

## **'Towards terra firma: making tracks in a pathless sea. Pathways to higher education for Humanitarian Entrant students'**

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### *Context*

The CALD Support Program at the University of Tasmania (UTAS) is an integrated program focused on supporting the transition to university life of a significant cohort of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students, many of whom have been refugees in the past. The program uses a relationship-based approach to supporting the cultural, social and academic transition of its client group with an emphasis on the achievement by students of the necessary levels of self-sufficiency required for university success. The approach is necessarily holistic, with the broader settlement experience of the students being central to service design and delivery. The program began as a reactive response to a general state of crisis in this cohort and has emerged as a proactive and integrated suite of initiatives.

The CALD Outreach Program has developed in direct response to the need for earlier contact with students and intervention in their processes of decision making about and preparation for university study. Shaping of the student's environment and expectations about university life in Tasmania and its relationship with the broader settlement experience is central to the program.

The CALD cohort at UTAS numbers more than 600 people in 2008 including students from Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burma (Myanmar), Iraq, Iran, Latin America and Eastern Europe. African students form the most significant part of our workload and are the focus of this session. The cohort is likely to grow steadily in coming years.

### *Setting the Scene*

A man in his late thirties has recently arrived with his wife and five children from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). He is elated and full of hope – at last their long journey of dislocation, powerlessness and dependency is at an end. In Australia he can re-establish himself as an educated professional, provide financial stability for his family and restart from the point he had reached 10 years ago.

As he finds his feet, to his shock and frustration, more barriers begin to appear: as a French speaker he feels isolated and confused in his new environment and eagerly attempts to absorb English through his settlement classes at TAFE; through a long and

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confusing process of enquiry he learns that his qualifications are not recognized here and he must start again. Three more long years of study, for a job he has been doing for 15 years. Grudgingly, he accepts the situation: he has qualified as a nurse before and is familiar with higher education environments in the DRC – surely this is just one more formality he must endure.

He applies, is accepted and begins his studies reluctantly, with half his mind focused three years hence. But, yet again, the ‘formality’ turns into an experience of uncertainty and dislocation. His coping skills learned during previous study do not hold, and even hamper him - where he seeks a face, he is handed information, a helping hand and he is directed to the internet. When he bands together with another African student to collaborate on assignments they are warned against copying work. Though teachers and tutors try to help him, the level of assistance he needs is not sustainable and first semester results shatter his confidence.

A relative living in Melbourne has found a job in a factory and is getting on his feet again. The student from the DRC relocates his family and may not return to higher education for a long while.

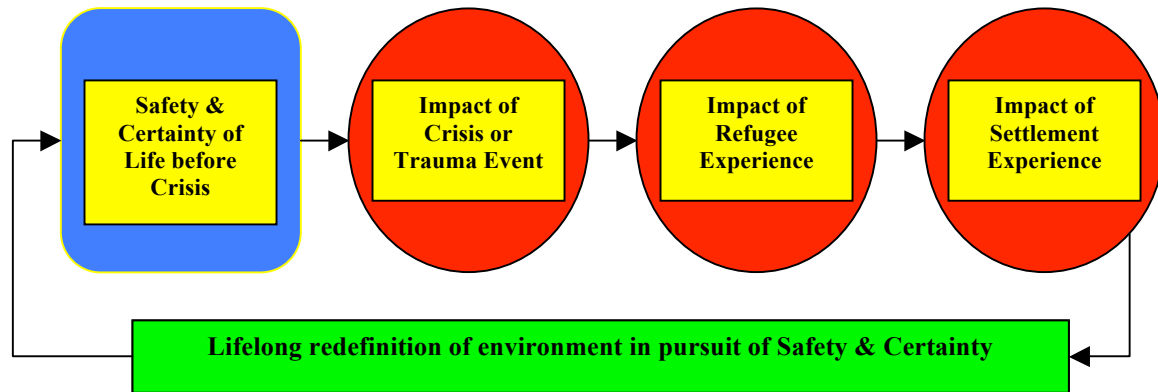
### *The Session*

This session will focus on the evolution of the CALD Outreach Program within the context of the CALD program as a whole and, more broadly, the settlement experience itself. It will take a linear approach beginning with how past cultural and educational experiences within this cohort lead to particular expectations about the University environment which, in combination with issues stemming from forced migration and the settlement process, combine to produce a cohort eager but often unready and ill informed about the realities of succeeding in an Australian University environment.

Most importantly, the session will consider how this situation has led to the development of the outreach program itself – with its attempt to reach potential clients well before enrolment to allow for a period of extended orientation in which realistic contours of the new educational environment are mapped out, empowering individuals to understand the choices they have and the implications of each choice and to build understanding and trust between the client group and CALD workers: something that is much more important than the provision of information in collectivist cultures.

### *The Impact of Settlement*

Figure 1 below attempts to articulate the complex life-long settlement journey taken by humanitarian entrants in a way that takes account of the cumulative impact of trauma and the search for safety and certainty that issues from it. In addition to a range of potential mental health impacts, the cultural dislocation experienced significantly influences decisions, behaviour and help-seeking in humanitarian entrant communities.



**Figure 1: Settlement context for humanitarian entrant students**

Of course, arriving in Australia as a refugee carries with it a range of practical disadvantages in relation to educational opportunity, environmental and cultural knowledge and sometimes language proficiency. Different approaches to learning and teaching; different styles of communicating and socialisation; and, a lack of mutually conceived expectations further emphasise the centrality of the settlement experience to all aspects of life, including university study, for this cohort. Making pathway decisions and assessing one's capacity to enact them at any point in time is a perilous task.

#### *The CALD Outreach Program*

When the CALD program began it quickly became evident that many of the difficulties our clients were experiencing fell into broad categories that were regularly repeated and remained beyond the scope of existing support offered by UTAS. The traditional University environment is one in which our clients are assumed, as independent learners, to possess an 'environmental competence' that allows them to navigate the University environment with a minimum of assistance, understand the choices they have within that environment and the implications of these choices and to seek out the strictly limited extra assistance they may need. Though this is changing, it also became clear that, no matter to what degree support initiatives focused on orientation and support, once University study had commenced this cohort exhibited difficulties the causes of which had to be addressed well before enrolment.

A review of our workflow through the yearly cycle also supported the development of methods of earlier intervention and relationship building. Our early reliance on enrolment data meant we did not begin building relationships with our clients much before the commencement of semester, leading to a period of unmanageable workload in the first weeks in which issues were identified that would take some time to address or could not be addressed adequately at this late stage. With no time for extended orientation, the proximity of census date, established Centrelink and scholarship commitments and limited immediate educational alternatives on offer we had little room to manoeuvre.

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From this recognition developed the CALD Outreach Program – an approach that incorporates:

- (1) visits to local colleges and feeder organisations during the year before commencement, in which a realistic introduction to University life and the skill levels required to be successful here are introduced early in the decision making process and viable pathway options are identified for skill development prior to enrolment;
- (2) early flagging of potential clients through applicant data (rather than later enrolment data) to identify potential clients who have not been reached through the schools program;
- (3) pre-enrolment interviews and diagnostic English testing to identify potential issues early and allow clients to make informed decisions before enrolling;
- (4) University visits in the summer before enrolling to begin an extended orientation process; and,
- (5) targeted CALD orientation activities and support materials given immediately prior to commencing study.

### *Experiences and Outcomes*

The response to date to the CALD Outreach Program has been overwhelmingly positive with feedback from teaching and support staff at TAFE Tasmania and local colleges in relation to the 2007 program resulting in its extension to include institutional visits as early as March/April 2008 to allow time for self-assessment, decision making and preparation. Student feedback has been largely ad hoc but remains positive and encouraging.

Anticipated changes to the work flows of the broader CALD Support Program appear to have been realised, although further work to evaluate the impact of the Outreach Program will clarify the apparent linkages. Specifically, early intervention in the decision making processes of applicants has resulted in more accurate self-assessment of students' level of preparedness for university study and, in many cases, the implementation of a targeted preparation plan focused on language and IT skills along with curriculum content knowledge.

These trends have been further amplified by the establishment of a transition assessment process (see element (3) above) that includes conversational contact with applicants and the availability of a customised language proficiency test to aid student preparation and, in some cases, the reconsideration by the student of their decision to pursue university studies at that time. An area of recent concern has been those students who have not availed themselves of the Outreach Program, many of whom have become 'late enrollers' who are often able to 'get through the cracks' into a torrent of academic crises.

*An Integrated Approach*

The future promises much in relation to the on-going integration of the various elements of the broader CALD Support Program within the context of refugee settlement experiences. More effective and targeted academic support is under development and will be complimented by the tendency of more experienced CALD students to the mentoring roles natural in collectivist societies.

Ultimately, we aim to dovetail the existing CALD Outreach Program with a similarly structured and accelerating program to support career focus in this cohort that begins with the realistic expectations generated by the outreach program and builds progressively to consider relevant unit selection, workplace experience and skill development and ultimately clearly articulated strategies for entry to the job market.