Title:

Stigma, Stereotypes and Support: The 3S in navigating complex journeys from Intensive English Centres to higher education for students from refugee backgrounds in Australia

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Abstract

This study examined the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds (SfRBs) as they transitioned from Intensive English Centres (IECs) based at metropolitan high schools in Western Australia (WA) into higher education. Focus group discussions revealed that SfRBs were highly motivated and held aspirations for completion of tertiary study. Enabling factors included a supportive IEC environment, social and family support and tailored university enabling courses. However, students also faced barriers such as competing priorities, learning difficulties remaining undiagnosed and standardised testing. Individual in-depth interviews with key informants provided context and policy perspectives, such as the impact of settlement service policy changes on the provision of adequate services. There is limited literature on the experiences of students transitioning from IECs through the Australian education system. The findings of this study help to critically understand the unique experiences of young people from refugee backgrounds navigating the WA education system and reiterate the need for inclusive and supportive policies. Recommendations for universities and future research include the development of culturally appropriate tools to identify learning difficulties in SfRBs, and capturing the knowledge and capacity of IEC educators.

Keywords: Intensive English Centre, Refugees, Higher Education, Transition, Australia

Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates there were 79.5 million voluntary and forced migrants in 2019 who were displaced due to persecution, conflict, human rights abuses or a need to escape poverty (UNHCR 2020). This is an increase on 70.8 million displaced people the previous year, indicating an ongoing and compelling issue (UNHCR 2019a). Approximately half of all refugees are children under the age of 18, and a significant number of refugees are young adults, for whom education should be a priority (UNHCR 2019a).

Young refugees may not have continuous access to education during their time of protracted displacement. Despite improvement in enrolment since 2016, only 23% of refugee adolescents are enrolled in secondary school, compared to 84% of adolescents globally. Refugee children are five times more likely to be out of school than their non-refugee counterparts (UNHCR 2017). A limited number of higher education programs are available in camp contexts, for example the Jesuit Commons: Higher Education at the Margins program, run in the Dadaab camp in Kenya, Malawi and Jordan (Crea 2016). However, despite these small success stories, only 3% of young refugees in camps have access to higher education (UNHCR 2019b).

Australian Humanitarian resettlement program and access to education

Australia's Humanitarian Program allows asylum seekers who have been found to be refugees according to the Refugees Convention to apply for protection visas (Department of Home Affairs 2019). In 2018-19, the Humanitarian Program granted 18,762 visas, of which 40.1% were granted to children and adolescents below the age of 18 years. The main groups granted offshore visas in 2018-19 were from Syria, Iraq, Myanmar, Afghanistan, Bhutan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia, with the majority of applicants living in dedicated refugee camps (Department of Home Affairs 2019). Humanitarian entrants may speak multiple languages and dialects, including those acquired in refugee camps. The top 12 languages

broadly spoken by humanitarian entrants are Arabic, Dari, Farsi, Hazaragi, Assyrian, Persian, Nepali, Burmese, Serbian, Chin, Dinka and Karen. Approximately 80% of humanitarian entrants do not speak English fluently, and some may not speak English at all (Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia 2016).

Upon arrival in Australia, students with a humanitarian entrance background are entitled to up to two years in an Intensive English Centre (IEC). IECs provide specialist English language programs to students who are in the early stages of English language acquisition and are based at public schools in metropolitan areas (Government of Western Australia n.d.).

SfRB experiences at Australian IECs and universities

In the past two decades, Australian IECs and universities have received increasing numbers of students from refugee backgrounds (SfRBs)(Authors et al. date). There is a small body of research that addresses the educational, social and cultural expectations and experiences of SfRBs in higher education and their transition from mainstream high school, especially those who wish to regain the social and educational capital they once held. They view higher education as a means to escape poverty, and aim for educational achievement, despite relatively low expectations from school teachers and educational institutions (Author et al. date; Kong et al. 2016; Ramsay and Baker 2019).

However, they are confronted with barriers such as language and cultural differences, family responsibilities and the competing need to secure employment (Ramsay and Baker 2019). For specific groups, such as African women, obtaining an educational qualification is in conflict with cultural expectations, which present their own set of barriers (Harris et al. 2015). For all refugee groups, implicit social knowledge around learning and education exists in the host society that refugee students may not hold, which includes knowledge around the possibility

of extension for assessments, and academic writing styles (Authors et al. date; Kong et al. 2016).

There is limited literature on the experiences of students transitioning from IECs through the Australian education system. Studies situated at IECs have focussed on interventions to address problematic behaviour in traumatised youth (Mom et al. 2019); and goal setting approaches among African refugee students transitioning from IECs to mainstream high school (Gunasekera et al. 2016). The authors recommend increasing the emotional support and sense of cultural belonging among SfRBs both during their time in the IEC and as they transition to mainstream high school education. Studies on SfRBs in higher education have challenged the traditional understandings of a linear transition through education (Baker and Irwin 2021), as well as the commonly applied 'deficit' view of English language challenges experienced by SfRBs (Naidoo and Adoniou 2019). The authors posit that teachers' and policy makers' understandings of the refugee experience can be enhanced by acknowledging the language capital and life experience possessed by SfRBs, who often speak multiple languages, and recommend professional development for teachers in using a strengths-based approach. It is critical that programs and strategies are developed to support SfRBs to transition from IECs into mainstream high school and higher education, to participate meaningfully and achieve success in their studies.

Aim

The research reported in this paper was part of a larger three-university study undertaken across two states in Australia. This article reports on the research undertaken in Western Australia which focussed on motivations and expectations for higher education among IEC SfRBs and students' experience of language and academic culture at university. By identifying issues

impacting the transition of students into and through higher education the study aimed to improve students' experience and therefore contribute to retention of SfRBs in higher education.

The objectives of our study were the following:

1. To explore how SfRBs studying at IECs, and holding a humanitarian visa in Western Australia, experience preparation for entrance into Australian higher education.
2. To obtain viewpoints of key informants in the IECs working with SrFBs
3. To document the learning experiences of SfRBs who had already transitioned to university, with a focus on first year students.
4. To propose policy and program recommendations that will improve success of refugee students in higher education

Methods

Design, Sampling and Setting

A qualitative exploratory design was used in this study as it was the appropriate design to examine in-depth an issue where there is limited information (Polit and Beck 2017). Participants were recruited using purposive and convenience sampling. Five IECs in Perth, WA were invited to participate and three agreed. Principals of the IECs assisted with identifying students with a humanitarian entrance background interested in pursuing higher education, and provided a list of possible key informants with knowledge of policy and pedagogy in this area. At undergraduate (UG) level, university admissions records were used to identify first year students with a humanitarian entrance background. They were invited by email to participate.

Ethics approval was obtained from the XXX Human Research Ethics Committee and the Western Australian Department of Education. Permission to access the IEC students was obtained from the Principals of each IEC, who also distributed comprehensive information letters to potential participants informing them that participation was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Consent forms were signed by all participants, including the parents of the participants under 18 years of age. To ensure confidentiality, data were stored securely at XXX University and in research drives on password-protected computers. The counselling service based at XXX University was available should any participants experience distress during participation in the study.

Data Collection

Eight focus groups with 45 IEC students (27 male and 18 female adolescents) from Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, and Karen refugees from Thailand were conducted between August and October 2016. The majority of students were between 15-17 years old. All focus groups were conducted at the IECs as this was convenient for the students, and were approximately one hour in length. Between two and eight participants, from diverse backgrounds, were in each group. Interpreters were not used as students had sufficient English. Topics covered included current experiences, aspirations and expectations for the future and understanding of various pathways.

Seven in-depth interviews with key informants examined the perspectives of teachers (n=5) and Principals (n=2) to identify personal, social and policy factors affecting the transition of students through the education system. Policy and funding issues impacting on the operations of IECs and teaching capacity were also discussed. Individual in-depth interviews with 11 University undergraduate SfRBs explored the variety of pathways taken during the transition

to higher education. The interviews also examined undergraduate perceptions on the barriers and enablers to transition to higher education, and sought their recommendations for further support. All interviews were 60-90 minutes long.

Data analysis

Focus group discussions and interviews were transcribed verbatim and each transcript was read thoroughly and notes were made in the margins to get a holistic understanding of the data. Each transcript was then analysed inductively using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis techniques (Braun and Clarke 2013). This technique allows themes to emerge from the data rather than be governed by a pre-determined theoretical framework. As the participants were adolescents and young people, it was important that assumptions were not made by the researchers as to what the important themes were, but that the participants' voices were the dominant source (Braun and Clarke 2013).

Within each transcript meaning units were identified and listed on a separate document. Initially, the IEC focus group data were analysed separately from the individual interviews, but as the analysis deepened common threads emerged across the two student cohorts and subsequent analysis combined both cohorts. Meaning units were then condensed into concepts that at this stage were not given links or connections. By re-reading the transcripts, synthesis between the concepts led to the development of categories; emerging categories were then condensed into themes. Discussion between the authors clarified any confusion and helped to refine the themes. Initially 'time' was an independent theme, but after further discussion and reflection it was clear that this concept permeated across all themes and underpinned the experience of the SfRBs. As such, it became an underlying theme. Relevant participant excerpts have been added to provide direct evidence of emergent themes, and participant

numbers used to preserve confidentiality.

Categories	Themes	Sub-themes
Facilitators	Personal attributes	Aspirations and expectations
	IEC governance	IEC environment
		Relationships with other sectors
		Local partnerships in education
Barriers	Disrupted education	Winding pathways to education
		Missed academic skills and concepts
		Limited English language skills
	Education system barriers	Standardised testing
		Funding and policy
	Teacher assumptions	Learning difficulties and trauma
		Stereotypes and stigma
	Isolation	Socialisation problems
		Inconsistent support
Time (an underlying theme)		
Competing priorities		
Time management		
Navigating a new culture and system		

Findings

Analysis of the data revealed that factors influencing the transition of SfRBs from IECs to higher education could be divided into *Facilitators* and *Barriers*. A total of six themes across those two categories emerged, with associated sub-themes (table 1). The concept of *Time* in all its manifestations emerged as an underlying theme throughout the analysis.

Table 1. Facilitators and barriers for SfRBs transitioning from IECs to higher education

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Facilitators

Factors that facilitated educational transition included personal attributes of the participants, and IEC governance. Within the theme of *personal attributes,* the aspirations and expectations of the students impacted on their transition. Within the theme of *IEC governance,* the nature of the IEC environment, specific partnerships between IECs and universities, and some aspects of university enabling programs positively enabled transition.

Personal attributes
The individual personal qualities of students were a strong enabling factor in their transition through the education system.

Aspirations and expectations

SfRBs in the IECs had aspirations for higher education, primarily in nursing, information technology, engineering and science. They saw it as being achievable and relevant to their lives. Students valued self-determination highly, and believed this would get them through the transition period and into higher education. They were extremely motivated to do well.

They believed the HE teachers would be just as supportive as their IEC teachers.

"I want to make my life better than now." (IEC student 4)

Families were also encouraging of the students' aspirations for higher education, but this sometimes resulted in pressure on the students. Furthermore, despite parents having high aspirations for their children, teachers in the IECs sometimes also sometimes found it difficult to communicate with parents about educational issues.

"I think they often have pressure from their parents, the expectation based on the notion that the parents want them to go to university." (key informant 2)

"The parents are very difficult to communicate with and that causes difficulties. That's because of English, because of working long hours, because of just, sometimes coming from cultures where parents have a different role in schooling to what we would expect." (key informant 6)

IEC governance

IEC environment

Students were grateful for the safe learning environment that acknowledged their journeys. They expressed appreciation for learning materials that were tailored to their English level. They also acknowledged the supportive teaching staff, who students felt were available and welcoming.

"They said if you ever need any help you can come to them after school and they talk about it." (IEC student 4)

Relationships with other sectors

Key informants revealed that IECs played a multi-faceted role involving not only academic support, but also liaising with external agencies for physical and emotional health needs of students. IECs (and mainstream high schools) also adapted curriculum and teaching methods to suit SfRB needs.

"I deal with all the pastoral care issues, I deal with the outside agencies like ASeTTS (Association for Services to Torture and Trauma Survivors), Metropolitan Migrant Centre, medical personnel at Princess Margaret Hospital." (key informant 1)

Career and education counselling was offered by IEC teachers and Principals with a view to

helping students tailor personalised plans. This counselling extended to families to facilitate understanding of the education system and the academic requirements of entry to certain courses. Furthermore, the IECs provided good information on post-high school pathways available.

> "We have a little bit of career counselling or course counselling and the kids then start thinking for themselves and exploring other options." (key informant 7)

Local partnerships in education

One IEC in the northern suburbs of Perth has a partnership with a Western Australian university to deliver a University Preparation Course modified from the university's enabling program. This course is delivered over a full school year in year 12 and focusses on academic skills such as researching for information and academic writing. Upon achievement of a minimum score students are given direct entry to a number of courses at the partner university. At other IECs, activities are organised to expose students to the TAFE (Technical and Further Education) environment, which allows them to visit facilities, peruse courses and discuss specific vocations.

Barriers

Despite the positive effects of the factors outlined above, there were a number of barriers to educational transitions revealed by participants. These were the *disruptions in education* experienced by SfRBS, *educational system barriers* encountered at times of standardised testing, and that *teacher assumptions* made about SfRBs' English capacity were masking learning difficulties. Participants also highlighted social *isolation* and *inconsistent support* as

hindering their transition. Finally, *time* was a recurrent theme that impacted on transition in multiple ways.

Disrupted education

Analysis of data revealed that the long and complex journeys undertaken by SfRBs had impacted upon the linear development of academic and English language skills.

Winding pathways to education

Students reported periods of time where they didn't have access to schooling during the journey to Australia and when they were in transitional camps, which for some SfRBs extended over several years.

"I didn't go to school for about two years so I forgot everything." (IEC student 1)

Others had experienced continuous schooling but in multiple languages (eg Arabic, then Turkish, then English), often having to learn the language from the beginning to participate in schooling. All of this resulted in some missed concepts, such as mathematical addition and subtraction impacting on progression into higher maths concepts. Reduced academic skills sometimes required students to undertake additional schooling at IECs or other colleges in Australia prior to commencing high school. A particularly difficult time was during year 12, the high school graduating year.

"I did a preparation course at senior college for six months which was for the next year to choose what we want to do. And then after that six months I started doing year 12. Then I did year 12 twice." (UG student 1)

This disruption impacted on academic writing, referencing, critical appraisal and synthesis of information from journal articles, which were all described as difficult or as new concepts by the students at both the IEC and HE level.

"Understanding the academic writings from journals [is difficult]." (IEC student 10)

"I'm not familiar with basically academic writing, it was my first time when the lecturer told us to do this assessment and it has to be like this. This is the structure, referencing and the language that you use, the citation, everything was completely new for me." (UG student 4)

Interestingly, some students did not attend formal school but had been able to access private tutoring in the refugee camps while they were waiting for their visas to be approved, a period that can take up to five years.

"So they haven't been in a school, but they have had private tuition, especially in English. I think it's a form of preparation for them to come to Australia. As you know for the visa waiting period, they have to wait for three or even four or five years. So while waiting I think a lot of them are being proactive now, so [the parents are] preparing their child for when they get to Australia. I noticed that it's very common with the Syrians now that are coming in." (key informant 1)

Limited English language skills

Despite often speaking several languages. SfRBs expressed having some difficulties in English

language, both written and spoken, which impacted on their confidence. Many students were operating in two languages, translating written work between languages and using devices such as Google translate to assist them in understanding content. Difficulties with spelling and grammar also had an unexpected impact on learning other subjects such as mathematics. In mathematics, problems are often presented in text form, with up to a paragraph of writing, from which students must determine which mathematical formula to use to solve the problem. IEC students were aware of their disadvantage and that they were competing with local students for ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) scores. They felt frustration and stress as a result.

> "So for example if you're doing ATAR maths, you have the ATAR English in it. They've been here for 15 years [local students] and I just been here for like 10 months, I'm competing with them." (IEC student 5)

> "I could understand the content but when it comes to the final exams I couldn't remember all of the things that I should write exactly. If they ask me write it in Persian I could answer it perfectly." (UG student 3)

Once students moved from the IEC to the mainstream high school and then to higher education, support staff were not always available to provide English, or other, academic support. Students worried about moving into mainstream high school because teachers would have high expectations of language ability.

> "But the thing is that they [mainstream teachers] don't know your English. They just know that because you graduated from IEC so your English is [must be] good, [they

will assume] you understand a lot of things, they're just going to talk to you like an

Aussie, like you've been born Australia." (IEC student 5)

Education System Barriers

A number of systemic barriers to educational transition were revealed in the data. At the IECs

these included the consequences of standardised testing and funding issues. At university,

enabling courses provided mixed experiences.

Standardised testing

The OLNA assessment (Online Literacy and Numeracy Assessment), is a test that is

administered in Western Australia only and is a requirement for graduation from high school.

In some circumstances students passed their school-based subjects, but did not qualify to

graduate if they did not pass OLNA. This impacted on their post-high school options and the

transition to higher education and caused significant barriers.

"The first thing they asked me to do OLNA test which is really, really, you know, which

is give me a tension. It's like, we did OLNA two times and I didn't pass." (IEC student

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In addition, students intending to enter university had to complete subjects that contribute to

an Australia-wide ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank). The ATAR system

determines a student's options for tertiary entry. Students and teachers perceive it to be

inflexible, particularly for students arriving in Australia during their adolescence. Students had

to choose their ATAR subjects for year 11 and year 12 early in year 10, before they had finished

the IEC year and when their English journey was still new. The subject choices they made at

such an early stage may have cost them a pathway to higher education.

> "Those students that are going into year 10 this semester, they had to pick their ATAR subjects a couple of weeks ago, for year 11. That's not fair because they've got a whole semester of year 10 where they could improve." (key informant 4)

Those that arrived early in adolescence were advantaged as they could transition from the IEC into year 10 mainstream, and thus have extended time at high school. Those that arrived later had more interruptions to schooling, and had to transition to year 11 from the IEC which was very difficult. They were generally not able to choose ATAR subjects that led directly to university and thus their pathways to higher education were limited.

> "The guys that they turn 18 in IEC they're going to go to year 11 straightaway but it's a bit hard for them if they want to go to university after that." (IEC student 5)

Funding and policy considerations

Data from the key informant interviews revealed that recent changes to the funding model for IECs had resulted in reduced staffing levels, and specialist classes for students with limited or disrupted schooling were not always available.

> "It's not easy as the funding arrangements have changed significantly. Our classes are bigger than they used to be and our limited schooling class has been absorbed into the other classes." (key informant 2)

Furthermore, on arrival in Australia families may not have been informed of the options for

IEC education for their children. They may instead simply have been sent to the nearest public school, irrespective of that school's ability to provide speciality education.

"In the past the Department [Settlement Services] used to resource ways of communicating with new arrivals into Australia about what the IECs are and where they are, and what they do. These days it doesn't happen in a regular process, it's often word of mouth, it's sometimes dependant on the schools that they turn up to, and [that school] will recommend they come here. Some schools are unaware that the IEC exists these days just for the way that the Department is structured which is disappointing. We have enough to do without having to advertise ourselves as well, but that's becoming increasingly part of what we have to do, including attending the settlement service meetings." (key informant 2)

Policy dictates the length of time to which a student is entitled to be in the IEC. Key informants felt this was often inadequate and that SfRBs need more time than locally born students to complete work and learn new concepts.

"Two years in the IEC is not enough time to get a child or a student who's coming from this background, to a year 10 or 11 level, which is often where they'll be put." (key informant 4)

Teacher assumptions

Participants revealed that lack of awareness sometimes resulted in teachers misinterpreting poor student performance as language-related, rather than recognising true learning difficulties

or trauma. Furthermore, stigma was causing a degree of marginalisation within mainstream high school environments.

Learning difficulties and trauma

Learning difficulties like dyslexia may have been undiagnosed as teachers assumed any academic issues were a result of English difficulties. Trauma could also go unrecognised as teachers assumed symptoms such as silence were related to poor English ability.

> "Some of the students have genuine learning disabilities or difficulties or behavioural or psychological issues that can be masked by the fact that they're EALD (English as an Additional Language or Dialect) students. There are assumptions that they're performing poorly because of English but it's not always the case." (key informant 3)

Stigma and stereotypes

Key informants reported there could be stigma associated with being a refugee in the high school environment, unfortunately sometimes from mainstream teachers. As a result SfRBs were reluctant to acknowledge or speak about their refugee experience, and teachers were subsequently not always aware of the needs of those students. This presented teaching challenges as mainstream teachers were not given information about student refugee status from administrative sources and rely on self-disclosure.

> "There's a stigma about being a refugee, so the students will deny being a refugee." (key informant 3)

Isolation

Students revealed that social interaction and inconsistencies in formal support presented difficulties.

Socialisation problems

Most students reported social interaction was difficult in educational settings and the wider community. Local students, although not overtly discriminatory, do not interact and seem reluctant to form long-term friendships outside the classroom. Students displayed independence and self-reliance, but seemed isolated, which again also impacted on confidence.

"The college student I say hello to them, I try to talk to them. Because my English is not good they don't like to talk to me." (UG student 6)

Inconsistent support

Students did sometimes access formal support programs available such as academic skills and English classes, with mixed success. Sometimes students perceived they were not tailored to their needs. In general, rather than formal grammatical instruction they wanted a mentor to proof-read their work individually. As this was not available, many sought informal support from peers. This put a burden on their locally born friends and SfRBs were not always successful in finding this informal support. Some sought help from former high school teachers – who often provided it in their own time. Higher education tutors did not typically have time to help, or to proofread.

"I'm looking for someone who can read through to me my assignment. I finished everything but I don't want to submit it and losing mark for my English. Sometimes I

find some people I really like, second year or third year student. Sometimes they help me and be happy to help me but sometimes they say we are busy, we can't help you." (UG student 3)

"No one will help you because tutors they so busy and have so many student always like just ask her by email, I can't meet her face to face." (UG student 6)

However, whilst students conveyed a need for support, they were reluctant to be identified as refugees, highlighting a desire to achieve on their own merits. They did not want refugee status disclosed to peers or tutors, even if it could be a gateway to extra support.

"I'm not different from others. If I want to study this I need to learn the same thing that others do. The rest is my problem." (UG student 4)

Time

Underpinning all findings was the concept of time.

Competing priorities

During the first two years post-arrival there were many foci for students including socialisation, learning English, acculturation, overcoming trauma, needing to support the family, and possibly facilitating the migration of their family. These competing priorities made it very difficult to focus entirely on studies. Employment and the need to earn money could be a priority, and post-traumatic stress symptoms impacted on learning in the IEC.

"When they have experienced trauma, in the first two years not much happens

academically because they need to settle down socially first before they can start processing language and learning." (key informant 2)

Some UG students were facilitating the resettlement of their families through refugee camps overseas, a very long and drawn out process requiring considerable time and effort. This involved constant communications with the family and with government agencies. They were often financially supporting their family on their relocation journey, which required many hours of part time work.

"And I was spending so much time about explaining everything that I did before when I was in Turkey to them so they can go through it." (UG student 2)

Time Management

The translation between two languages during the learning and writing process meant completing assessments took a significantly longer time. There was also additional time pressure when students were trying to fit in extra English classes which may have been compulsory. This resulted in daily stress.

"It takes me like so much time to translate the terms first and then learn the terms and then learn how they are used in the sentence. So it's like multiple steps process for me." (UG student 5)

Time to navigate systems and culture

Parents learnt the school and higher education system *over time* from teachers and students. It took *time to adapt to new cultural norms*, and sometimes to renegotiate family roles. For many

there were conflicting expectations from friends (make money), family (make money and be a doctor), and themselves (follow your heart) about what their future life course should be. All this had to happen whilst studying and learning English.

> "At the beginning my parents were pressuring, like they wanted me to do pharmacy, nothing else. But when it comes to real life where you tell them what are the requirements and what you need to do they came to understand." (IEC student 12)

Students needed *time to navigate* the Australian education system, including changing course, or university. IEC teachers encouraged students to have an alternative plan to university, such as TAFE. Spending time at TAFE could help them decide future pathways. It could be a *'time-out'* or a pause.

> "I understand it's going to be like very challenging for someone like me so I'm going to give myself second chance or third chance I'm not sure, but yeah I'm going to keep trying." (UG student 5)

Discussion

This study explored the preparation, motivations and expectations for higher education among IEC SfRBs, and students' experience of language and academic culture at university. Like previous studies (Hammond 2014; Rose 2018), our findings have shown that SfRBs are highly motivated, demonstrate a strong work ethic and expect to transition to higher education. However, at university, competing priorities of supporting extended family, adjusting to a new culture and managing re-settlement needs was highlighted, mirroring previous studies (Author et al. date). At the IEC level disrupted schooling, limited English proficiency, trauma and

systemic barriers such as standardised testing presented significant challenges (Molyneux and Hiorth 2019; Rose 2018). Stigma and stereotypes were present in SfRBs' experiences of accessing support, particularly for help with learning difficulties. Federal government refugee policies, and state education policies also impacted on their transition experiences.

The number of refugees accepted for re-settlement in Australia, and the source countries they come from, is determined by Australian federal government policy (Parliament of Australia 2016). This in turn influences the numbers of students enrolled in IECs and the educational background they bring. Strong connections between the Department for Settlement Services and IECs are critical as sending SfRBs to public schools without an IEC may not be educationally appropriate (Authors et al, date) (Miller and Windle 2010). State government funding decisions may result in new refugee arrivals with disrupted education being combined with international students who have had continuous and often rigorous education in their home country, and have come to Australia simply to learn English. SfRBs with missed concepts may struggle in these environments (Hammond 2014; Miller and Windle 2010; Rose 2018).

At state level, government educational policy also has a direct influence on the number and classification of IEC classes. For example, the Western Australian Education Department policy change that was implemented in 2015 to move Year 7 students from primary school to high school (Western Australian Auditor General 2014) impacted high-school-based IECs who since then have had to accommodate younger students with a broader range of educational backgrounds. This mean IECs are not always able to accommodate the numbers and specific needs of SfRBs, especially those with learning difficulties (Due et al. 2015; Rose 2018).

The challenges in assessing learning difficulties in culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD)

students faced by high school psychologists and guidance counsellors are noted in the literature, although they are not refugee specific (Crevecoeur and Obiakor 2013; Vega et al. 2016). A lack of appropriate training in this area, along with a lack of validated tools and guidelines can lead to subjective interpretations of assessment results and inaccurate diagnoses (Mak and Shaw 2015; Velasco Leon and Campbell 2020). This in turn leads to isolation, frustration, an increase in student attrition and poor employment prospects for students (Crevecoeur and Obiakor 2013). In a recent study of Australian school psychologists and guidance counsellors it was found that 65% had not received specific training in assessing CALD students, and had difficulty obtaining culturally appropriate psycho-educational assessment tools (Velasco Leon and Campbell 2020). The use of socio-emotional tests specifically for trauma were not discussed by the authors, which may indicate a lack of their use, or a limitation of the study. The impact of trauma in educational attainment warrants further research as a misdiagnosis in this area can have significant implications for student learning (Kaplan et al. 2016; Velasco Leon and Campbell 2020). The ability of school psychologists to diagnose learning difficulties in non-English speaking students, especially those who have experienced trauma, needs to be strengthened so they in turn can work with their teaching colleagues in the IEC and mainstream classrooms to optimise students' progress and enable them to choose an aspirational pathway.

One important pathway revealed in the current study was the local partnership between a specific Perth University and its partner high school that enabled year 12 students to study the University Preparation Course over a 12-month period. This is similar to The Learning Centre 110 (TLC110) program developed for other schools in Perth focussing on low socio-economic status (SES) students (Goggin et al. 2016; Vernon et al. 2018). Low SES students face similar barriers to SfRBs in that, over time, aspirations and expectations for university can decline due

to a lack of cultural capital (Molyneux and Hiorth 2019), discouragement from teachers and inability to access ATAR subjects (Vernon et al. 2018). Evaluation outcomes of the TLC110 program showed it facilitated engagement in students from a low socio-economic background and increased students' motivations and expectations of finishing a university degree (Goggin et al. 2016; Vernon et al. 2018). Further research is required into university enabling programs completed during year 12 for SfRBs as they may offer an effective and supportive pathway that recognises students' inherent abilities whilst addressing the specific barriers faced by this cohort. Supporting teachers to acknowledge the language capital of SfRBs and to modify curriculum to build on those strengths is critical (Naidoo and Adonious 2019).

One significant barrier identified at university level was difficulties with socialisation (Naidoo 2019). Students from refugee backgrounds find it difficult to access the social supports available to locally-born students (Vickers et al. 2017). Mentoring programs between locally-born students and refugee students have had positive results in some Australian tertiary education settings. Vickers, McCarthy and Zammit (2017) found improved intercultural understanding and a widening of perspective of the mentors in their mentoring program at a university in Sydney, noting that meaningful relationships could be created within a supportive environment. In contrast, Woods et al. (2013) evaluated a mentoring program at a university in Brisbane, Australia and posit that more consideration and work is required for effective building of friendships to facilitate successful social connections (Woods et al. 2013).

Recommendations

Whilst many of our findings resonate with other studies, our study is unique in the exploration of the IEC pathway and the transition taken by SfRBs into higher education. This study

highlights the need to use human rights and social justice approaches to provide SfRBs the support and opportunities to succeed in their country of resettlement. At the IEC and high school level this includes consideration of alternative pathways offered concurrently to year 12 studies, the development of culturally appropriate psycho-educational assessment tools to identify learning difficulties and the impacts of trauma, and providing culturally safe spaces (Velasco Leon and Campbell 2020).

Policy recommendations include an ongoing need for adequate and sustained funding of IECs and other services that offer English language support and learning opportunities to newly arrived refugee families. The inadequate dissemination of information about IECs and alternative pathways to higher education for SfRBS and their families upon arrival in Australia needs to be addressed. There is a particular need for specialist classes for SfRBs with limited and disrupted schooling with suitably qualified teachers (Due et al. 2015). Further research is required to capture the existing knowledge of IEC teachers, and to develop resources and support to enable their teaching and further support the learning and success of SfRBs.

To ease the transition to university, culturally appropriate mentoring programs, suited to meet the needs of SfRBs, should be offered within universities to address the challenges SfRBs face in accessing opportunities to connect meaningfully with the wider university community. Experiences that offer domestic students cultural encounters with people from diverse backgrounds improve cultural skill and awareness, contributing to improvements in overall cultural competence (Authors et al. date).

Conclusion

Despite facing barriers such as stigma and stereotypes, disrupted education prior to arrival, competing priorities, and standardised testing, refugee students hold high aspirations and goals (Author et al. date) and want to succeed in their country of resettlement. This study highlights the importance of support, commencing with accurate information provision on arrival in Australia. The critical role played by IEC teachers and administrators is clear, and there is a need for sustained funding of IECs, particularly to assist staff in the assessment of trauma and learning difficulties. The voices of the SfRBs in this study highlight the need for approaches to education that adopt inclusivity, empower refugee students and build on the resilience and aspiration of refugee students. Many of the challenges affecting SfRBs' lives also affect refugees in the wider community and their future well-being, and therefore improvements in education policy that incorporate culturally appropriate interventions may also apply in broader policy contexts.

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