

6. From 'chopping up chicken' to 'cap and gown': A university initiative to increase pathways to employment for skilled migrants and refugees

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ABSTRACT

Equity policies enable individuals from low SES backgrounds to enter University, yet do not facilitate their engagement as members of groups. These selected individuals enter a broader cohort, where they are expected (with support) to meet the same graduate attributes as everyone else. Rather than the diverse experiences of such students being seen as strengths to be built on, the focus tends to be placed on remedying their learning disadvantage. Thus, university poses as a neutral pathway to jobs and status, and effectively, a pathway out of low SES communities, rather than a gateway into greater community involvement. This paper presents a case study of a graduate certificate which offered fee scholarships to a group of overseas skilled refugees and migrants. In contrast to usual equity experiences, these students progressed as a cohort, were often the majority group in class, bent the curriculum to their own needs and applied the learning to their community involvements. Such engagement constituted a rich adult learning experience, which challenged conventional teaching–learning processes and curriculum, and raised questions about academic standards. Examining learnings from this project, the paper asks how Schools of Social Work can draw on their professional values to enhance equity processes

within the academy.

Keywords: *Overseas Skilled Refugees; University Equity Policies; Learning and Teaching.*

Emma came from Burundi, with her husband and five children, after 12 years in a refugee camp. She was a trained nurse in Burundi, but Skills Recognition was unable to verify her qualifications. Her husband spent some time working in a chicken factory, and both now could not face the smell of raw chicken. In 2010, Emma enrolled in the Graduate Certificate in Community and Youth Work at Griffith University. She studied at home after 10 pm when the children had gone to bed, and it became very clear that she loved to study. She was an enthusiastic learner and her English language skills improved rapidly. Emma did her professional work experience placement in a domestic violence refuge and her supervisor was glowing in her commendation. However, no job flowed on from this, or from the many applications Emma wrote. Uplifted by her university experience and undeterred by job rejections, Emma returned to study nursing full-time. She shared: "Opening my mind to University has opened the possibility to my children and to other members of my community. It has increased my confidence in study, and given me skills for work. It has enabled me to work with my community in many different ways".

INTRODUCTION

Across Australia, people who have arrived as migrants and refugees, and who had status and qualifications at home, are underemployed and find themselves driving cabs, cleaning offices, working in meat factories, and generally doing work that is 'dirty, dangerous and difficult' (Colic-Peisker 2009; Watt 2010). Colic-Peisker (2009) argues that refugees have a higher unemployment rate than other residents, and when employed, are often isolated from the wider community in low-status, low-paid jobs, with poor job security, requiring long hours of work. Well-educated refugees, when competing for jobs with Australian-born applicants, will rarely be as successful because of systemic issues such as persistent discrimination in the Australian employment market (Colic-Peisker 2009; Fozdar and Torezani 2008; Fozdar 2012).

In Fozdar's (2012) study, half a group of 150 skilled refugees surveyed about their employment experiences reported facing discrimination in the field of employment. Employers remain unaware of the systemic barriers overseas-skilled migrants face, preferring to blame the latter's lack of job-relevant skills and assuming that such workers would not 'fit in' (Fozdar 2012). Yet barriers to sustainable employment include: lack of Australian work experience; limited language skills relevant to industry; limited knowledge of Australian labour markets; and limited experience impacting on ability to complete registration for regulated occupations (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007). Furthermore, there are very weak arrangements in place in terms of macro and meso frameworks to promote and manage cultural diversity in Australian workplaces (Syed and Kramer 2010). Anecdotal evidence suggests that multicultural non-government agencies tend to have stronger frameworks for employing and managing diversity. For skilled refugees in Australia, issues of unemployment and underemployment remain critical to positive resettlement experiences.

This paper presents a case study of a Graduate Certificate in Community and Youth Work, led by the second author and offered by the School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University, to overseas-qualified refugees and migrants. The program ran in 2010 & 2011, and the evaluation data was collected in 2010 (stage 1), 2011 (further interviews) and 2012 (via phone calls). The discussion draws on a range of sources, including staff reflections, program materials, descriptive content and evaluation material collected at program completion, and nine months after completion. The evaluation had ethics clearance from Griffith University, and a research assistant who had no prior engagement with the students conducted interviews. It should be noted, however, that this paper is not the report of that research, but is a consideration of the tensions involved in creating a successful learning environment in a diverse classroom, and the inadequacy of current equity discourse in supporting this.

A total of 14 students commenced the program as part of the scholarship scheme (10 in Semester 1, and four in Semester 2). Skills Recognition, a unit with Queensland Department of Education and Training, provided the scholarships. As an enhanced pathway to employment in health and human services, this project achieved some success, with seven of the 10 graduates securing work in a human service role, three enrolled in Masters degrees and one enrolled in a fulltime Bachelors degree. As will be discussed, graduates also reported a range of other important outcomes including increased confidence, leadership in their communities and a greater understanding of the culture of their new country.

An analysis of factors influencing the success of the program suggests that access to university is not enough to effect change. The classroom dynamics, teaching and learning styles and the curriculum all needed to change if the cohort of students are to be met in ways that acknowledge their status and existing strengths. In the contemporary university, units of study and their curricula are developed in advance of the teaching semester, and teaching loads are based on expectations of staff delivering lectures and tutorials with little redesign along the way. It can then come as a shock to face a classroom in which the majority of students do not recognise the historical, cultural and discursive references embedded in the curricula (du Plessis and Gisschoff 2007).

EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Bradley Report (Commonwealth of Australia 2008) emphasised that increasing the pool of well-qualified people is essential if Australia is to meet the demands of a rapidly changing global economy. Yet overseas-qualified and skilled people are often settling for jobs that are below their capacities. University programs should therefore be part of opening pathways for skilled migrants.

The participation targets and funding criteria arising from the Bradley Report, however, do not differentiate between equity groups, referring to people from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds as if they are a homogenous group. Similarly, the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) guidelines outline funding criteria for 'people from low SES backgrounds' as a whole, while higher education participation targets also fail to differentiate groups within this broad cohort. There is no mention of the specific

needs of migrants and refugees in these key documents. Gale (2009, p. 4), reflecting on this, says that 'low socioeconomic status appears to have become an umbrella term for all under-represented groups. There are in fact distinct differences within this grouping that again are derived from their different social and cultural differences' (see also James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause and McInnis 2004, for an analysis of equity groups in higher education).

In a Sydney-based study by Hannah (1999), colleges and universities argued that once refugees become Australian citizens, they have the same entitlements and are treated the same as all other citizens. Refugees can access support services, study skills and language support on an individual-need basis. However, refugee students from Victorian higher education institutions reported that support was inadequate or non-existent, and that they would benefit from academics having more understanding of refugees and their experiences (Earnest, Joyce, de Mori and Silvagni 2010). Similarly, whilst it is well known that 'facilitating the early engagement of students with their studies and campus life is linked to greater student satisfaction, improved retention rates' (Silburn, Earnest, Butcher and de Mori 2008, p. 3) and better educational outcomes, refugees attending some Australian universities felt that their institution did not understand their needs and offered little support. The experiences of African refugees in a South Australian university were characterised by pressures to adapt to tertiary education, and meet community expectations while experiencing difficult home situations (Harris and Marlowe 2011).

Gale's (2009, p. 2) critique is that equity in Australian policy and university practice has become a numbers game, which deals bureaucratically with student recruitment but pays little attention to what happens once 'bums are on seats'. The 'numbers game' has the appearance of equity, yet contributes to maintaining the status quo in terms of broader systemic approaches that locate all curricula within one knowledge paradigm. Gale (2009, p. 10) argues that in current equity thinking:

Effectively, students are not just 'supported' but positioned as requiring change, adjustment, upskilling, additional resources, and so on, in order to fit into established patterns of participation. In its most positive sense, support services provide students with ways of coping with university, even mastering it.

Gale (2009, p. 10) says that academic processes 'context-strip' students. This is a very similar concept to Freire's (1972) notion that learners are seen as empty vessels to be filled with authorised knowledges. The wealth of experience-based knowledge that all students bring, and the cultural and professional knowledge that adult, educated migrants and refugees hold, are at risk of being discounted in contemporary learning and teaching processes. Whilst the very necessary co-curricular activities provided by student support can help with study skills, writing and even counselling, the complex processes whereby learners negotiate new content and link it to their existing reservoir of knowledge and experience, is arguably central to curricula and part of academic processes.

Bourdieu (1977) used the term cultural capital to analyse the ways in which inequality is reproduced. The valued knowledge and cues of one class (or culture) become the measure for all. In higher education, the legitimised knowledge of that class or culture becomes the

basis of the curriculum. In the literature on the internationalisation of higher education, there is significant debate about the exchange of culture and values, mutual understanding and respect for difference (Gu 2001) with the intent of academic cultures and the individuals engaged with them becoming part of a mutual and respectful exchange of ideas 'rather than the simple integration of knowledge from one culture into another' (Ryan 2012, p. 58). In practice however, this is much more complex than it seems. The logic of most academic curricula (as pointed out by du Plessis and Bisschoff 2007) is likely to be 'sequential, verbal, deductive and reflective' (p. 249), with expectation that students will draw consequences from the provided information and work out how to apply it. This is fine for students who share a similar logic, but can leave behind equally intelligent students whose scaffolding of concepts, thoughts and learning is quite different.

Equity, as practised, is a double-edged sword. It lets students into university, but then sets up a trajectory that inevitably privileges mainstream students. Whilst systemic approaches to equity are necessary, the narrative they are embedded in will shape overall outcomes. The grand narrative, now well critiqued by Lyotard (1984), Rose (1999) and others, is one of development and progress via which all populations across the world enter into the individualistic, materialist, aspirational lifestyle of the western middle class (Sellar and Gale 2009). In this narrative, universities are construed as culturally and class-neutral pathways for higher learning. Inherent to this narrative are notions that students, in all their diversity, are transformed through the educational process to reach their full potential, as (culturally-neutral) employees, professionals and leaders to actively contribute to economic development and enhance the competitive position of their countries in both national and world affairs (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). We might ask whether and how this dynamic can be altered.

To approach equity in a more meaningful way, or, as Gale (2009) says, through a more sophisticated understanding, requires a re-imagining of what higher education is about and how it takes place. The small case study in this paper makes no pretence of having achieved an alternative to the dominant teaching paradigm. Rather, it argues that when we try to re-imagine and enact what respectful higher education is, or might be, students may benefit significantly, but staff will be challenged on many fronts and will be likely to find that existing institutional supports are of little help, since they are designed for a different conception of higher education.

CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT

The Logan Campus

Logan City is the most culturally diverse community in Queensland (Logan City Council [LCC] 2008). Its demographics reflect every wave of migration of the 20th and 21st centuries. Located in South East Queensland, this city is now home to some 180 ethnic communities, and is one of the fastest growing Local Government Areas (LGA) in the region (LCC 2008). Between 2002 and 2006, over 2,500 migrants and over 300 refugees from various backgrounds resettled in Logan (LCC 2008). Each incoming community has struggled to find employment (despite this factor being widely identified as critical to the settlement process (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007)), and has eventually settled and made

a significant contribution to social and economic life. Current groups resettling in Logan city include people from Burma, Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi and Horn of Africa countries. The process of war, danger, abruptly leaving home, long periods in refugee camps, loss of the status one had at home, the settlement experience of living in a low socioeconomic area, being unable to find a job, and of having one's children struggle with discriminatory attitudes in schools, can rob one of confidence and can undermine aspiration. Therefore, although people may have attended university in their home country, it is not necessarily easy for them to embrace that option in their new country.

Since the establishment of the School of Human Services and Social Work at Griffith University in 1998, it has developed strong relations with the Logan community and its human services industry. Professional work experience placements are part of most courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and key strengths of the School. Indeed, the School aims to provide a combination of high academic standards with real world practice. Human services agencies are under increased pressures (mainly funding-based) and thus, supervising students can add to this. Nevertheless, field placements as well as shorter work experiences were found for all students discussed in this paper.

THE GRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN COMMUNITY AND YOUTH WORK

The Graduate Certificate was originally conceptualised as a pathway for those employed in the human services industry who wanted a formal qualification, or for those with formal qualifications but seeking a change in career paths into human services. A core philosophy of this program is the integration of academic and practical knowledge to tackle contemporary human services issues. The Graduate Certificate was chosen as the vehicle for enhancing skilled migrant and refugee pathways for three reasons: firstly, it was a short program (40 Credit Points (CP) across two semesters); secondly, there was some flexibility around eligibility requirements (for instance, language prerequisites and the nature of prior qualifications); and thirdly, the program could be modified for the cohort relatively quickly and with minimal impact on related qualifications and programs.

PURPOSE AND INTENDED OUTCOMES

This joint initiative by Skills Recognition (Queensland Department of Employment, Training and Employment) and Griffith University aimed to facilitate the transition of skilled migrants with overseas professional qualifications in health and community services occupations to health-related employment in Australia. The purpose of this partnership was to improve labour market participation through assisting participants to develop the community skills necessary to gain employment, orienting participants to the health and community workforce, and providing practice experiences and access to networks. It was hoped that the group of students would develop an enhanced understanding of Australian workplace culture to increase their employment prospects. Concurrently, the project would also expand and enhance Queensland's skills base and qualifications profile, encourage a culture of productive diversity in workplaces, as well as reduce delays in skills recognition and sustainable employment.

Skills Recognition made fee scholarships available for 10 students with health-related

professional qualifications. The funds were used to support students through an intensive English language and academic skills course provided by Griffith English Language Institute (GELI), which was taught around the program content. The scholarships also enabled the inclusion of a 200-hour work placement, as well as two core postgraduate academic courses introducing the Australian health and welfare systems to students. The group discussed here originated from a range of countries such as Afghanistan, Burundi, Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, Sudan, Serbia, Korea, Rwanda, Cook Islands, and Romania. They also came from diverse professional backgrounds including Science, Nursing, Social Work, Community Work, Psychology, Law, Medicine, and Literary Studies. Table 1 summarises the key issues the academic program sought to address:

Table 1: Issues addressed by the program.

Issues	Course would address by:
Lack of English language skills.	Intensive English language support (verbal and written).
Lack of local work experience and lack of familiarity with Australian workplace and industry culture.	Exposure through course learnings, placement and industry visits.
Underdeveloped social networks.	Expanded networks through university and placement contexts.
Low confidence in applying for jobs.	Build confidence through skills, knowledge and practical experience.
Low awareness of employment opportunities, limited experience in seeking professional registration.	Build broader awareness through course content, field visits and student sharing.

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

The Graduate Certificate program structure (see Table 2) was modified to include GELI's intensive English language course, a one-week work experience placement in Semester 1, and a 200-hour work placement in Semester 2. The two core courses retained their usual curriculum.

	20 CP Courses	20 CP Courses
Semester 1	Workplace Communication for Health Professionals Language, academic skills and Communication– (taught by GELI)	Human Service Knowledge and Practice (core) (Incorporating a one week workplace experience)
Semester 2	Community Work Practice (core).	200 hour work placement.

RECRUITMENT PROCESS

Letters containing information on the program were sent to all people on Skills Recognition's contacts list. All employment as well as multicultural agencies in the Logan area, were approached as part of the marketing strategy. Community networks were accessed extensively. All eligible applicants were interviewed. In Semester 1, 10 students commenced the program and six completed their courses. In Semester 2, four commenced and all completed.

Several issues impacted on recruitment. Despite the offer of 10 complete fee scholarships, the initial response was relatively low. Whilst the idea of a targeted recruitment strategy was sound, the issue was linked to potential students' aspirations, which did not include university qualifications at the time. People knew they were overlooked for jobs despite having relevant skills; however, they had friends who had regained degrees in Australia and still could not get professional positions. Hence, they were not convinced that the outcomes of studying would justify the commitment. In some cases, they had settled for earning money through low-status jobs and were reluctant to reorganise their hopes and lives to attend university. Nevertheless, 10 people did enrol and although some pulled out in the first intake, 10 people completed the program.

THE PROCESS OF STUDYING

This section discusses teaching staff reflections and student feedback. The overall experience required significant staff involvement:

I organised the program modifications, the marketing, fielded the inquiries, processed the applications, interviewed candidates, organised the induction and taught the two core courses (staff member).

This staff member goes on to reflect on the pros and cons of having one person teaching the two core courses:

For this group of students – it might have benefitted them, because once we had a relationship, it provided a level of comfort and support. At the same time, it would have been beneficial to expose students to a broader range of staff teaching styles and values. Students probably would have loved to have a staff member whose own ethnic identity was something other than Anglo-Australian (staff member).

Graduate Certificate courses are small, and the cohort formed the majority in the core courses, and the totality of GELI's English language course runs just for these students. This gave them a strong sense of themselves, and the confidence to bend the learning to their own needs:

I've often taught classes where one or two international students or one or two students who came to Australia as refugees form a minority in the class. They often sit silently, and face a

fair bit of exclusion from other students, as they try to accommodate the learning processes of a new culture (staff member).

By contrast, these students, already enlivened by the opportunity to study, were buoyed by each other and came as active learners to the classroom:

My first impression – the classroom was alive – vibrant – and keen to engage... We began with a map of the world, and people introduced themselves, their lives, their journey. They suggested we begin with greetings in the language of each group present. I knew from the start there would be no passive engagement here (staff member).

The extent to which the core courses curricula were steeped in a western culture's way of viewing the world became immediately obvious. The students wanted to explore topics that linked to their lives. Assumptions could not be made about the baseline of shared understanding that provides a starting point for new learning. This group of students was not going to engage in learning in any way that was detached from their reality:

I quickly realised that the course materials were pegged at a conceptual or abstract level that was unacceptable as a starting point for these students. I needed to reassess what concepts were central to the curriculum and find ways into them that began with student experiences (staff member).

Although this approach is, of course, central to any adult education program, the lecturer realised that pre-prepared lectures, web materials and even readings, whilst paying tribute to culture, were ill fitted to students' frames of reference:

Every week was a rush to re-frame materials, find ways of linking them to student stories, tease out key concepts, and find ways for students to explore them. For example: I made cards reflecting a human service scenario, that I knew from their personal stories they would understand, and getting them to discuss with each other how they could respond to the scenario in ways that reflected certain human service values or concepts. We used video triggers and role plays to explore the links between everyday issues they raised and key concepts (staff member).

The students wanted to explore relationships, parenting, conflict, world issues, rights, power, ways of using authority, and the notion of change. They were using the opportunity to meet much wider learning needs than had been anticipated. Fortunately, this was all relevant to human services:

We had fathers role playing in class how they talk to their daughters about the ways they dress – and the class analysing the feelings, concepts, power dynamics and interpersonal skills evident in the role play (staff member).

There was involvement at emotional, social and cultural levels as well as academic and work-related levels:

I could see that people were weighing up different cultural ways of doing things and testing them out. For example, we did many role plays around the concept of rights, particularly

individual rights and how they do or can play out in marriage, in raising children and in public relations between authorities and families and individuals. Issues like domestic violence led to heated debate (staff member).

Several students said that reading and thinking critically about what they read were the most challenging aspects:

In my country, study was about learning what the notes and lectures said. Here I find there are different ways of thinking about things and you have to read more and think through what the consequences are (student).

Many found language the biggest challenge. Despite the intensive English language support, none of the students achieved an IELTS score of 6:

The language teacher was very helpful, she made it seem easy. But still reading the texts and writing papers was hard (student).

The lecturer reflected that students' attempts to access student administration and support required lots of brokering from a supportive lecturer:

I found I had to anticipate admin deadlines, and prepare students because they somehow always missed them and at one time we had to muster the funds to pay a heap of late enrolment fees to a very unsympathetic administrative body (staff member).

Walking alongside a less resourced group made it obvious how geared the system is to a more resourced student body. For example, at graduation time, buying tickets for families of spouses, siblings, five, six or seven children represented an overwhelming cost. Yet, the benefit of bringing family has lasting effects.

Students had different levels of experience and skill in relation to technology. For some, accessing material online and using computers for assessment was very challenging, while others were already adept.

The practicum was concurrently the most challenging and rewarding experience for students:

I was terrified of answering the phone. But before we went out we did a lot of work around what we feared and what strategies we could use to manage our fears. I worked out I could take a pause, think about what I would say, pick up the phone and speak slowly. If I could not understand I could ask the person to repeat it. So I soon overcame that fear (student).

Many students brought family or community members to class, as they were keen to break down the barriers between their everyday lives and university. They also regularly planned celebrations and invited lecturers and other students.

Many of the students were already involved in their respective communities before commencing university. However, this intensified as students found they could draw on a

broader repertoire of skills as well as a wider network of potentially supportive people to enrich their community work. Several assumed significant leadership positions by the time they graduated. They sought the lecturer's support for community activities, and wanted to discuss their community work in class:

Having encouraged an adult learning environment, I was running to keep up with the students and struggling to manage the heightened classroom dynamics which overflowed the time allowance for classes, and meant other curricula items dropped off the agenda (staff member).

Each member of the group was simultaneously struggling with significant responsibilities and demands at home. Maintaining stable housing, earning an income, supporting children through school, managing childcare, family relationships and community obligations both here and overseas, meant there was little time for study and reading. While all students face such challenges, the personal narratives shared in class offered glimpses of just how resilient those who arrive as refugees need to be:

I was breathless before the enormity of the stories people told, of their journeys, their losses, the hurts inflicted on them by other human beings (staff member).

Students' own acculturation struggles became a core part of class discussions, and for the lecturer,

I learned from students of their experiences: with human service agencies – good and bad; of the mental health struggles in their families; of the impact of different rates of acculturation within families; and of the ways in which family members who have suffered such abuse, can turn abuse and exploitation on each other. A student, mother of six, rang to consult me about her assignment on the day her seventh baby was due. Three hours later she rang from hospital to say the baby was here and she would complete the assignment tomorrow (staff member).

FIELD PLACEMENTS

Four participants completed their practicums in community centres, two with the Queensland Department of Child Safety, two with MultiLink Community Services, one with a domestic violence refuge, and one with Southbank Institute of TAFE. All students received glowing reports. University staff made visits to all ten placements to ensure students were supported to make the most of the practicum opportunity. However, only one student secured employment from the work placement. It was hoped that this would eventuate for more students from this cohort. Enquiries with agencies and placement supervisors revealed how they were so short-staffed that, if a vacancy did come up, they would choose the most skilled person who could work with the least support across the most dimensions. Overall, the agencies most likely to employ graduates were multicultural organisations.

OUTCOMES

Anton came to the program as a father of four, unemployed, and a science graduate who had worked in a medical laboratory and clinic in his central African hometown. After many years in a refugee camp, he came to Australia and worked in a meat factory for a while, but had little stomach for it. Anton enrolled in the Graduate Certificate program. He struggled throughout the learning journey, not so much because of English language skills, but more because course concepts challenged his values and modus operandi. He wanted to apply rules to most situations and assert his authority as a way of addressing challenging situations. By the end of the program, and after many classroom discussions, much reading, assignment writing and significant exposure in the field, he admitted that the program had changed how he operated as a worker, husband, father, community member and human being. He said, "I now do not have to control everything. I know the value of communication, listening, and I can work things out with others, rather than insisting on one right way". He secured a full-time position as a case manager from his work experience placement and is still working and learning in that position. He is also studying for a Masters of Mental Health Practice at Griffith University.

While four students dropped out, 10 completed the program. There have been three further enrolments of overseas-qualified students since the scholarship scheme was removed. These students are still completing the program. Six further students (from New Zealand, Afghanistan, Sudan and Samoa) were supported by another Griffith University partnership to complete the course.

Students were interviewed after completion and again nine months later. Several students are now studying and working, thus appear twice in Table 3 below. As can be seen, outcomes do not necessarily happen immediately. The students were supported with job applications, resumes and references well beyond their graduation. Two students were also seeking registration, one in psychology and the other in law. Both are still working on improving their English language skills to gain such registration.

Table 3: Graduate outcomes

Graduate outcomes N=10	Prior to program	2010	2011	2012
Working full-time in professional human service role	0	1	2	5
Studying at Masters level	0	1	3	3
Studying at Bachelors level	0	0	1	1
Part-time work in professional human service role	1	0	1	2
Working but not in human service role	5	1	1	0
Seeking Work	9	7	4	1
Accreditation	0	0	1	
Not Seeking Work	0	0	0	1

All students reported a range of outcomes: improved fluency in English, interpersonal skills and critical thinking; improved self-expression, self-esteem, self-confidence leading to improved quality of life; exposure to computer skills; and improved leadership skills to contribute effectively to their own community. Children of these students are now studying at the University.

Students felt that the program had a significant impact on their lives. They are now more inclined to listen and communicate much better in all contexts (home, community, and work). They have learned to work with young people, understand their issues, and help in family and community relationships. Students had an improved understanding of service systems and developed better networks overall.

Students also reported lasting family and community outcomes, thanks to their exposure to the course content and their involvement at university. The intensifying sense of achievement leading to their graduation ceremony indicated how much this event meant to these students, their families and communities. It was a time for rejoicing, and there was no question for any of them, despite the expense, that this was a very publicly celebrated event. Indeed, the students were well aware that their own achievement had opened previously unconsidered pathways for other family and community members.

All graduates felt that their lives in Australia benefitted from their participation in the course and their increased capacity to understand the mainstream culture. They developed an increased respect for social institutions from class discussions and readings. They have progressed to different stages of their lives, even if still seeking work.

During the second interviews, students who were studying further at university made the comparison, that they are now a minority, often the only, African (or other) student in their class. They find the environment less supportive, less enjoyable, and less receptive to their efforts to link learning to life experiences.

DISCUSSION: TEACH THEM OUR WAY OR CO-CONSTRUCT NEW WAYS ?

Gale (2009, p. 11) challenges academia to re-imagine equity, by focusing on what happens between entry and outputs. He says:

- *First and foremost, student learning environments and experiences are such that students are appreciated for who they are and for how they identify themselves;*
- *Second, there are opportunities in these environments and experiences for all students to make knowledge contributions as well as to develop their understandings and skills;*
- *Third, all students are provided with genuine opportunities to shape how their learning environments and experiences are structured.*

The experience of this project brought home to us how challenging it is to translate pre-prepared curricula materials into learning experiences that communicate to students, and that what they bring, and who they are, really do matter. Staff members made particular

efforts to meet this cohort at their starting point, hear their stories and aspirations, acknowledge their concerns about embedded western cultural values in curricula and readings, work intensively with topics they were excited by, and vary assessments to allow for their capacities and interests. Staff learned a great deal.

On the second point, staff gradually understood that social work and human service curricula are deeply imbued with knowledge emerging from one culture's ways of life, and struggles to deal with the inequities and injustices embodied in that way of life. Yet these students came from different backgrounds, organised to address different internal struggles. Exploring together how different cultures address familiar life issues enabled students to contribute to knowledge and provided a pathway into analysis.

The third of Gale's propositions is the most difficult. On reflection, the learning and assessment environment is increasingly shaped by centralised university concerns for quality assurance and efficiency. Timetables do not allow for negotiations over how the learning environment will operate, and tight time schedules ensure that attempts to re-shape on the run are more likely to produce chaos than exciting learning environments. We often, not always, found that mainstream students demanded the learning environment they were familiar with, were impatient with the learning struggles of others, and disinterested in the biographical processes and the cultural learning they potentially offered. We struggled to manage these dynamics.

Our attempts to re-imagine equity in this small project were shaped by the tension between respect for what the students brought with them, and demands of an existing curriculum, all within the tight constraints of contemporary university practices. Our experience was that despite the goodwill of many people across the equity and student support domain, we were largely on our own with these tensions. Co-curricular supports, such as learning services, were essential in helping students with the academic skills required to meet the pre-established curriculum, but were not structured to assist the processes by which students hear, process, and apply information across quite different cultural domains.

For all of the energy invested into the project, staff felt they had created a short term 'pocket of change' within a wider system that was untouched by those changes (a phrase used to make this exact point in Magro and Ghorayshi's (2011) research). It would be very difficult to replicate the successful components of this program in the wider university setting, given large classes, heavy teaching, administration and research loads, and increasingly inflexible curricula. Yet, to the extent that we structure education in ways that require students to suspend who they are in order to engage effectively, we contribute to a context in which people's experiences do not matter, and in which those students who enter under equity recruitment processes, seem to matter least. Inadvertently, the micropolitics within a mainstream program can reproduce the discriminations and inequities students experience beyond university.

Structurally, support for small programs diminished over the period of this project. The Commonwealth Government ceased its fee support for graduate certificates, and program fees increased from \$3,200 to \$7,900. Once the fee scholarships ended, there was little

incentive for this program to be considered a viable equity pathway. The School was forced by low enrolments to combine small programs into one Graduate Certificate. There is still a potential equity pathway for overseas-qualified refugees, but it will cost them more, and will be likely to support them less.

If the equity paradigm embraced not only recruitment and outcomes, but also what happens along the way, higher education itself would have to change, bringing it more into line with social justice and social work and human service values and ethics. This is what Gale (2009, p. 10) refers to as a sophisticated approach to equity. It would result in: 'increased social justice', changed 'centre-periphery relations in the realm of knowledge', and 'multiple payoffs', including better educational processes, better educated students, more teaching satisfaction, better outcomes for universities, better outcomes for equity groups, diverse community benefits, a more dynamic social sphere, and vastly improved industry outcomes in terms of creativity and innovation. Would it cost more? Certainly, but a shift in paradigm implies cost savings as well as new costs.

CONCLUSION

Small equity projects can operate outside dominant equity paradigms only through the efforts and commitment of staff. This can be as exhausting as it is rewarding. Nevertheless, at any one time, there are a number of small innovative initiatives through which universities link to struggling communities and to industry. The more we can join the dots between these initiatives, the easier it becomes to imagine equity differently. Perhaps these small projects, and the literature we produce from them, are a way of keeping a light burning until the pendulum swings in favour of a more expansive adult education system and a more sophisticated understanding of equity.

The transformation from 'chopping up chicken' to 'cap and gown' provided opportunity for this cohort of people to reclaim dignity and status and had multiple outcomes including increased confidence, greater contribution to their communities, changed appreciation of their new social setting, and more satisfying employment and career pathways for this cohort of skilled migrants and refugees.

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