian program (Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), 2007). According to the most recent statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2006, 2007), Australia had the second highest rate of refugee resettlement behind the United States during 2005 and 2006 and the third highest in 2007 (UNHCR, 2008). These statistics report on quota refugees who are people already recognized by UN standards for refugee classification, and host states recognize this status before their arrival. These refugees are sometimes referred to as "UN refugees" and are distinct from asylum seekers, who are not represented in this data. In the last six months of 2008, more than 114,000 people became permanent residents of the Australian population (17% more than for the same period in 2007). Of this total, 6,587 were humanitarian entrants, of whom 1,437 were from Africa in addition to 9,448 people who came from Africa on non-humanitarian visas (DIAC, 2009b).

A number of these humanitarian entrants have chosen to undertake further educational opportunities to give themselves a greater chance of employment and self-determination in Australian contexts. At the

commencement of this study in late 2007, of the 16,000 students enrolled at this university, 56 students identified themselves in university records as being on a humanitarian visa and having been born in an African country (over half of these were born in Sudan). It is anticipated that this is an under-estimation since students are not required to provide this information, and numbers are likely to be higher in other states, such as Victoria and New South Wales, which have higher numbers of African-born citizens. While this grouping represents a small fraction of university enrollments, their growing number and the relative dearth of research into these students' educational experience highlights the need to further understand their academic trajectories, concerns, and aspirations.

Hardin (2008) describes the tertiary experience for mature age students (of any background) as "like building a house of cards. In order to be successful, each part of their lives must be in place and carefully balanced" (p. 56). This delicate balancing act has parallels with the experience of refugees and other migrants from African countries attempting to succeed at the university. Living in an environment that is different from their country of origin, HEB students often find themselves needing to adjust to new academic expectations and protocols (see for example Conley, 2008). Luzio-Lockett (1998) referred to this process as the squeezing effect because students from foreign educational backgrounds must try to "squeeze" their own identity in order to fit in with the values and norms of another context. Burns (1991) also supports this notion of squeezing and states, "The additional role of being an alien exacerbates and magnifies the stress through linguistic and socio-cultural-emotional difficulties involved in cultural adjustment" (p. 73). Australian universities can thus constitute a foreign academic environment with challenges and obstacles that may not be evident to local students and staff, highlighting the reality that it may be far from a level playing field with respect to knowing the "rules of the game." Principles of academic integrity, plagiarism and what constitutes an original idea may vary greatly between countries' educational contexts, and expectations such as these may be implicit rather than explicit in Australian educational settings. While some domestic students lack adequate tertiary skills (e.g., referencing, constructing a coherent essay, or locating academic material via the internet/library), most of these students arguably have experienced some teaching of these skills and been exposed to these expectations. Knowledge and tools such as these are often tacitly assumed, adding another layer to the task facing students with different academic experiences, with the result that they may fail to identify these expectations, much less negotiate them.

While past educational experiences (and how these compare to the present) are of paramount importance, academic squeezing is not the only salient consideration. Recent statistics point to specific financial, social and employment challenges facing migrants from the African countries represented in this study. The median income of a Sudanese person in Australia is 46% of that of the Australian-born population (see Table 1), revealing that challenges in the tertiary environment are not just about exposure to appropriate referencing and how to construct a convincing paper argument – they also extend to financial pressures that can directly impact on one's educational experience. These statistics are supported through Australia's 2006 Census, which reveals that the unemployment rate for "Sudan-born" Australians is almost six times the national average (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009), implying powerful exclusion from the labor-force. Other Australian studies have emerged which document how social disadvantage characterises the daily experience of resettling refugee communities (such that the presence of a segmented labor market allocates African migrants low-status jobs, if any at all) (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006, 2007; Fozdar & Torezani, 2008). If, as Colic-Peisker (2003) argues, a stripping away of identity is part of the process of becoming (or living as) a refugee, then this process is exacerbated by the difficulties many refugees confront in entering the Australian labor market (Dunlop, 2005).

The need to earn money extends beyond living a decent life in Australia, because many refugees also have a firm commitment to sending remittances to families in their country of origin (see Riak Akuei, 2005). African refugees have been referred to as "global breadwinners" (Stoll & Johnson, 2007), highlighting their transnational responsibilities to support family relations on two or more continents, and with those responsibilities come high expectations. These challenges may be significant contributors to a decision to undertake tertiary study in Australia, sometimes in spite of minimal previous educational experience and/or an emerging competence in the English language. Obtaining an Australian tertiary degree represents a potential pathway for resolving structural obstacles to employment, income and recognition. The pressures to succeed are therefore great, and they originate not only from the students themselves but also from their communities (see e.g., Riak Akuei, 2005; McSpadden, 1987). For refugees who remain in transit or have resettled, a university degree holds a special place, symbolizing an opportunity to redress marginalization and disadvantage that are

characteristic of forced migration and resettlement (Interagency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), 2004; Russell, 2005).

There is now a significant international body of literature highlighting the diversity of student backgrounds generally and the need for informed and inclusive educational approaches (see Nieto, 2000; Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Barceló, 2010; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Tran, 2010; Kennedy, 1995). The diversity of refugee populations means that some HEB students entering a university in their new host country may have been educated professionals prior to fleeing their home country while others may have had incomplete or inadequate basic education. Limited educational opportunities exist in refugee camps and for displaced peoples (Ager, 1999; Jeppsson & Hjern, 2005; Wessells, 2008), thus some may find the educational environment somewhat familiar, while others will find it quite alien. This study attempts to give voice to these students' local experiences and concerns in the hope that it provides a broader global context where both students and educators can find better pathways to tertiary success.

Study Design

This paper draws on interviews with African HEB students and academic staff at one Australian university and constitutes a small-scale scoping study designed to ascertain whether research on a larger scale is warranted. Twenty students were interviewed in focus groups of up to four participants, and 10 teaching staff were interviewed individually. As such, the research is qualitative, drawing on a deeper engagement with a small number of individual experiences. The importance of capturing the richness of people's experiences both within small groups and individually is well established (Creswell, 2003; Mishler, 1986) and provides justification for the qualitative approach.

A qualitative approach based on open-ended questions in informal interviews and focus groups was adopted, recognizing, not only the power inequities that may exist (or be perceived to exist) in this inquiry (particularly those of students talking to staff about their challenges) but also the reality that the researcher does not always know "the right question to ask" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993, p. 33). This was one reason for the engagement of a research assistant who is an African-born HEB student at the university, the benefits of which were seen to outweigh the danger of possibly leading to the exclusion of some individuals due to regional or personal conflicts (see Gardner 1999, p. 6). Open-ended questions were used as a starting point for a

Table 1
Median Income by Country of Birth

Birthplace	Median individual weekly income (AUD)
Somalia	214
Sudan	231
Liberia	324
Ethiopia	342
Sierra Leone	413
Australia	488
Total Australian population	466

Note. Adapted from data from DIAC (2009b)

broader discussion that allowed the interview to be somewhat participant-led, “to empower the participants, because they . . . have a voice and guide the study” (Holloway, 1997, p. 8; Creswell, 2003). Furthermore, focus groups were held in a non-teaching space and food was provided, in order to minimize the perceived formality of the interview.

The fifty-six students who had identified themselves in the university record system as having been born in an African country and as having humanitarian status were mailed a letter describing the research and inviting them to participate. Since such identification is voluntary, this process did not identify all relevant students, and informal student networks were also used to invite participation on an individual basis through word of mouth and via posters around the campus. This process was significantly assisted by the engagement of the African-born HEB research assistant who was well connected with other African students on campus. Academic teaching staff were approached through an email sent to staff mailing lists in several different academic units (“schools”) outlining the project and inviting staff to make contact if they would like to participate in an informal individual interview.

Five key questions were addressed in the focus groups with students: students’ experience at the university so far; challenges encountered in their studies; supports or people that have made their experience easier; identification of potential ways of assisting students; and the experience of racism by individuals or people whom they know. Staff interviews focused on: staff perceptions of this group of students and their potential obstacles at university; how staff respond to these challenges; obstacles they encounter in meeting the needs of this group of students; and people or resources that have assisted in meeting these needs.

Results

Locating the Student and Staff Learning Environment

The results are arranged under the two key themes of life at the university and student realities beyond the

academic campus. Student and staff views of the impacts, challenges and strategies related to tertiary education are addressed together, and they reveal both consensus and difference on several key issues. The issues presented below are not unique to African HEB students, but they reflect the reality of members of other minority student groups, for example, Indigenous Australian students; however, a thorough comparison is beyond the scope of this paper.

Life at the University

The phrase “we’re setting them up to fail” was frequently repeated throughout the staff interviews, meaning that the university is accepting students who lack sufficient academic or English language skills to succeed, and it is not providing the extra supports necessary to bridge this gap. Staff often expressed concerns that they do not have the specific capacity or time to address issues relating to English language writing and comprehension, which is viewed as a necessary foundation for presenting critical analysis and argument. One staff member said, “I can bring them from here to here [indicating with hand gestures] but if they don’t even meet that basic standard [I can’t get them there]” (staff interview 4). This issue generated passion among a number of staff, who described going to extraordinary lengths to assist struggling students, yet felt that they rarely succeeded.

Students shared this concern and noted that the challenges may be more than just language comprehension:

English. That’s the big challenge. And perhaps our methods and learning [are] somehow different from country to country. Within [my country] we have schools that do this continual assessment which is what we do here, but there are some that have one-off exams. So someone from such an academic background would find it very difficult here. (male student, focus group 8)

A significant impact of these challenges was seen in assessment processes and outcomes. Students felt that staff fail to recognize important factors contributing to their performance:

When they mark assignments it's one thing to have mainstream students who have been born here, raised here, and their education system has been structured: they have gone through the system. Then having people who are coming half way [round the world]. . . . I guess lecturers could be, could take time to understand the needs of these particular students coming from these particular backgrounds. We all studied hard to get here, [but] it was in different circumstances we gained those marks. (female student, focus group 4)

Focus group members elaborated this concern by suggesting that staff should take such factors into account in ways that would provide more equitable assessment processes. For example, a common theme in focus groups was that issues such as poor grammar or expression should not have a strong impact upon the assessment of written work, with one student saying, "We're not saying give us a pass because 'poor us' – I mean when I [show I can] apply the law, why mark me down for punctuation?" (female student, focus group 4). While for some students it literally is just a question of appropriate punctuation, poor language comprehension and written expression can translate into significant additional time and energy for staff trying to discern meaning, content, and originality in students' work. This is intensified for casual staff who may be allocated only 10 to 15 minutes to mark each paper.

These students may have excellent cognitive and academic skills, but if they have a limited English language proficiency in receiving and expressing information and concepts, they will face significant hurdles as they (attempt to) progress through the university system. This concern fed into a broader issue for many staff: the question of how important factors like levels of English expression are in overall academic achievement. As one staff member reflected, "We have no guidelines on how to adjust for English levels in marking" (staff interview 3). If staff are unable to understand a student's writing (or feel they must *interpret* or ascribe meaning within what is written), they cannot accurately assess whether the student has learned the key concepts being assessed in that work.

Students also voiced a number of more diffuse concerns about the university experience. While there were many positive comments about lecturers and tutors, focus group participants also felt that some teaching staff are unhelpful in ways such as consistently speaking too fast and refusing requests for clarification. Several of these participants also felt that some staff

(and other domestic students) appear to expect African students to have nothing to contribute in academic discussions:

When they have black people in [this academic department] it's really shocking. I can see in some lecturers' faces, they see [a black student for] the first time – [you're] the only black there and whenever you enter the class they all look at you. And when you talk it's like they look at you almost as if they don't expect anything to come out of your mouth. And I feel so insulted by such an assumption that I should be stupid. . . . I didn't get here because I'm stupid. (female student, focus group 4)

While this student felt silenced, several staff were concerned with low levels of HEB student tutorial participation. They acknowledged that HEB students may not necessarily understand expectations or be willing to ask for information and may have limited access to resources, including minimal experience with technology. With technology-based tasks or information delivery becoming increasingly central to course delivery, this can translate into a failure to complete set tasks. Connected with this, staff expressed a broad concern about HEB students' reticence to follow up on encouragement or direction to seek further help from the tutor or the Student Learning Center (a free service to students, offering both group training and short individual sessions), expressing frustration that there appears to be little take-up of the available opportunities, or limited effectiveness when it is taken up. They recognized (but did not really understand) the reluctance to use these facilities, with comments such as, "African students tend not to ask for help, based on a pride thing. In contrast, Chinese students tend to be very active in seeking help" (staff interview 2). In contrast, students were quite clear that they did always not find these services useful, as one student described: "I've been there once but all they do is they just check my essay and were like 'oh the grammar's really good' and there's no need for me to go there and something" (male student, focus group 3).

Staff described going to great personal lengths to help HEB students who were struggling to succeed in their tertiary studies, giving a significant portion of their own time at the expense of a multitude of other tasks such as research and writing, and often without payment in the case of casual or part-time staff, who "are paid for half an hour of student contact per week but may spend 45 minutes with one student from this cohort [without extra remuneration]" (staff interview 4). This *ad hoc* personal response to students was accompanied by a strong desire for appropriate dedicated support programs specifically designed,

appropriately staffed, and adequately resourced to address the basic skills of learning and completing assessment.

Students acknowledged that some staff invest a lot of time associated with these *ad hoc* responses, and they mentioned in particular a topic in which an extra weekly tutorial (in addition to the one tutorial that students must attend) is held for students from non-English speaking backgrounds. As one student said, “That was fantastic . . . [the lecturer] was saying ‘I recognize that you have needs and I’m here at this time for whatever you might need’ – and that could be done for other subjects” (female student, focus group 4). More commonly, however, students referred to the small ways that they support each other, including helping with topic choices, emotional support, and practical matters such as finding suitable materials in the library. They felt that the main impact of providing additional classes such as orientation sessions would be to impose another demand on their time rather than assisting them to succeed. In contrast, they were very enthusiastic about the idea of forming an African students’ association on campus. They felt that this would give them the opportunity to formalize their support for one another and to feel that this was recognized and valued by the university. The importance of such a support association was reflected in the following exchange:

Male 1: Yes it is good if there is some community group, like sharing I guess because if I am here for 3 years I know better than someone who is just coming, just starting next year or something. So if there was a group that when new people came you just show them the way and stuff . . . that’s one thing [that would help].

Male 2: I think that would be really important because when you think about it we’re such a diverse group. We have people [who] study science topics, we have people studying law topics, we have people who do international studies and stuff. If we all have a committee where we could come together I think helping each other would be much more easy. (Focus group 1)

As a direct result of this research an association has now been established (the Flinders African Students’ Association, FASStA), and early meetings have had attendance of around 20 students and very dynamic discussions about purpose and process. At the time of writing, FASStA was in its second year, with active leadership and a growing membership.

Life Outside the University

Many HEB students are very active in their communities, and their status as university students also

means that the community has particular (high) expectations of them. Ironically, one of these expectations is succeeding at the university, yet pressures and obligations from families and communities can limit the time they can dedicate to study. Students stated that they are often expected to attend community events every weekend, making it extremely difficult to find any weekend time for study. For example, “in the Sudanese community [there are] always lots of activities on the weekend and meetings that you have to go to” (male student, focus group 2).

In addition, and highlighting the transnational reality of this student body, a key external pressure that students mentioned was that of “family pressures from back home” (male student, focus group 8). Most (if not all) have family members still living in Africa or elsewhere, adding the stress of missing their families, worrying for their safety, and even feeling guilty for living in the safety and comfort of Adelaide. In addition, there is the pressure to support their families financially, thus students are often working to support themselves and family members, as well as trying to participate fully as members of their communities here, and also trying to succeed in their studies.

Half of the staff specifically recognized these issues, pointing to significant pressures including young families, financially supporting family in Australia and their country of origin, community expectations of academic achievement and community participation, home environments that are not always conducive to study, and long commuting regimes. While staff recognized the presence of these factors in a somewhat abstract or theoretical sense, the stark reality was summarized by one female student as follows:

When we go home first of all we’re different– I have to clean up the house. I have to cook. I have a very noisy household, I will tell you this. So you use the [dial-up] internet as work, well everybody wants to talk on the phone to someone else. We have these obligations that cannot be taken away whatsoever. You can’t stop it . . . some people just give up because you can’t balance . . . I’m constantly stressed out. I don’t want to go home; I want to stay here [at uni] because as soon as I go home I can’t do anything. I will plan how I’m going to go, but when I step in, plans have been made for what I’m supposed to do. (Female, focus group 4)

This comment sparked a conversation amongst focus group members regarding Adelaide’s limited public transport system, which combined with the reality that affordable accommodation is generally distant from the university, means that it is nearly impossible to return to the university library when the home situation

becomes unbearable, because it can take 1½–2 hours in commuting time in each direction. Of the 56 HEB students enrolled at this University at the time of the research, more than half lived in areas that require commuting on at least two buses. As one student explained, “I catch two buses . . . if I miss the first one I have to wait more than thirty minutes . . . I can spend four hours just travelling [each day]. This is not conducive to study” (male student 1, focus group 2). Another student in this focus group responded that with five people in her household, the noise could impede study but “if you say I’m trying to study they say you should go back to the library – but if you’ve just left [university for the two hour trip] to go home, you can’t just come back” (male student 2, focus group 2).

One staff member noted yet another pressure: that these students stand out in their “astonishing visibility” (staff interview 2) where other groups might blend more easily into the student body. This was also identified by some of the students:

One issue I’m facing is . . . the sense that we feel as though there’s a lot for us to prove. We have to prove a lot of stereotypes wrong. We have to prove to our parents who brought us here for a better life but also to better and prosper our community as well. You know the whole integration thing as well. Lately there’s been so much drama about how we’re not integrating properly . . . [I feel like] I have to prove people wrong and I’m *going* to prove them wrong. But for some people unfortunately it feels like someone’s pulling the rug from under our feet. (male student, focus group 4)

Discussion

Returning to Luzio-Lockett’s (1998) notion of squeezing, it is apparent that both staff and students have to “squeeze” prior teaching approaches, learning practices and beliefs into a changing academic context. The challenges of delivering a curriculum within an increasingly global education market and the adaptations necessitated by having to study in a different educational environment are multiple and complex, highlighting the need to think critically about tertiary education. Our recommendations arising from this study follow three main themes:

- Cultural competence and moving beyond the orientation model;
- Overcoming forbearance; and
- Locating support and managing staff and student workloads.

We recognize that there are many challenges to achieving these three outcomes, and this highlights the reality of HEB students needing to squeeze into a new academic context as an increasingly global landscape of the tertiary education system continues to evolve. This context also demands a squeezing response from teaching staff and university support systems.

Cultural Competence and Moving Beyond the Orientation Model

The difficulty of being culturally inclusive while having to deliver a rigorous curriculum and meet diverse student needs signals one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary tertiary education. This challenge, however, also creates a learning environment that can be made dynamic and stimulating whereby it is possible to locate individual learning within much broader points of reference. We maintain that staff do not need to become cultural experts but rather engaged in principles of cultural competence while delivering a quality program of education. Part of this process involves recognizing the importance of university-level policies and expectations. It also necessitates an acknowledgement that now, more than ever, not all students come from the same background, and some flexibility should be incorporated into tertiary structures, thus enabling more effective responses to situations such as these. This does not mean that principles of academic integrity or rigorous curricula should be abandoned. Rather, it highlights the necessity to critically engage these concepts in contemporary and comparative contexts.

This study emphasizes a need to move beyond a model focused on intensive orientations towards fostering a stronger and ongoing relational dynamic between students, staff, and academic support centres. It is reasonable for staff to assume 12 years of schooling as a standard for the majority of students entering Australian universities; however, in the case of *some* HEB students, it is dramatically less than this and potentially is a very disjointed experience. Staff in this study recognized that this creates a danger that they may assume a level of educational experience (and thus learning skills) that is absent. Tacit assumptions about prior educational learning and technological familiarity with computers, writing skills, and understandings of academic integrity lead to situations in which lecturers can encounter pedagogical difficulties around both delivery and student expectations.

Orientations can help to inform students about how to locate scholarly literature, write academic papers, and know about the various student support services available. In contrast, the tertiary sector needs to become an environment where students are able (and enabled) to engage in the learning process *throughout*

their academic program. A recent study found that international students showed a preference for active, ongoing assistance throughout their educational experience as opposed to one intense block of orientation which is most often arranged near the beginning of the students' academic experience (Irizarry & Marlowe, 2010). This translates to staff maintaining an open door to students to discuss a range of academic issues. It is clear that this will take more staff time, especially since African HEB students are not the only group needing (or in many cases demanding) more one-to-one time from academic staff. Universities need to be alert to this change and respond on a structural level rather than simply expecting staff to absorb the impact of increasing expectations in this and other areas.

Overcoming Forbearance

Forbearance – the tendency of students to minimize or conceal problems so as not to trouble or burden teaching staff – is a common practice for many international students, due to many important cultural constructions surrounding help-seeking behaviors (Moore & Constantine, 2005). Further, other authors argue that students from diverse backgrounds may engage forbearance due to cultural expectations that students respect and not question their educators (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Samuelowicz, 1987). This tendency to avoid raising problems was reflected in both student focus groups and staff interviews. While forbearance may be a socially constructed concept that varies across a diverse student body, those who feel connected with the faculty or an academic support unit may be more inclined to ask for help.

Several studies highlight how students from different social and cultural backgrounds may have a stronger tendency towards practices of collectivism and interdependence (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Moore & Constantine, 2005). For example, Moore and Constantine (2005) argue that “cultural values emphasizing collectivism and communalism appear to affect both social support seeking and forbearance coping styles among African, Asian, and Latin American international students” (p. 343). While caution must be exercised with such generalizations, this highlights both the commitments that some students have within their communities and reluctance to access academic support. When possible, offering regular extra (non-compulsory) tutorials for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may help overcome issues of forbearance and reduce the *ad hoc* nature of staff striving to greater ensure a student's academic success.

Locating Support and Managing Staff and Student Workloads

As the university opens its doors to an increasingly global and diverse body of students, it must also respond to the competing and difficult demands this situation places on academic staff, who genuinely want to ensure that students succeed. There needs to be a greater recognition within university environments of staff commitments to meeting student needs, so that it does not become an “invisible” burden added to already hectic workloads. There is a broad recognition amongst the staff interviewed that there are many students from non-English speaking backgrounds in the university whose level of English means that they face significant additional challenges in their study (as indeed is also the case for some students whose first language is English). As noted, these students may have excellent cognitive and academic skills, but without the language to receive and express complex information and concepts, they and their teachers face significant hurdles as they (attempt to) progress through the university system.

Staff identify a need for ongoing and substantial support for students who are struggling, especially around writing and language comprehension skills. They express empathy for African refugee students in this situation and a desire for them to succeed, but they often feel that they are not adequately resourced or skilled to assist in this task themselves, and wish that “someone” was doing this. Yet the services that *are* available are not taken up, as for example with the Student Learning Center. Similarly, a peer mentoring and academic support program for first-year students run by one school at this university in 2008 – specifically designed to ease transition to university and support students identified as being at risk of failing – had a generally low uptake by both African and non-African students. It therefore needs to be recognized that the simple provision of services will not guarantee improvements in student outcomes or experiences. Services must recognize both needs and competing demands on staff and students in order to be relevant and useful.

In related work with the Sudanese community in Adelaide (Marlowe, 2009), students have noted that the tertiary degree they are pursuing does not just belong to the individual but also to the community: in a number of respects, a degree reflects a community achievement rather than an exclusively individual endeavor. While not all HEB students share this exact sentiment, it does highlight that they are not solely academic beings. They can have commitments to the community that, at times, take precedence over university study. While the university system may play a limited role in broader community-based and social settings, an awareness

(and an appreciation) of the associated issues both for administrators and teaching staff could create an environment of greater understanding.

Conclusion

This study highlights the need for better understandings about HEB students and greater attention from the international higher education research community. The growing challenges associated with displacement through conflict and natural disasters means that higher education institutions must critically and reflectively assess how quality educational outcomes are delivered. The humanitarian needs resulting from disasters such as the earthquake in Haiti, ongoing political violence in numerous countries in Africa and the Middle East, ethnic strife in former Soviet republics, and rising sea levels in for a number of island nations are just a few examples of how our contemporary world is characterized by transnational movement and social transformation. These events mean that tertiary sectors will likely experience increasingly diverse student body profiles which represent a rich mosaic of different learning experiences and approaches.

The small scale of this project clearly limits an ability to generalize the findings. Nonetheless, this study provides strong indications of some of the actual problems that staff and students experience in tertiary settings and has broader international relevance by encouraging universities to direct more attention to addressing international migration arising from humanitarian based issues and the associated challenges of delivering relevant, effective and quality learning outcomes. Many students reported challenges with developing language comprehension, adapting to new academic expectations, finding culturally appropriate means of seeking help, and experiencing external pressures related to their commitments in domains outside university life. The rich descriptions obtained from students and staff reinforce many of the findings detailed in the academic literature regarding success in higher education settings. There remains significant scope for learning about the experiences of HEB students in particular, as they have sometimes taken a very different educational pathway from most other students. Understanding these issues helps to identify the supports and obstacles encountered by humanitarian refugee students attempting to succeed at the university and thereby prevent or break a cycle of marginalization and economic exclusion – and for some, facilitate the long-term aim of improving development in their birth country.

Many of these students have shown a remarkable resilience and adaptability to function and succeed within foreign educational and social contexts.

Supporting students from very different educational, cultural, historical, and social realities presents numerous challenges to universities, staff, and student bodies. These challenges have only grown more salient in contemporary contexts as students from diverse backgrounds seek to pursue an education in other countries. It highlights the need for the higher education sector to ensure a greater ongoing commitment towards developing more sophisticated understandings of this small, but important, student body while developing responses grounded in broad cultural competence, and sensitive to the already extensive demands on both staff and students.

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