

# Refugee Background Students Transitioning Into Higher Education

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# Refugee Background Students Transitioning Into Higher Education

Navigating Complex Spaces

 Springer

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ISBN 978-981-13-0419-4      ISBN 978-981-13-0420-0 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0420-0>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018940625

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Printed on acid-free paper

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The registered company address is: 152 Beach Road, #21-01/04 Gateway East, Singapore 189721, Singapore

# Foreword

The focus of this book is on educational equity issues affecting refugee background students who are entering and moving through Australian universities. It comes at a time of unprecedented global levels of human displacement due to persecution, violence, war and climate change. All the young people whose stories are told in this book came to Australia as humanitarian refugees. It is a testament to their fortitude and resilience that they have succeeded in entering our universities.

There is no doubt that most refugee background students find the transition into and participation in university education very challenging. In addition to the need to acquire high levels of English literacy, they have mostly been disadvantaged by intermittent schooling and by the traumatic experiences that forced them to flee their homelands.

Over the past decade, levels of student participation in Australia's universities have grown substantially. Most universities have established support systems to provide for the increase in the proportion of new entrants, who are in many cases, the first in their families to participate in university education. Nevertheless, it is rare to find programmes in Australian universities that are specifically tailored to the needs of refugee background students.

The research reported in this book makes a compelling case for the need for such programmes. By providing an outline of the policy elements that would enable successful transition and participation in higher education for refugee background youth, the authors have made an important contribution. It is clear that programmes for these young people must be specific to their particular needs. Learning is culturally situated, and expectations regarding how students learn are specific to cultural context. As a result, the scholarly expectations held by universities need to be explicitly taught to new entrants, especially to refugee background students. As the authors also proposed, an enabling learning culture needs to be built based on nurturing positive interpersonal relationships with peers teachers and support staff

in the wider community. While numerous studies have already documented the needs of refugee background students at the school level, this book makes an important contribution to a relatively neglected topic, that is, the needs of refugee background students within our university systems.

Penrith, Australia

Margaret Vickers  
Emeritus Professor  
Western Sydney University

# Acknowledgements

This book represents the culmination of a five-year journey by the authors and involved significant introspection for all of us as higher education academics.

We would like to thank:

The Australian Federal Government Office of Learning and Teaching for financial support through an Innovation and Development grant in 2012 that allowed us to conduct the research for this book.

Dr. Rachel Cunneen from the University of Canberra who has been a friend and co-researcher in the initial project and co-author of the subsequent case study report. She has made a critical contribution to the shaping of this book.

The teaching and professional staff at the schools and universities involved in the research whose commitment and enthusiasm inspired our work.

The school and university students' for the vivacity of their voices. These were priceless in helping us to find meaning and new direction.

Dawn Bolger, Fern Hyde and Dee Radwan for their insightful editing and proof reading of our final drafts and Elle Findlay for her meticulous research and review of the literature.

Western Sydney University, Charles Sturt and Monash Universities and University of Canberra in supporting our work as researchers in this endeavour.

The team at Springer for graciously responding to queries.

Our families, friends and colleagues for their unfailing support and encouragement.

While funding for the original project on which this book is based was provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching, the views expressed in this book do not reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

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served as the President of two national teachers associations—TESOL Greece, and the Australian Council of TESOL Associations, and is on the board of directors of TESOL International, an affiliation of 105 teachers associations around the globe.

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# Introduction

## Abstract

This chapter provides a road map of the book. We discuss in more detail the study on which this book is based. We outline the framework of the book and invite you as a reader to enter this journey with us. The significant questions examined in the chapters are provided so that as you embark on this journey, you are able to navigate with us the complex arena that refugee background students transitioning from schools to Australian universities occupy. By doing so, it is hoped that the chapter will shed light on the major social function of the increasingly corporatised academy in our modern world, the university. This leads us to ask the 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?

We wrote this book as the largest wave of refugees and asylum seekers since World War Two left hostilities behind in their home countries as part of a desperate search for haven, security and succour in new lands. The response from Western countries has been mixed: Germany initially reacted with generosity, some eastern European nations closed their borders and at the time of writing, are refusing to open them despite agreements reached within the EU. Australia increased its humanitarian intake but continued to deal harshly with those who arrived via boats. Donald Trump was elected President: the US quota of refugees was halved and bans were placed on people arriving from designated nations that were deemed to be terrorist threats. The British made the shock decision to “Brexit” and the campaign leading up to the referendum was marred by narratives of racism and finger-pointing at the supposed damage caused to British employment by immigration. Neither of the major French political parties made the run-off for the presidency; with the far right National Front, headed by Marie Le Penn, gaining a historically high number of votes.

And yet, humanity remains and resides in the most unexpected of corners and times. The photograph of a three-year toddler washed up on a beach and cradled by a soldier was flashed around the world, causing a brief pause in hostilities before the media debate about refugee intakes was taken up with renewed vigour and venom. What is our role as human beings in such debates? What is the role of our civic institutions? How can they (and we) react with courage, care, sensitivity and heightened responsiveness in ways that support, sustain and nurture this new demographic? This book attempts to examine these questions through the lens of a study of refugee background students transitioning from schools to Australian universities. In doing so, the book raises questions about the key social function of the increasingly corporatised academy in our modern world: 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?

Each of us come to the writing of this book sharing a family history of immigration to Australia due to economic strictures, conflict in our homelands and/or a sometimes desperate desire for a better life. Each of us is educators with a passion for social justice and many years of experience teaching and researching with young learners from refugee backgrounds in schools and universities. As university educators, we were disturbed by our institutions' seeming lack of responsiveness to this new demographic, despite the hard work of individual practitioners. Students of refugee background were variously bundled with international students, homogenised under the banner of "immigrant", largely overlooked in terms of creative responses to teaching and assessment, silenced in university policies, with administrative and support practices remaining largely unresponsive. In Nancy Fraser's (2001) framework, we perceived a disturbing lack of social justice in terms of recognition, redistribution and representation.

Equally, we were disturbed by the inadequate research and attention paid to refugee background students in universities, in contrast to an increasingly large body of studies in schools. Although the former situation is changing, there still remains a meagre amount of research in this area. In 2012, we were successful in gaining a large Office of Learning and Teaching [OLT] grant from the Australian government to conduct a two-year study of young refugee background students transitioning from schools to universities. We were interested in delving deeper into their experiences—How did these young people experience the transition? What barriers, challenges and opportunities did they undergo? What supports did the schools and universities provide and how helpful were these? How did students aspiring to go to university perceive this journey? How did their teachers, principals and support staff perceive this? And once the young people had "made it" to university, what were their experiences like? What did the academics and university support staff who worked with these students have to say? Was there congruence between the perspectives of these various stakeholders or were there gaps, silences and dissonances? Finally, what could we learn from these accounts that would assist universities to improve their policies and practices, not in piecemeal ways, but in ways that creatively and courageously embrace the assets and challenges posed by this new demographic?

In the remainder of this chapter, we discuss in more detail the study on which this book is based. We outline the framework of the book and invite you as a reader to enter this journey with us. A key characteristic of this book and one that sets it apart from other texts in the area is that we draw extensively on the voices of the young people in our study, variously juxtaposing them against the narratives of school and university staff. Moreover, we draw on the voices of stakeholders not often included in such studies, i.e. the English as an Additional Language or Dialect [EAL/D]<sup>1</sup> aides who worked with refugee background youth in schools as well as the university support staff in a range of areas such as learning and teaching and equal opportunities. We extend our deepest gratitude to these staff and to the various academics, teachers, principals and university administrators who so generously gave of their time to us in order to share their thoughts and experiences. Finally, we particularly thank our young participants—it is their futures that we are shaping in our everyday work as educators and researchers.

### **The School–University Pathways Project (Naidoo, Wilkinson, Langat, Adoniou, Cunneen, & Bolger, 2015)**

The major study on which the book draws, the *School–University Pathways project for Refugee Students* was funded by the Australian Federal Government’s Office of Learning and Teaching and took place over 2013–2014. Employing a qualitative paradigm and case study methodology, data was collected via 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 New South Wales [NSW]); and (iii) Canberra (Australian Capital Territory [ACT]). The sites were chosen for their demonstrated experience in providing targeted programmes for refugee background students, significant refugee support programmes with schools in the local area and high refugee populations (Naidoo et al., 2015). 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.

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<sup>1</sup>EAL/D is the educational acronym now used in Australia to refer to those students whose home language or first language (L1) is a language or dialect other than Standard Australian English (SAE) and who require additional support to develop proficiency in SAE, which is the variety of spoken and written formal English used in Australian schools. The new acronym (EAL/D) foregrounds the English language learning needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who speak an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Creole, or a variety of Aboriginal English. It also foregrounds those who speak a traditional or heritage indigenous language, migrant and refugee background students who speak an English-based Creole, pidgin or dialect, as well as those who are learning English as a second or additional language (ESL/EAL) (Hertzberg, 2012).

The refugee background university students interviewed came from a range of countries (in alphabetical order), such as Bhutan, Bosnia, Burma, Iran, Iraq, 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.

With the complex 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, 2013) and to provide an in-depth exploration and description of a complex phenomenon (GAO, 1990). 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, p. 39). 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).

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).

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.

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, Malamcharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & O'Garro Joseph, 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).

Findings suggested the need for schools and universities to reconceptualise transition as a holistic process which extends beyond classroom walls, encompassing assistance and targeted support at individual and systemic levels, and building on the resilience and assets refugee background students bring to learning (Naidoo et al., 2015). While the project made a unique contribution to our understanding of the challenges and enablers that refugee background students face as they negotiate the path from school to university and then within the university landscape, there was still an urgent need for scholarship which examined how universities can create enduring spaces for students from refugee backgrounds spanning university and school borders.

## **The Framework of the Book**

Chapter 1 sets the context for the book and positions refugee education and transition to higher education within the wider framework of international refugee displacement and resettlement. Through a review of the current literature on the transition of marginalised students globally, this chapter provides background information for universities to make a meaningful contribution to increasing and widening participation in higher education.

Chapter 2 locates the discussion of refugee background student education within notions of "super diversity" as discussed by Vervotec (2007) and human rights education and equity and access. It explores the continual process of rights-based education towards transformative action in an open and democratic society, as dependent upon the facilitation of human rights education in the higher education sector linking an understanding of human rights to education as a humanising practice.

Chapter 3 discusses forced migration by carefully documenting Australia's humanitarian programme, definitions and categories of forced migration, the root causes of displacement such as environmental stress, poverty, political persecution and violence and finally examines the literature that relates to an understanding of the "journey" undertaken by refugees. This enables the subsequent narratives of refugee experiences to be recorded and understood as an important "unit of analysis" beneficial for better policymaking. The chapter concludes that policymakers and practitioners have a critical role to play in reframing thinking about education for forced migrants such as refugees, by helping to shape a narrative which incorporates and values the experiences of those affected by displacement.



Chapter 4 focuses on the pre-settlement educational experiences and aspirations of a few refugee youth—their plight as a refugee and journey to Australia. It highlights the need to understand the highly complex pre-settlement experiences of refugee background students. Drawing on data for the chapter from the study reported in this book, as well as a later study examining educational aspirations and expectations of those refugees offshore with approved UNHCR refugee status, this chapter demonstrates through the voices of refugee youth who experienced war and lengthy dislocation, that each journey to Australia was different and unique. This chapter hence gives voice to refugee youth in higher education, drawing on subjective experiences and stories designed to capture their diverse prior life experiences and future aspirations.

Chapter 5 focuses on the pivotal role played by schools in transitioning refugee youth. Drawing on data with refugee youth who aspired for higher education, together with data from mainstream and EALD teachers, this chapter focuses on the important role schools can play in supporting refugee youth transitioning to higher education. With a focus on enablers and barriers for nurturing successful transition, the findings show that successful transition into university is dependent upon successful collaboration and mediation between schools and the school communities as an integral part of the transition process.

Chapter 6 examines the precarious trials faced by refugee youth as they negotiate the unfamiliar landscape of higher education. Using data from university staff (academic and support) and refugee youth, this chapter highlights the disinvested infrastructure and weakened supports at university that posit a challenge to those refugee background students with aspirations to transition from school to university. A tension exists between refugee youths' expectations for educational opportunity in higher education and the certainty of constricted pathways through which those aspirations are grasped. Pedagogical challenges and mixed messages about university requirements along with a lack of academic support indicate to refugee youth that the perilousness of their pre-migration experiences extends well after their resettlement into the host country.

Chapter 7 focuses specifically on the provision of intensive language supports for youth of refugee background as they seek to make the transition from school to higher education. Utilising the narratives of these youth, as well as accounts from teachers and support staff at schools and universities across Australia, this chapter contends that refugee background students require language supports which show an informed knowledge of the past lives of these students rather than the generic "one-size-fits-all" approach that constructs refugee youth in a deficit manner and assumes intensive instruction will provide the key to disabling the language learning challenges.

Chapter 8 acknowledges the challenges transition to university presents to refugee background students, making it clear that schools on their own cannot deliver all the forms of learning support that are needed for successful transition unless they gain additional assistance. This chapter hence has as its focus the different configurations of support that can be provided by community, non-governmental organisations and universities when they help schools to meet

the social and educational requirements of refugee background students in the process of transition. Communities have a critical role such as linking partnership activities to school improvement goals and the necessity for schools to develop two-way interactions through which they provide useful services to the community as well as receiving useful services from the community.

The conclusion draws together the central themes of the book and discusses transition as a developmental process rather than an end in itself. It argues that even if successful transition and participation in higher education exist for refugee background students, there is need for pastoral care to support the social, emotional and educational aspirations of refugee background students. This support can only be achieved by building an *enabling learning culture at university* and one that is based on the common good. It requires the support and commitment of the university community to tailored teaching and learning approaches that would be of immense benefit to this unique cohort of learners.

The insights gained in this book not only extend our understandings of key contemporary educational processes in the transition to higher education for refugee background students, but also point to policy and practice necessary to promote their greater equity and access in tertiary environments. Moreover, the book highlights the significant challenges that enable and/or constrain a quality education for all young people in tertiary settings. This is not an issue isolated to Australia, but, as the book reveals, a broader issue that many OECD nations are wrestling with as part of the global flows of refugee populations across the world. Hence, the chapters that follow provide compelling insights for educators, administrators, policymakers and stakeholders in schools and universities around the world about the educational journey of this unique cohort of students.

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