7. Connecting with students from new and emerging communities in social work education

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Students from new and emerging communities enrolled in university can face a number of barriers to learning in the context of Australian higher education. It is important for social work educators to understand the challenges faced by these students as they work to improve their education and employment opportunities with the ultimate goal of helping their communities, and the Australian society.In the study reported here, semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2011-2012 with seven African students. Key findings from the study included that students were committed to improving their education for the betterment of their communities; their prior educational experiences did not always equip them for tertiary learning; computer use and online technology were particular challenges; and the formal supports provided by the university were not well accessed. However, informal peer learning groups were useful. The findings suggest that social and academic support and learning spaces provided by tertiary education institutions could be more inclusive of students from new and emerging communities. This aim of this article is to discuss the findings in order to increase understanding and improve teaching practices when working with students from new and emerging communities

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, there are increasing numbers of migrants and refugees forced to leave their homes because of conflict, disaster and persecution (Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia 2010). In 2011, 42.5 million people became refugees (15.2 million); were internally displaced peoples (26.4 million); or were in the process of seeking asylum (895, 000). The majority were women and children. In Australia, in 2009-2010, 13,770 refugee and humanitarian visas were issued, divided between 9,236 offshore refugee and humanitarian visas and 4,534 onshore visas. Within Australia, the main source regions for offshore refugee and humanitarian visas were Asia (38.6%), Middle East and South-West Asia (31.8%) and Africa (29.2%). This article reports on a study that specifically explored the expectations and experiences of students from African backgrounds in social work and welfare education, drawing out implication for students from new and emerging communities.

NEW AND EMERGING COMMUNITIES

The Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia (FECCA) define new and emerging communities as communities who are small in number and newly arrived to Australia with a significant increase in numbers over the last five years. People from new and emerging communities may have limited established family networks, support systems, community structures and resources (compared with more established communities). They may be from a refugee background and may have experienced displacement and trauma as a result of civil unrest. They may have had limited access to education and skills due to displacement and can have limited English language skills (FECCA 2010). Furthermore, community members may be unfamiliar with mainstream government services available in Australia (FECCA 2010). Therefore it is acknowledged that new and emerging communities have particular educational support needs, in comparison to communities who have settled in Australia in previous decades.

The 2008 Review of Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent and Scales 2008) set the sector a target of 40% for Australian 25 to 34 year olds to achieve a bachelor degree, with 20% of undergraduate enrolments in higher education to come from low socio-economic backgrounds (Bradley et al. 2008). An interesting feature of the current student diversity in higher education is growing numbers of students from refugee backgrounds. Within the last ten years, students from refugee backgrounds have steadily increased at Australian universities (Earnest, Housen, and Gilleatt 2007; Harris and Marlowe 2011). There is a dearth of academic literature about the experiences of people from new and emerging communities and refugee backgrounds in higher education, particularly students from African backgrounds (Harris and Marlowe 2011). Overall, small numbers of African students on humanitarian visas enrolled at Australian universities.

Table 1: Numbers of African student enrolments on a humanitarian visa

Name of University	Number of Students in Africa on humanitarian Visas	Date	Source
Flinders University	56	2007	Harris and Marlowe 2011
Queensland University of Technolgy	50	2011	Lawson et al 2011
Murdoch University	49 (additional 13 in 2008-2009)	2007, 2008, 2009	Silburn et al 2010
Curtin University	Yearly student intake: 9 in 2007 18 in 2008 12 in 2009	2007, 2008, 2009	Silburn et al 2010

In 2012, at the University of South Australia, the total number of African students with Permanent Humanitarian Visas was 48. Students born in Africa with permanent residency, who were Australian citizens, totalled 335 (University of South Australia 2012). In 2012, the School of Psychology, Social Work and Social Policy, at the University of South Australia, had 61 students enrolled from African countries in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs, and 36 of these students were enrolled in undergraduate Social Work programs. These students came from 13 African countries (Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Zambia and Zimbabwe) and similar to other universities, the majority of students were from Sudan (21 students).

Within the African student refugee population there is significant diversity, including mature-aged students (Silburn et al. 2010, p.21), students who have suffered considerable trauma as a result of conditions leading up to their refugee status (Lawson et al 2011), students who were educated professionals prior to fleeing their home country (Morrice 2009), students who have incomplete education due to civil, political and military instability (Burnett and Peel 2001; Davies and Webb 2000) and students who have experienced ad hoc educational opportunities such as short workshops provided in refugee camps (Jeppsson and Hjern 2005). As humanitarian visa holders and new Australians, many African students with a refugee background experience unemployment (Harris and Marlowe 2011) or if employed, work in low status jobs (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007). They often are committed to sending money back to their country of origin (RiakAkuei 2005).

There is limited Australian research on the experiences of students from African and refugee backgrounds engaged in tertiary education. Earnest et al (2010) conducted

research with students from refugee backgrounds (Afghanistan and Africa) at Curtin University in Western Australia and Monash, Deakin and RMIT in Victoria. That study found that students experienced barriers including accessing tertiary education, they were unprepared for university 'academic writing', and had trouble adapting to the different styles of teaching (where Australian styles were more student centred, requiring more independent learning). They had limited English language proficiency skills, were not skilled in the use of technology, were unfamiliar with services provided at university, and they experienced exclusion or culturally inappropriate responses to their needs (Earnest et al. 2010). These findings complement studies in Perth by Earnest et al. (2007, 2010), and recommendations by Joyce et al (2010) and Silburn et al. (2010). In South Australia, Harris and Marlowe (2011) conducted a study on the encounter between academic staff and students from African refugee backgrounds. That study found that students experienced external pressures, such as transport issues, disruptive home environments, financial pressures, high community expectations, and worry about family left behind (Harris and Marlowe 2011). Staff expressed concerns that existing support services were not meeting the needs of students who needed additional support for English language writing skills and comprehension, resulting in significant pressures on students and misunderstandings between educators and students (Harris and Marlowe 2011). However, no Australian research was found which specifically examined the experiences and expectations of African students in social work education in tertiary education.

AFRICAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

This article focuses on a study that explored the experiences of African students in social work education as a case study for examining the teaching and learning issues affecting many students from new and emerging communities. The main aim of the project reported here was to gain a deeper understanding of African students' expectations and experiences of higher education and to inform teaching and learning approaches in social work education. The project was designed around three unknowns:

• Why African students from refugee backgrounds came to university to study social work and human services

• What their experience was once they were studying

• What they thought could be done to better support their learning.

The University of South Australia Human Research Ethics Committee approved this study and the research was made possible by a University of South Australia Teaching and Learning Grant. Initially, three information sessions were held, advertised by circulating flyers and emails (with variable attendance from 1 student to over 15 students). In one of the information sessions, a student noted that the language and cultural barriers expressed and experienced by African students also were relevant to students from other non-English backgrounds and new and emerging communities. After the information sessions, and repeated emails being circulated to invite students to participate, in 2011 and 2012, a small number of students volunteered to participate in individual interviews. There were

a number of ethical dilemmas for the research team, primarily related to interviewing students who were known to the researchers in another capacity, such as lecturer, program director or tutor. The power dynamics between student and teacher were taken into account, by deciding that members of the team who had taught the students were not to be involved in the face to face interviews. The sample consisted of six male participants and one female. After the information sessions, and emails being circulated to invite students to participate, the sample consisted of six male participants and one female. All of the even face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted by a member of the research team who did not know the students. Participants were from Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Congo, Burundi, Liberia and Rwanda. The semi-structured interviews explored areas related to the educational aspirations of participants, students' learning experiences at the University, and sought recommendations for responding to the learning needs of African students. Whilst there were a number of diverse barriers facing students from African backgrounds, the findings reported relate specifically to the teaching and learning needs of the students.

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) describe six stages of the thematic analysis: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. The face to face interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were analysed thematically, by identifying, analysing and reporting patterns and themes within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). The interviews were analysed inductively and coded into main themes that were relevant to the research questions. In the transcribing process, responses were listed under each question asked to the participants, such as, why they enrolled in the social work program, what had been their experiences of studying at university, what supports them in their learning and what barriers they had experienced. Connolly (2003, p.106) provides a qualitative data analysis model that includes three phases: the Generative, Interpretative and Theorising phase. Using this model to explain the data analysis process, the initial phase of the data analysis involved examining each sentence and paragraph and coding data to generate themes, such as expectations, employment, education, supports, and barriers. These themes were then grouped and translated into more general and abstract conceptual categories, such as 'improving future employment prospects' and 'creating a better society', which reflected patterns found across the interview data (Connolly 2003, p.109). Finally, drawing on previous studies and literature as well as our knowledge of university policies and resources, the theoretical and practical implications of the findings were highlighted (Connolly 2003, p. 110).

Prior to the interviews, students completed a questionnaire to provide information about their educational background, languages spoken, basis for applying to university and the degree they were enrolled in. The findings from the paper questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews are discussed below.

FINDINGS

The responses to the paper questionnaire revealed that:

- Participants came to Australia on migrant as well as humanitarian visas after living for many years in refugee camps

- Their main form of entry into the University was via TAFE once they had completed either a Certificate 4 in Community Services, a Diploma in Counselling or a Diploma in Community Welfare

- Most had participated in the 510 hours of free English language instruction which is offered to them during the first 2 years of their stay (Refugee Council of Australia 2012)

- A few participants had completed the equivalent of Year 12 in another language or country

- They were enrolled in a double degree with the Bachelor of Social Work, Social Work as a single degree, or a Bachelor of Social Science

- All students were bilingual and some students spoke up to five different languages

- Students were, in the main, Australian citizens.

The students who participated in this study had a range of expectations and experiences of university life, social work education and supports provided for students, both positive and negative.

Expectations and experiences of African students in social work education

The students interviewed had a number of expectations that tertiary education would improve their future prospects and opportunities and positively contribute to their own communities and a better society. Students were studying social work or human services, to have a 'better future':

> *'I wanted to change my education, be more positive. I wanted to educate myself so I could have a better future and opportunities'* (Interview 1)

This included improving educational and employment opportunities:

> *'[I want to] upgrade my skills; get the knowledge, to get a good career'* (Interview 3)

As well, the students interviewed were keen to help their own communities, in Australia and internationally:

> *'It is important for the African diaspora to help with issues like literacy and health back home but I am an Australian citizen so if I went to Africa to teach, it would be through an Australian organisation or NGO'* (Interview 1)

However, educational systems in Africa and prior education and learning did not always prepare students for the 'academic' and independent learning requirements of tertiary education:

> *'The system of learning here is different. There are no assignments in Africa only exams.'* (Interview 1)

'I thought coming from TAFE I would be able to do it OK…' (Interview 5);

'At TAFE you are told exactly what to do but here you have to understand it in your own way' (Interview 6)

All students interviewed explained that they had little experience with computers and online technology and found they needed computer literacy assistance:

'Most African students come from refugee backgrounds, they have been living in camps where there is no computer technology' (Interview 5)

Furthermore, institutional learning support from the Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) was not well accessed (or understood):

'I don't really see the role of the learning adviser compared to what I get from lecturers and tutors' (Interview 3)

'When you go there are only certain times you can see someone and they don't match people' (Interview 3)

'You have to book in advance…I need to have time to do the assignment…but then there isn't enough time to get help from them…' (Interview 5)

In contrast, informal peer support was found to be useful:

'We are non-English speaking background…you can have an idea but the way you interpret it is different…unless you have information from different people…we try to have a lot of friends and have group work and work together' (Interview 1)

'If we really don't understand a question we discuss it…with Australian and African students' (Interview 5)

Despite connecting with peers, African students did not feel that the University provided culturally appropriate social experiences, for example,

'…the Uni is supposed to be inclusive but it wasn't what I expected – Western society is not like the African way, African people are very social. I joined Unilife but they didn't organise anything to bring people together. It's not very multicultural really. They should invite people from different ethnic groups to get involved in organising events, not just put things in place and invite them' (Interview 3)

Furthermore, some students felt excluded in student study groups such as tutorials due to prejudice:

'There is some prejudice if you are someone who looks different' (Interview 5)

'Sometimes in group work my contributions aren't listened to, this is hard, it makes the motivation go down, it makes it hard to get back up and contribute' (Interview 6)

Supports for learning

In relation to the supports that could assist African students, interview participants raised issues such as more equitable assessment processes that focused less on written academic English expression, computer literacy workshops specific to each course, ability to 'get help' early, and clarity on assignments and on the different roles of the Learning and Teaching Unit (LTU) and tutors in the School.

Some students felt that academic staff could provide extra assistance to African students by considering whether the student has understood key concepts, rather than focusing only on English language proficiency.

'When marking assignments from African students, tutors should consider the strength of the argument and not just focus on grammar' (Interview 5)

This finding also was evident in Harris and Marlowe's 2011 study in which students felt that some staff members did go out of their way to help them but others did not respond to their request for clarification. Some felt 'silenced' and that lecturers 'could take time to understand the needs of particular students' coming from backgrounds (who have not gone through the Australian education system), by not only focusing on grammar and written expression but whether or not they understood the content such as application of legislation (Harris and Marlowe 2011, p.190).

With regard to support for computer literacy, students felt that their knowledge improved over time but one student suggested that workshops could be course based:

'Computer workshops are useful but there should be more of them and perhaps a separate one for each course' (Interview 6)

The technology, English language, and academic barriers experienced by students impacted on their abilities to progress through their studies. Early intervention was suggested by this student:

'Help needs to start from the outset of your studies so you can get yourself prepared and know exactly what you need to do. Otherwise your GPA will be down and you can't do things like Honours' (Interview 6)

In regards to the Learning and Teaching Unit, it was suggested that:

'It would be useful if the different roles of the Learning Advisers and the tutors/lecturers at the School were made clearer' (Interview 4)

Overall, the findings of this small exploratory study have implications for developing institutional strategies to improve the transition from TAFE to university, for providing English language and computer literacy support and to further develop academic literacies

across university programs. With regard to teaching styles and strategies, it is important for academic lecturers and tutors to consider how group work is arranged to ensure inclusivity and the preparation of students for group work. Furthermore, when social events and activities are provided to involve students in life on campus, the participation of students from culturally diverse backgrounds in the development of these social events would assist to address the cultural differences of students at the university.

Limitations of the study

This pilot study has obvious limitations such as sample size. The findings are not generalisable to the experiences of all students from new and emerging communities in social work education. However, although the sample group was small (seven students), the study provided enough data/information to build a picture that provides an understanding of African students' experience and expectations of Australian higher education. This is an exploratory study that begins to examine the teaching and learning needs of students from new and emerging African communities and may highlight potential areas for improvement in supporting culturally diverse students.

Implications for supporting students from new and emerging communities

The barriers found in this study involving African students also are relevant to students from other new and emerging communities. The Federation of Ethnic Communities Council of Australia (FECCA) advocates for a number of strategies to support the re-settlement of people from new and emerging communities in Australia. These include recognising the diverse needs of new and emerging communities, providing effective settlement services, eradicating racism, discrimination and bullying, providing appropriate healthcare, improving education and training outcomes and enhancing workforce capabilities, which includes cross cultural training for staff and inclusive recruitment strategies (FECCA 2010). These suggestions by FECCA are broader than teaching and learning strategies but foundational to working towards an inclusive society and community.

This project gathers the perspectives of minority students in a predominantly white and Western educational environment. Implications for social work education that emerged from the findings of this project are fundamental social justice issues. They are primarily concerned with equity, access, support and inclusive practices. Social work academics seek to critically reflection on ways of improving social work practice and social work education. As Noble (2003, p.95) notes, multiculturalism 'poses social work with one of its greatest challenges in the 21st century' because social work education needs to embrace the changing cultural landscape in Australian society'. All social work students need to be prepared for practice and placements in an 'increasingly multicultural community' (Noble, 2003, p.95).However, contemporary Western based curricula in social work education continue to raise questions about whose values, traditions, practices and knowledges are being privileged (Holtzhausen, 2011). The production of knowledge in academia has been contained within normative, predominantly white, masculine and middle class institutional structures (Dill and Kohlman 2012), which can create an 'illusion of inclusion' in social work education because the Eurocentric organisational culture often remains the same (Roberts and Smith 2002, p. 196).'Transformative' strategies can include building cross-

cultural relationships, changing thought processes, building community strengths and developing cross-cultural mutuality (Roberts and Smith 2002 p. 205).

This study suggests that the teaching and learning environment of universities as well as teaching staff and students may not be culturally prepared to engage with difference. The implications for social work educators are that teaching and learning activities should be culturally inclusive and enable all students to develop intercultural practice. All students need to be valued for the knowledge and experience they bring with them and encouraged to broaden their understandings of the intercultural aspects of social work by actively engaging with students from diverse cultures (Noble 2003; Gair et al. 2003). Equally, the internationalisation of the social work curriculum ideally would prepare students for practice in a multicultural environment and develop both students' and educators' intercultural understandings.

CONCLUSION

Social work and welfare educators are working in increasingly culturally diverse classrooms. This diversity requires us to reflect on our current teaching practices, to ensure we provide supportive learning environments, where all student, and particularly disadvantaged students from new and emerging communities, can be successful at university and in tertiary studies. This purpose of this research was to improve the learning outcomes of students from new and emerging communities, by outlining potential learning supports identified by students themselves, to improve services provided by tertiary education sectors such as Australian universities. Whilst this study was small, and focussed primarily on African students, the findings resonate with findings from studies in other Australian universities that highlight similar areas for improvement (Earnest et al. 2007, 2010; Joyce et al. 2010; Silburn et al. 2010; Harris and Marlowe 2011). These areas of improvement are broadly related to providing culturally appropriate supports in the first years of study, for developing 'academic' English and computer literacy skills as well as focusing on transitioning from TAFE and other educational settings, where expectations are different to university. Further research with a larger sample of students from new and emerging communities, and gathering the perspectives of other stakeholders such as social work academics across Australian universities seems implicated. Researching the perspectives of social work educators would complement this study, to further discuss and develop inclusive teaching strategies that would support students from new and emerging communities in their learning. Furthermore, the issues encountered by African students whilst completing their social work placement could be an area for further research.

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