

Needs Analysis of Refugee Youth at a Western Australian university: a Case Study from Curtin University

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**PART OF SYMPOSIUM: THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE
BACKGROUNDS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: CASE STUDIES FROM
WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

Abstract

The needs of refugee youth are complex and multi-faceted requiring a co-ordinated approach between educational institutions, families, communities and service agencies. The results of the study by Earnest, Housen & Gilleatt, (2007), revealed that educational institutions are the settings in which many of the hopes of refugee youth materialise. The refugee youth find educational institutions a safe environment. They enjoy learning and the routine that educational institutions provide. Whilst a small percentage of this cohort successfully make the transition to university, students from this group very often find the multiple challenges of academic study, coupled with resettling in a host country and having to adjust to new belief systems, values and mores, too daunting.

Strong educational institution-based programming inclusive of communities and educational staff has shown to increase psychosocial well-being and educational outcomes of refugee students. Interviews with students and key informants clearly demonstrated an inner strength that drives students to strive for educational outcomes that would enable them to accomplish their hopes for a better future. This paper reports on a Needs Analysis undertaken at Curtin University in Semester 2, 2007 & Semester 1 2008. The Needs Analysis was undertaken with a small cohort of African refugee student using in-depth semi-structured interviews. The subsequent analysis revealed areas of need and is currently informing the design of a teaching programme to support the transition of refugee youth into universities.

Rationale for the study

In the past decade issues of diversity have moved from periphery positions into central concerns of higher education institutions (Brown, 2004). This diversity of current student bodies in higher education, poses new challenges for the engagement of students for whom the university may be a culturally alienating place (Krause, 2005, p.3). Students from refugee and disadvantaged backgrounds frequently find the culture of tertiary institution alienating and experience difficulties in forming social bonds. They are confronted with "... a complex web of factors that influence [their] decisions to withdraw or take extended leave" (Elliott, 2002). Facilitating the early engagement of students with their studies and campus life has shown to lead to greater student satisfaction and improved rates of retention (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). The challenge remains how to provide opportunities for these students for whom the university culture is often an overwhelming and daunting experience.

Researchers and educators note that the implication of this imperative is that universities need to develop new and specifically tailored programs to impart the necessary skills and sensitivities for student diversity (Kramer & Weiner, 1994). These programs need to be developed in a manner that enables students to become active members of a learning community and have a sense of belonging to the university culture. Students who feel under-prepared (that is, they do not have an understanding of how the university operates and how to succeed within the culture), will especially require a more specific tailored induction into the university system, so that they are strategically positioned and equipped to meet its challenges. Northedge notes that the key skills students need to learn is "to acquire the capacity to participate in the discourses of an unfamiliar knowledge community" (2003, p.17 & 23). It is this gap that this Carrick Institute: Australian Teaching and Learning funded project seeks to address. This paper reports on a Needs Analysis undertaken at Curtin University.

Background to the study

Refugee Students

For students from refugee backgrounds, the acculturation process that is required for successful outcomes at university has three distinct aspects as described by Birman et al (2002): language competence, behavioural participation and identification, as they allow individuals to communicate and function in differing contexts. Whilst a small percentage of this cohort make the transition to university successfully, students from this group very often find the multiple challenges of academic study, coupled with resettling in a host country and having to adjust to new belief systems, values and mores, too overwhelming. Identification especially, in particular ethnic identity, is linked to outcomes such as self-concept and psychological adjustment (Burnett & Peel, 2001; Davies & Webb, 2000).

Most refugee students have encountered the violent death of a parent, injury/torture towards a family member(s), bombardments and shelling, detention, beatings and/or physical injury, disability inflicted by violence, sexual assault, disappearance of family members/friends, and witnessed murder/massacre, terrorist attack(s), parental fear and panic, famine, forcible eviction, separation and forced migration (Burnett & Peel, 2001; Davies & Webb, 2000). Currently, although the numbers of refugee students in universities are relatively small, the number of refugee students has been steadily growing in recent years in West Australian Universities (Earnest, Housen & Gilleatt, 2007). Therefore, it is essential that educators need to be prepared for understanding the diversity in student intake, to ensure provision of the best possible support for refugee students.

Refugee Youth in Australia

The needs of refugee youth are complex and multi-faceted requiring a co-ordinated approach between educational institutions, families, communities and service agencies. The results of a study by Earnest, Housen & Gilleatt, (2007), revealed that educational institutions are the settings in which many of the hopes of refugee youth materialise. Strong educational institution-based programming inclusive of communities, families and educational staff has shown to increase psychosocial well-being and educational outcomes. In an Australian study, Cooke et al. identified that approximately 60% of humanitarian arrivals to Australia are less than 19 years of age. Given the paucity of research in the Australian context, it is imperative that the experiences of refugee youth in Australia are better understood and documented. Their decision making and external influences regarding beginning and completing tertiary education in the Australian context needs to be examined and, in particular, the role that educational institutions can play in improving their future outcomes.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Diversity in Tertiary Institutions: Implications for Educators

Changes in the tertiary education sector have resulted in staff having to accommodate a higher proportion of students from diverse backgrounds with little increase in resources needed to ensure that students' needs are properly accommodated. A national survey in 1999, undertaken in the US found that 69% of academics believed that providing academic support to, presumably, 'under prepared' students was one of the most significant factors in the increase in their workload. The most critical finding with respect to diversity was that the proportion of academics who say that dealing with 'too wide a range of abilities' in the classroom is a major hindrance to their teaching (McInnis 2003, p.388). This perception by academics, coupled with their increased workloads, reinforces the need for creating targeted and flexible pedagogical strategies that can be effectively embedded into mainstream units. McInnis also notes that successful programs that initially targeted small groups have "after a few years come to be adopted by the whole institution that is mainstreamed" (McInnis 2003, p. 391). In light of these issues and concerns, it is essential that educators in today's increasingly diverse learning environments are supported and equipped themselves to recognize differences among students, so that all students, particularly refugee students, are enabled to gain competencies that assist them in successfully functioning in a pluralistic society.

Effective learning environments

The pluralism imperative in universities globally now requires that particular attention be given to students who have little, if any, experience in academic settings, who often struggle to develop an understanding of the expectations of academic culture. Their key challenge is "...to develop an effective voice through which to 'speak' the discourse, whether in writing or in class ...support in establishing voice is a vital component of courses for students from diverse backgrounds" (Northedge, 2003, p.25).

There is significant evidence that effective educational practices, which facilitate students' engagement, provide a boost to underrepresented and lower achieving students commencing tertiary education. Data from the National Survey of Student Engagement conducted in 2006 found that student engagement activities such as "collaborating with peers on projects inside and outside the classroom helped students overcome previous educational disadvantages" (Wasley 2006, p.1). Additionally, the survey findings also revealed that there is a strong relationship between approaches to learning and self-reported gains in intellectual and social development (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2006). Other studies (Krause 2005

and Tinto 2005) have shown that early engagement of students with their studies and campus community life can lead to greater psychosocial well-being, student satisfaction, better performance and improved retention rates within the university. Lastly, Gurin's analysis of the literature on learning outcomes concluded that "*diversity interactions increased active thinking, academic engagement, motivation and academic and intellectual skills*" (Gurin cited by Maruyama & Moreno, 2000).

Learning Strategies for Diverse Student Groups

Tertiary institutions have typically addressed the challenges that arise from an increased diversity of students by 'adding on' units or courses to address specific problems (Tinto 2004). This strategy has generally been found to be ineffective: better outcomes are achieved when specific learning needs are addressed within mainstream programs: The "*redesign elements that seem to especially benefit such students include high expectations, a requirement that students participate in specific experiences or exercises, and on-demand support services*" (Twigg 2005, p.1). Therefore, programs to be developed in this project will therefore be designed to have the potential and long term vision to be integrated into mainstream units.

The Learning Centre at Curtin University in Western Australia

At Curtin University, the current 2007 student enrolments for those with permanent Humanitarian visas, by country of birth were: Afghanistan (3), Ethiopia (2), France (2), India (1), Iran (4), Iraq (4), Liberia (3), Malaysia (2), Rwanda (1), Sierra Leone (2), Somalia, (1), Sudan, (21), Uganda (1).

Curtin University implements a number of programs for its equity students: bridging and tertiary access for indigenous students, enabling and foundation studies for rural and isolated students, learning support for Australian 'at risk' students (Institutional Assessment Framework Portfolio, Curtin University, 2006). There is currently no academic program specifically tailored for refugee students at Curtin University.

Curtin University: Curtin Student learning Centre and Institutional priorities for learning and teaching

Curtin University of Technology's 'Teaching and Learning Enabling Plan' includes the following key strategic priorities which are addressed in this proposal:

- Improve retention by enhancing the learning experiences of first year students, in particular part-time students, both school leavers and mature age students
- Implement teaching and learning approaches which accommodate cultural diversity

The Curtin Student Learning Centre is an academic centre within the University Life portfolio, offering the following learning support services to undergraduate and postgraduate students, both domestic and international:

- Learning skills, strategies, and organisational management techniques development for all Curtin students through seminars, consultations, and on-line resources
- Individual assessment of and assistance to refugee 'at-risk' students
- Consultation with lecturers, course coordinators, and individual lecturers to develop effective interventions for 'at-risk' students
- Orientation seminars
- Pre-semester academic preparation programs

Research Methodology

The Aims of the Needs Analysis

The study commenced with a 'learning needs analysis' undertaken in Semester 2, 2007, with a selected group of current enrolled refugee students at the university. The overarching aim of the Learning Needs Analysis was to identify the learning needs of refugee students at Curtin University in Western Australia. The needs analysis used focus group discussions and in-depth interviews to obtain qualitative information from students about their learning needs in the university and their level of engagement with study. This analysis facilitated a better understanding of the specific learning and social needs of refugee students and helped determine the factors that enable students to feel that they 'belong' and identify with the university community.

The Needs Analysis Methodology

A 'Needs Analysis' is a research methodology used to find the real cause of existing problems, so that deficits and weaknesses of the situation can be addressed in subsequent planning (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000). The method is used as a springboard for future programs that desire to be based on factual issues, rather than speculative, and used to ensure that interventions are appropriately matched to the need (Cohen et al. 2000). The definition of 'needs' broadly covers wants, preferences and anticipated future problems (Cohen et al., 2000).

The 'Needs Analysis' therefore seeks to understand and evaluate several components including the definition of the need being assessed, and the nature, severity, priorities and causes of the need, as well as forecasting future needs and the consequences of both addressing and failing to address the need (Cohen et al., 2000). The methodology was used to identify gaps and needs in current programs and services, to ascertain emotional and physical reasons refugee students struggled to commence and complete university, and to gather participant recommendations and suggestions to meet the tertiary education needs of refugee students.

The Participants

Six in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four male participants and two female participant from Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea who attend Curtin University. The domination of East African participants is reflective of the number of refugee students at Curtin University coming from African nations. Participants were pooled from personal contacts initially, with snowballing and purposive sampling.

In-depth Interviews

The semi-formal in-depth interviews were guided by prepared question that covered the following categories: background and demographics; general university life; university teaching environment; university social environment; university technology and administration systems; special psychosocial/emotional needs at university; coping strategies at university and recommendations for future students. These questions were designed to assess aspects of the students learning and engagement in university, such as feelings of connectedness to the university community, as well as more qualitative factors such as use of services and technology, and attendance to lecture and tutorials.

Ethical approval

Ethics approval for the project was obtained from the Human research Ethics office at Curtin University.

Thematic content analysis

Content analysis has been described as the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics (Neuendorf, 2002). Content analysis is an empirically grounded research method that is exploratory in process, and predicative or inferential in its intent, used to predict and infer the phenomena that cannot be directly observed (Neuendorf, 2002). The completed thematic content analysis then produces a succinct, reliable and valid body of work that displays the key themes in an easily communicated manner (Judd & Reis, 2000). These themes are like recurring patterns in the content that is analysed, that describes and explains the phenomena, which can either be generated inductively from the raw information initially, or generated deductively from the theoretical underpinnings and prior research conducted before the thematic content analysis is commenced (Boyatzis, 1998).

After the interviews were undertaken a thematic content analysis was undertaken with the transcribed interviews to collate and condense the information gathered into distinct, and succinct themes and recommendations that could be used to design and direct the remaining aims of their project. Once the interviews with the refugee students had been transcribed, the interview documents were re-read and colour coded into themes and categories with different colours for each emerging theme, by searching for important and poignant comments the students has made regarding university learning. Once all documents had been colour coded, each theme was collated into a page of its own, to be summarised. This process was repeated and until the themes were saturated, and then formatted into a matrix. Lastly, participant recommendations were collated into a separate list to be incorporated into the further stages of the project.

Discussion and Themes from the Needs Analysis

Having a Sense of Direction:

Receiving mixed messages about enrolment, their qualifications and entrance requirements, which nearly forced them to give up. Participants expressed feelings of having no support in their pursuit of completing their degree.

“...To me the difficult part of getting to uni is the process of getting admitted... when you try to use that qualification... they completely rubbish it! I almost gave up studying...It took me three and a half years to qualify to go to uni.” Sudanese male student studying Environmental Health Science

“They just say, you’re not fit to be here, go back to TAFE and see what you can do from there... When I went to TAFE... they told me “Your English is OK, you’re not fit to be with us here” Sudanese male student studying Health Promotion

Difference of Teaching Styles:

There is significant difference in the African and Australian teaching styles: African teaching style is more involved, with constant reminders to do work and focus. This was described as “spoon feeding”, which contrasts with descriptions of Curtin University teaching and learning where students are forced to be more independent, do more individual research and personal organisation. Participants are often overwhelmed with the number of assessments and have to learn to be self-motivated and disciplined. Students felt handouts were essential to their learning, yet wanted more information, as they spend time after class going over the information that was thought to ensure their understanding.

“The style of teaching is quite different... here we find it every time, any topic you finish you need to be assessed on the topics, so you always have lots of assignments. It’s not like you wait till the end of the semester and then you prepare for all, big exam working hard for 100%, so here, that’s one of the big difference”. Sudanese male student studying Environmental Health Science

“You have to be an independent person, you cant rely on teachers to tell you or for anything so, basically you have to be an individual, and independent and responsible, so far that’s with I know, but so far I haven’t really learnt it.” Somali male studying Commerce

Education and Learning:

Students had varying levels of education and proficiency before commencing university. However, all participants experienced interrupted schooling, and were the first in their families to obtain university degrees, and felt a great sense of pride at this. Somali Participants had only primary school education; whereas the Sudanese participants had completed diplomas. No participants had been to university previously. Participants found essays, referencing, researching difficult and had to learn these new skills.

“I came here in 1998, and when I first started in 2003, so really there was 5 years, a big gap, so when I started uni I was feeling like, local you know, but if I came here and started straight away it was going to be more difficult” Somali male studying Environmental Health Science

“I think it’s not very interactive, you feel a bit isolated...maybe it’s because of how big the lectures are... but that’s the reason there aren’t attachments to teachers and lecturer.” Somali male Studying Commerce

English:

Participants had varying years of experience speaking English, yet they had to begin learning English before arrival to Australia. Participants felt however, that their English hindered them from participating in tutorials, as the discussion moved too fast.

“Yeah I found that, most difficult for me in English, they way you pronounce the words is different, so I was practicing like all the time, so eventually I could speak it” Somali male studying Environmental Health Science

“Sometimes you can be there and putting all your attention, but you find the way this person speaks, you can’t pick what you want” Sudanese male student studying Environmental Health Science

Difference from Australian Students:

Refugee students were often learning four or five things at once, they have to learn English, technology, communication and essay writing etc at the same time. Students were aware they had less support systems than Australian students. Participants felt they were at a disadvantage from their limited knowledge of Australian culture and history, and that courses were too focused on local issues, not international topics.

“Most people from refugee backgrounds haven’t been to university before and they don’t have anyone to give them advice or give them help at home.” Somali male studying Environmental Health Science

“Because what happens is we have to learn two or three things at the same time...Most people who are here and go to uni they know they are going there to learn, but sometimes we go there to learn something from the class and also something of the lifestyle at the same time.” Sudanese male student studying Environmental Health Science

Future Goals:

Regardless of the varied difficulties associated with enrolling and completing their university degree, students were determined to complete their studies, citing increased respect, higher incomes and better jobs as the motivation to push through the struggles. Participants were extremely motivated and ambitious in their career goals. Many were the first in their families to obtain university degrees, and felt a great sense of pride at this. Participants spoke of encouraging their family, friends and community member to study. One participant was concerned his race and religion would be a disadvantage in obtaining a job in Australia’s current political climate

“Because nowadays its be come like education, it’s a necessity in life...education is power” Somali male studying Commerce

“When you study you know you can make your life much better than some one who doesn’t study” Sudanese male student studying Environmental Health Science

Financial issues:

All participants send money back to their family and relatives as often as they can to support them, on top of providing for themselves and those they live with, which effects their time, spent studying. Students worked part time or during university holiday times.

“Financial struggle is the most thing effected our studies, because you know we have to go sometimes during the day, and sacrifice your classes... almost everyday, you’re thinking about how you’re going to pay the next bills. It becomes very hard for me, so when I study...my mind is always divided here in school but thinking about family.” Sudanese male student studying Environmental Health Science

Social Life:

Participants found it easier to make friends with international students and other refugees and commented on the multi cultural nature of Curtin University which they liked. Their sense of community outside university life is very important to their mental and social wellbeing. All of them felt connected to their university community.

“Most of my friends are...refugees too...I don’t have many Australian friends who I talk to and stuff, we don’t really get close, because of our difference in background, we can’t really relate much, but with the other guys, we have good relations” Somali male Studying Commerce

“At the beginning I feel very welcomed in Australia, but not now [because of] the situation against Muslims and Africans” Somali male Studying Commerce

Gender issues:

Female students faced greater challenges in completing their studies, as they have bigger roles in the house to fulfil, that they put before studying. In addition to the burden of the household chores they complete for their male family members, some are managing their own children as well.

“That’s what happens, with almost all of our women...in our family setting, the mother or our sisters take care of the family, whether its cooking, washing dishes or other stuff, that’s what they’re doing. So if I’m home, and if I start cooking, my sister feels bad” Sudanese male student studying Health Promotion

“So naturally that’s what they do, and even if she has her assignment to finish, if she knows the family has to eat, she has definitely to cook. So that definitely can effect their performance at the end” Sudanese male student studying Health Promotion

External Pressures and Commitments:

Participants endured a number of external pressures, responsibilities and commitments that affected their study time study. Financial stresses were cited as the biggest challenges to completing their studies, followed by family responsibilities and travel time to and from university, as most students were relying on public transport. No participants recorded severe emotional or psychological problems.

“I like working, but I find it very hard because you know you go to work, you need to go and study, then you have family problems, it too much... not enough hours in the day.” Sudanese male student studying Environmental Health Science

“Yeah, financial struggles is the most thing effected our studies, because you know we have to go sometimes during the day, and sacrifice your classes, you come back and do your work, instead of time for rest, and then you have to get up in the morning, and sleep only 5 hours, and then go back to uni you really don’t have enough yours, and that runs you know, all the year.” Sudanese male student studying Environmental Health Science

Use of Services and Technology:

Participants found using the internet and computers the most challenging new skill to learn, and navigating the library and administration systems virtually problem free. Although the Muslim students praised Curtin University for their Muslim services, such as the prayer room and availability of Halal food, the other educational and support services at the university were not as frequently used.

“I don’t know about computers, so my first year was really so hard...locating resources on the internet, it’s a major challenge for most of us who come from the developing countries....” Sudanese male student studying Environmental Health Science

“Curtin is multicultural you know, everything, there’s a lot of services for us like Muslims and international students... there’s a prayer area, Halal places, you feel ... welcomed, you feel like you’re home in a away” Somali male Studying Commerce

Participation in University:

Refugee students were not as outspoken as other students in tutorials and group assignments, often feeling their contributions were not listened to. Participants tended to remain quiet unless asked. This was partly due to participants finding communication within the university system new and challenging. They also found making friends with Australian students difficult, making tutorial and group work participation difficult and unnerving.

“I’ll participate in class discussions, but sometimes the topics, its something that I don’t like or its moved too fast and we can’t get it” Somali male studying Environmental Health Science

“Sometimes you feel isolated. That’s why sometimes I sometimes feel group work ... it’s a waste of a time, because some people in my group may not want me to contribute” Sudanese male student studying Health Promotion

Participant Recommendations

The students were asked in their interviews to suggest ways in which Curtin University could better prepare and support them for university life, and what recommendations they would give to new students commencing university. Their responses were as follows:

1. Participants stressed the need for guidance and encouragement to attend university, especially from a young age. High school students should be made aware of the possible courses to study and encouraged to have dreams and goals.
2. They felt that their mothers and older adults should also be encouraged to study.
3. They suggested reaching potential students through their community and church groups, to act as a bridge to university, and to assist with identified enrolment challenges.
4. Students would like more attention and help, especially in first year. They often felt lost and thought the lecturers were too busy, especially in first year units with so many students in each class. They suggested two lecturers in larger units, one to lecture, one to go around offering help.
5. Units should be more international in their focus, and not assume all students are going to work in Perth upon graduation.
6. More scholarships and financial assistance, to reduce stress and the temptation to stop studying in order to work.

Conclusion

The data collected from the needs analysis conducted in this study demonstrates the complex and varied challenges refugees face during their time at university. Participants included in the needs analysis varied in age, the courses they studied and the number of years they had been in Australia and at university. Prior to commencing university, participants had varying degrees of previous education, English language proficiency, and computer literacy, which effected their experiences of university learning. In spite of these participant differences, the study found similar and recurring themes and issues that highlight both the fulfilled and unfilled needs of refugee students at Curtin University.

The pre and post migration experiences that culminated with the stressors of resettlement and acculturation in Australia demand extraordinary levels of resilience and determination of the students in order to complete university education. In light of this, it is clear that the multi-faceted needs of refugee youth require a co-ordinated approach between Curtin University teaching staff, teaching and learning service providers and support staff that tailors specifically to refugee students’ needs. Despite these difficulties, this study has also revealed

that universities represent the setting where many of the hopes of refugee students materialise. The students find university a safe and welcoming environment, to which they feel connected to, and continue to work towards balancing their work, study and social lives in order to complete their university courses. All participants were extremely motivated and inspired to achieve their career objectives and placed education as one of their top priorities.

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