

Conclusion

Abstract This chapter sums up the key points of our book, that is, that even though traditional institutional environments may constrain transition for refugee background students, transition is a process, not an outcome. Drawing on focus groups and interviews with refugee background youth in schools and universities, school teachers, academics and support staff in schools and universities, and examples of effective transition programmes, the book has mapped what enables successful transition and participation in higher education for refugee background youth. The book has argued that successful transition and participation in new educational contexts for refugee background students' needs to be reconceptualised by universities as a holistic process that builds an enabling learning culture. Such a culture rejects a deficit approach to learning and 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 higher education system.

We titled our book “Refugee background students transitioning into higher education”. In sum, the book reveals that even though traditional institutional environments may constrain transition for refugee background students, transition is a process, not an outcome. Drawing on focus groups and interviews with refugee background youth in schools and universities, school teachers, academics and support staff in schools and universities, and examples of effective transition programmes, the book has mapped what enables successful transition and participation in higher education for refugee background youth. The book has argued that successful transition and participation in new educational contexts for refugee background students' needs to be reconceptualised by universities as a holistic process that builds an *enabling learning culture*. Such a culture rejects a deficit approach to learning and 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 higher education system.

As we have seen, there are many factors enabling a successful transition to higher education for refugee background youth. These factors include prior life experience and education, language, aspiration, and policies that focus on support and partnership. Additionally, an enabling learning culture that accommodates the teaching, learning and cultural needs and social capital of refugee background students is a key factor in the transition process. We have also seen that conflicting notions of resilience complicate and problematise what a successful transition may or may not look like. In a nation like Australia, which can be defined as “super-diverse” (Vervotec, 2007); there is no single roadmap to higher education for refugee background youth. What teachers, academics and support staff can implement, however, is a culture that enables diversity to flourish, and that works against educational cultures that cement a deficit view of the potentials and abilities of refugee students and students from a refugee background.

Our book has argued that *an enabling learning culture* 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.

Chapter 1 formulated the setting for refugee education in the international arena, in the context of the current global refugee crises. The conceptual historical shifts of rights-based education and notions of justice were explored in Chap. 2. We considered how different rights-based theorists understood justice and human rights in order to set up a framework for a rights-based approach to higher education. The conceptual cartography of the forced migration journey was developed in Chap. 3 to strengthen the case for a rights-based higher education. Chapters 4–7 explored, through textual analysis of participant narratives, some of the difficulties refugee background students experience in relation to schools and universities. These included the effects of torture and trauma that greatly impact a refugee background students’ ability to learn and a lack of understanding of the often implicit “rules of the game” of the Australian higher education system which can prevent students from achieving their aspirations. We argued that a learner-centred approach needed to be adopted when teaching refugee background students (Naidoo, 2015).

Hence, Chaps. 4–7 showed how schools and universities potentially can be spaces that promote and enable the transition of refugee background students rather than being drivers of normalization. Chapter 8 discussed the implications and opportunities for universities to partner with communities, how these can operate and what they meant for refugee background students’ university experiences. Despite the known benefits of community engagement and its significant potential to assist refugee background students’ transition academically and socially, there remain serious challenges faced by students in general transitioning to higher education. There has thus been considerable emphasis and priority on the transition experience

for university recognition in the last few years (Nelson, Smith, & Clarke, 2011). As such, research in the area has intended to progress the transition of all students and escalate retention (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; McInnis, 2001).

In light of the above, this book explored what education as a human right means for the transition of refugee background students in particular. It did so by showing how the educational experiences of refugee background students at schools can significantly influence their transition to higher education. Although the explicit purpose of higher education should be rights based, transition to higher education is not always an option for some students. Universities thus need to be at the forefront in widening access and participation of refugee background students whose requirements and prior life experiences may be multiple and complex requiring universities to accommodate and validate other's ways of being. The current literature showed that higher education institutions are introducing strategies to widen participation and develop an inclusive curriculum that engages students particularly in the undergraduate programmes (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith, & McKay, 2012; NCSEHE, 2013). This was due to the increasing demand for higher education in the recent years (McMahon, 2014) with the European Commission predicting (cited in McMahon, 2014) that the number of students in higher education will increase from 100 million in 2000 to over 400 million in 2030. To meet the demand of non-traditional students like those from refugee backgrounds, institutional efforts will need to be well thought out, organised and workable across all university programmes for all students, both traditional and non-traditional to have access (Kift, 2015).

Education and skills have thus become increasingly important dimensions of social inequality; but they are also an indispensable part of the solution to this problem. Education can lift people out of poverty and social exclusion, but in order to do so, educational attainment has to translate into social mobility. Inclusive societies thus need education systems that promote learning and the acquisition of knowledge and skills in an equitable manner. (Boni & Walker, 2016, p. 32)

Even when the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees states that “refugees be accorded the same treatment ... with respect to education other than elementary education” (UNHCR, 2010) and the Bradley review (2008) in Australia identifies the underrepresentation of students in higher education as “disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth” (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. xi), the number of refugee background students participating and succeeding in higher education continues to be truncated. So while the question of access remains at the forefront, the opportunities for transition provided by individual institutions still remain unequal. Marginson (2011) points out that there are two ways of looking at higher education equity policy. Equity as impartiality focuses on the numbers of underrepresented students in higher education, while equity as inclusion considers the comparative representation of underrepresented groups. While there

may be an increase in the numbers of students predicted to access higher education by 2030 as cited by McMahon (2014), the proportionate representation of refugee background students may still remain extremely low. This is problematic as refugee background students have high aspirations to acquire a university education and see access to higher education as a vehicle for their success in life (Sidhu & Taylor, 2009). Similarly, Naidoo (2009) found that refugee students chose to study at university as they perceived it as the most available means for increasing social and cultural capital.

Thus for refugee background students to be successful at universities, institutions are required to move away from the “one-size-fits-all approach” and “understand the nuanced experiences of all students within highly diverse student groups” in order to avoid homogenizing student experiences (Hockings, 2011, p. 521). Students like those from refugee background, who need more support and resources to access education should be able to use the available opportunities and resources to be successful in their transition (Nussbaum, 2011). However, it is not just the provision of support and resources that is important for the participation of refugee background students in higher education but

the way in which the major social institutions fit together into one system, and how they assign fundamental rights and duties and shape the division of advantages that arise through social cooperation. (Rawls, 1996, p. 258)

Thus Rawls, though not particularly focusing his work on education, makes a case through his theory of justice for education for the public good (Lee, 2013, p. 4). His idea, that the worst off benefit the most from education (see Chap.2) has the greatest impact for access and transition to university for refugee background students. Moreover, the discussion in Chap. 2 has also shown that the assistance given to refugee background students at universities is insignificant if it does not lead to critical participatory consciousness. To “alienate [refugee background students] from their own decision-making is to change them into objects” (Freire, 1970, p. 73). Students may get access to resources, support and highly specialised expert knowledge at university but if this knowledge is presented uncritically, then the outcomes will not be equitable for these students and transition will be hindered. According to Freire (1974) a critical education is one in which people “perceive themselves in a dialectical relationship with their social reality” (p. 34) so that the reality can be transformed. Without this dialectic relationship, student capability remains undeveloped. Herein lies the importance of Sen’s capability approach, as explored in Chap.2. According to Sen (1999), the capability approach in education implies the growth of individual freedom and the extent to which they [refugee background students] can translate opportunities into successes. To be different is not the same as being unequal. Difference only becomes unequal when capabilities in the form of opportunities are denied. In this sense, transition is possible if

education at university is based on models that not only promote human rights education but also provide opportunities for diverse students like those of refugee background to succeed.

Promoting transition in an institutional setting for disadvantaged and marginalized students will mean not only increasing the opportunities for student voices to be heard but also encouraging students from refugee backgrounds to participate, for example, in the designing of university curricula. Krause et al. (2005) similarly suggested that due to the diverse and complex nature of student experiences at university, the latter needs to gather data not only of attrition but also the experiences of student. This should include data for the entire student population, including all target groups, regardless of the size (Krause et al., 2005). Additionally, while refugee background students may possess ‘agency’ and ‘resilience’ to succeed at university:

[Any] attempt to choke off participatory freedoms [by the university] on grounds of traditional values...simply misses the issue of legitimacy and the need for people affected to participate in deciding what they want and what they have reason to accept. (Sen, 1999, p. 32)

Therefore, an enabling university environment, based on equity and an expansion of choice, has the ability to enhance individual freedom and allow refugee background students to transition to and beyond university. According to Sen, freedom of choice becomes a condition of development (Sen, 1999, p. 290) which is concerned with “our ability to decide to live as we would like and to promote the ends that we may want to advance” (Sen, 2010). A commitment to a capabilities approach hence

encourages us to seek functional solutions that can assist children in achieving a level of well-being that is of value to them because it enables them to act on the rights that they have within the societies in which they exist. (Lee, 2013, p. 8)

When applied in the context of university transition, the capabilities approach highlights the importance of understanding the academic choices that students from refugee background make which are largely influenced by their prior life experiences and their interaction with social contexts that enable and constrain their success at university.

Sen’s theory of capability is extended further by Fraser’s theory of justice in that Fraser, as examined in Chap. 2, links student ‘misrecognition’ to institutional injustice. For example, when higher education institutions adopt a deficit approach conferring less academic value to refugee background students, they create “an institutionalized pattern of cultural value that constitutes some social actors as less than full members of society” (Fraser, 2000, p. 114). This form of misrecognition is not necessarily overt and hence difficult to prove (Fraser, 2013) but can and does influence the transition and participation of students from disadvantaged

backgrounds in higher education. Fraser's (1996) concept of parity of participation (p. 30) as analysed in Chap.2 has been taken up by the Bradley report Recommendation Four (Bradley et al., 2008) to increase the number of low SES students at university by 2020. While this recommendation is more about broadening access, it is also about participation. Parity of participation also implies among other aspects, the ability of universities to recognise that the different and varied learning achievements acquired by refugee background students in their countries of origin can make a valuable contribution to knowledge at university. It is what Zipin (2013) calls an exercise in *double-democracy*:

Curriculum becomes democratic by including and working with the family and community-based knowledge of students who inhabit the school. Pedagogy becomes democratic in relationships of power-sharing that support voice and agency among students. (p. 10)

Therefore, in developing a human rights approach to higher education which focuses on capability and participation, it is important to transform institutional cultures. A human rights framework for higher education offers a robust agenda that can only be realised in an educational environment that recognises and supports the importance of transparent, participatory and accountable policies and processes. In other words, higher education could be at the forefront in producing knowledge that is democratic and sustainable for a socially just society. The transformative possibilities of higher education especially for refugee background students and the common good necessarily also involve fostering engagement with policymakers, staff, students and stakeholders both across the sector and in the wider society. This will only happen "if higher education is allowed to do so, and it chooses to do so. Neither is guaranteed, each is possible" (Marginson, 2016, p. x).

We began our book with a key question: How can and do universities contribute to our common good as a civil society, foster social solidarity and mitigate inequalities in these increasingly volatile times? The problematic experiences of refugee background students' access and retention in the 'edu-business' that now characterises contemporary academe reveals how universities' "contribution to the common good is being eroded" (Marginson, 2016). Instead, we conclude this book with a call to action for universities to move beyond individual student levels of support to whole university practices that are built on human rights and embedded within institutional and systemic structures to serve the common good. Some of the key principles that underline reform and successful transition for students of refugee background from schools to universities are as follows:

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 self, others and the world.
3. Support programmes for students from refugee backgrounds must be specific to the needs of these learners which are different from others from EALD 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 instruction. For refugee students, often operating within an extremely disadvantaged framework and a history of interrupted schooling, the process can take up to ten years to develop (Garcia, Dicerbo & Center, 2000). Therefore, English language supports must be in place throughout the students' time in secondary and tertiary settings, and the instruction must be cognizant of the developmental nature of language learning.
5. The language of each discipline is specific to the discipline. Therefore, programmes must support English language development in relation to the content and language demands of the discipline the students are studying within.
6. Students from refugee backgrounds 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 cultural contexts; 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 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 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.

A human rights approach to understand the transition of refugee background students offers higher education the opportunity to work in ways that engender a sense of belonging and mattering—building social cohesion rather than forming elites. In these increasingly fractured times, what could be more important?

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