

Engaging Communities: designing and delivering effectively targeted support to Humanitarian Entrant students.

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Setting the Scene

It is week two of the first semester of the 2006 academic year. The Launceston campus of the University of Tasmania (UTAS) is a tense place with a long line of students waiting for assistance at the service counter of the Student Centre. Some are agitated; some look forlorn; all seem a little unsure of their surroundings.

Among them is a young Sudanese man who knows that those around him are staring. His anxiety causes him pain – due to stomach ulcers after years of fear and uncertainty. He tells the service officer that he has been sleeping on a friend's floor since arriving from the mainland three weeks earlier. He needs a place to live and he has no money. Will she help him?

Campus accommodations and share houses are full. The service officer provides some website addresses and refers the man to a local agency to apply for financial assistance. A week later, the young man has left Launceston and returned to his mainland community. He has not formally withdrawn and now has a significant HECS debt. He is unlikely to return to his studies.

The Session

This session will present for consideration the evolution of a successful approach to service design and delivery for Humanitarian Entrant students at the University of Tasmania. In particular, it will articulate the nature of a shift from reactive to proactive support processes and the increased efficiency and effectiveness that have resulted.

Most importantly, it will demonstrate the central role of the refugee 'settlement' experience and of community engagement in supporting this cohort. Every Humanitarian Entrant cohort is unique and it is these critical elements that provide the 'how to' component of the session.

The Cohort

Our client group numbers more than 500 in 2007 includes students from Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Rwanda, Eritrea, Latin America, Central Asia and Eastern Europe. African students form the most significant component of our workload and are the

focus of this session. The client group is likely to grow steadily in coming years and will include members of Tasmania's growing Burmese community.

Specific characteristics of the First-Year experience for this cohort

Our initial focus was to provide immediate assistance in relation to 'welfare' issues including a lack of permanent accommodation; difficulties finding employment; difficulties accessing health care; the stress related to the management of limited financial resources and debt arrangements without family and/or community support; and, feelings of isolation in a new cultural environment.

Most clients presented with multiple issues that were seriously affecting their ability to focus on their studies. Successful interactions led to return visits relating to academic issues including limited computer skills; information illiteracy; unfamiliar culture, teaching and learning styles; inadequate academic language skills; inadequate foundation learning; and, the impact of the settlement experience common to all humanitarian entrants.

Success and the Reactive-Proactive Shift

Success has been significant and has included overwhelming support from both the general and academic staff of the university. We also have the support of service providers in the wider community and of the refugee communities themselves.

Specifically, our efforts have seen the number of students in this cohort experiencing a successful and rewarding first year of study increase from approximately 35-40% in 2005 to more than 75% in 2006.

In addition, our work to be more proactive in identifying service issues for this cohort has made available the capacity to engage the broader CALD community at UTAS and to feel confident about our ability to effectively support the first year experiences of the growing population of Burmese students that we anticipate will enter the university in 2008.

This session will outline our approach to facilitating this shift through comprehensive profiling of our client group to better understand their settlement experience and academic performance.

Understanding refugee 'settlement' and its relevance to service provision

The fundamental and significant differences between individualist and collectivist cultures significantly affect student approaches to learning, interaction and seeking assistance. This session will elucidate the key differences and show how they led to the development of some key elements in our evolving design process. Those elements include:

- a focus on student self-sufficiency in the university environment;

- by building and maintaining strong networks across university boundaries we bring another dimension to the support we offer our clients;
- efforts to increase the likelihood of student success before enrolment;
- effectively targeted activities by mapping our work environment;
- encourage and facilitate design input from all university staff through collaborative working relationships; and,
- adopting regular processes of critical reflection in identifying opportunities for innovation in service design.

The Engagement of Communities

The fundamental supporting activity in the UTAS initiative for CALD student support has been the engagement and linking of several communities as follows:

- the refugee communities themselves so that we could better understand their ‘settlement’ and broader life experiences and contextualise their university experience on the basis of their culture;
- the community of service providers in the wider community so that we could offer quick and effective referral to services beyond those offered by the university and that would target the needs of this cohort; and,
- the university community so that the university experience would be a welcoming and safe one and so that university staff would feel supported in effectively applying their professional expertise.

Process Thinking

Our overarching focus has been to define a pathway from our reactive and chaotic beginnings to a proactive and organic approach to supporting our clients. The complex nature of our clients’ needs and the local community’s lack of experience in welcoming migrants have rendered a traditional and linear approach to process design impossible.

We established our desired outcomes on the assumption, which has been supported by our experiences, that the process of adjustment to an Australian university environment by humanitarian entrant students forms one part of the wider refugee settlement experience. The insights gained through this organic process have led to the development of a methodology that can be readily implemented in any university environment.

In addition, we believe that our experiences raise questions about approaches to service design and delivery to other equity groups where the on-going focus is on client self-sufficiency and the acknowledgement of distinct cultural communities.