

'Breaking Down Barriers: Language & Spaces. Relationship Based Preparation for Humanitarian Entrant Students Entering University'

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At the FYHE Conferences of 2007 and 2008, workshops described the genesis and enhancement of the CALD Support Program at UTAS. This submission proposes a workshop that focuses on the practicalities associated with our response to the most significant barriers to the successful transition of Humanitarian Entrant students: Language and Human Connection.

The workshop will consider the context provided by the 2008 Bradley Review of Higher Education; the DEEWR Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for students in Australian universities; the Framework for student transition and mastery proposed by Dr Jill Lawrence at USQ; and, the UTAS Strategic Plan 2008-2010.

Context

The CALD Support Program at UTAS is an integrated program focused on supporting the transition to university life of a significant cohort of migrant 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, focused on building self-sufficiency. The CALD Outreach Program and its **preparation components** have 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. The CALD cohort at UTAS numbers more than 600 people in 2008. African students form the most significant part of our workload and are the focus of this session. This cohort is likely to grow steadily in coming years.

Setting the Scene - Case Study

Moses arrived from Sudan in 2005. He has survived many years in Kakuma, a camp in northern Kenya. During this time his family's absolute reliance on the kindness and skills of the nurses and doctors who work in the camp leave a strong impression – fostering a desire in Moses to become a doctor. When his application for resettlement in Australia is granted, this desire becomes, for him, something attainable.

On arrival, Tasmanian law necessitates that Moses is placed in age appropriate, rather than skills appropriate, education. Moses is bright, but, displaced by war, he has experienced a broken education. He has had little exposure to computers and limited exposure to English. Moses struggles at school. Though dedicated ESL teachers do their best to bring him up to speed, three years of college is clearly too short for him to catch up. Nevertheless, he is intent on going to UTAS. Despite the advice of the teachers

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around him Moses applies for Medicine, Pharmacy and Nursing. These first three preferences are vetoed, but regional University entrance requirements are more lenient for mature age students. As a migrant, and now citizen, neither Moses' English proficiency nor his lack of experience with computers will be taken into account in his application. Despite the personal reservations of assessing officers, under its guidelines for entry the University is required to offer Moses a place in an Associate Degree in Science. Disappointed at not getting into Medicine, but not understanding the implications of what he has been offered, Moses accepts the offer as a step towards achieving his goals.

Though this system is not deliberately arranged to set students up to fail that is how it turns out for many forced migrants. How can we support these students to better understand their situation and make realistic choices for the best way ahead?

The Session

This session will focus on the evolution of the CALD transition process within the context of the CALD program and the settlement experience generally. It will consider the impact of expectations carried by prospective students; the traumatic process of multiple cultural adjustments; and, the central role of language skills in a successful transition to university life. Specifically, the two core elements of the program will be described and their successes and weaknesses discussed:

- relationship-based assessment of preparedness for university life and completion of a CALD Access Plan (CAP) to facilitate more effective transition; and,
- the English Assist Program consisting of language proficiency testing, personalised feedback and ongoing support incorporated into the CAP.

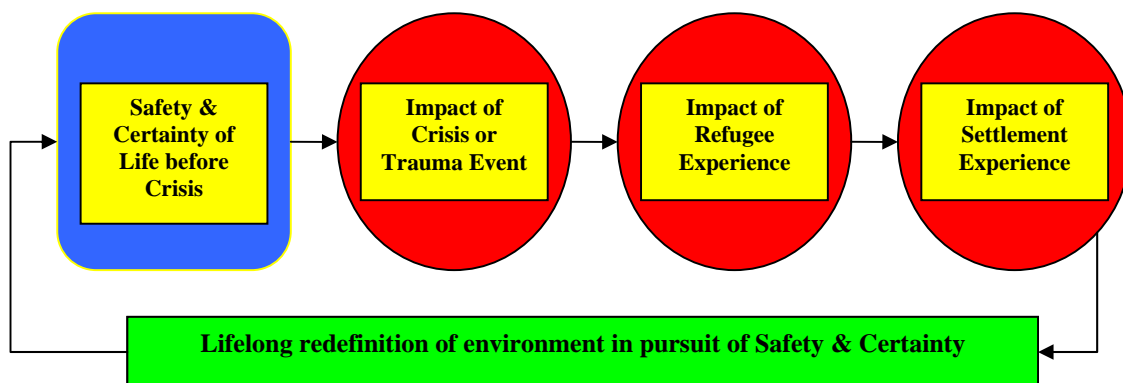
This program forms a logical extension and reinforcement of work done through the UTAS CALD Outreach Program to support prospective students to realistically map out the contours of their new educational environment and to understand the implications of the choices they have made. Most significantly, the program enables the establishment of understanding and trust between the client group and CALD workers.

Session Outline

- (1) Context: issues faced in context of Student Life Cycle.
- (2) Case Study: Trauma, Dislocation & The Search for Certainty.
- (3) Issues in the University Context: Language & Cultural Spaces.
- (4) How (not) to build a CALD Program:
 - i. engagement and trust;
 - ii. preparation, transition, support and mastery; and,
 - iii. key learnings & guiding principles.
- (5) Broader relevance: Bradley report, DEEWR Good Practice and UTAS generic approaches built on CALD Model.

The Impact of Settlement

The diagram below attempts to articulate the complex life-long settlement journey taken by humanitarian entrants. In addition to potential mental health impacts, the cultural dislocation experienced significantly influences decision making and help-seeking.



Of course, arriving in Australia as a refugee carries with it a range of practical disadvantages. 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. Making pathway decisions and assessing one's capacity to enact them at any point in time is a perilous task.

The CALD Outreach Program

The evolution of the CALD Program at UTAS demonstrated patterns of experience for students that remained beyond the scope of existing university support mechanisms. The University community assumes an 'environmental competence' in its members that is not possible for many CALD students without pre-enrolment intervention. Workflows also became unmanageable with no time for extended orientation, guided preparation and the proximity of census date in particular. 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 are introduced early in the decision making process and viable pathway options are identified;
- (2) early flagging of potential clients through applicant data (rather than later enrolment data) to identify potential clients who have not been reached;
- (3) **pre-enrolment interviews and diagnostic English testing to identify potential issues early and allow clients to make informed decisions before enrolment;**
- (4) extended orientation process including summer university visits; and,
- (5) carefully timed and targeted orientation activities and support materials.

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Experiences and Outcomes

Responses to the program have been overwhelmingly positive with feedback from colleges in 2007 resulting in its extension to include earlier institutional visits allow more time for self-assessment, decision making and preparation.

Eighteen students participated in the pilot English Assist/Transition Program with the following **positive outcomes and indicators of the transferability of the approach**:

- language testing proved to be largely accurate and helpful in student decision making and preparation;
- language testing outcomes accurately reflected relative academic success in first semester units;
- positive impact on CALD Support Program workloads;
- positive feedback from students and academic staff;
- UTAS Academic Senate Support and on-going funding to extend program to all CALD students;
- UTAS developing a Student Pathways and Experience framework based on CALD Program Model; and,
- proposals under development for initiatives based on this model to support the transition and university experiences of disengaged young people and people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

Issues emanating from pilot and initial roll out of the program include:

- need to include verbal language testing in the process;
- different patterns of student take up of support offered at different campuses;
- the effectiveness of workshop approaches necessitated a redesign of support;
- closer interaction with academic staff critical to success; and,
- ongoing concern re students who enroll late – missing out on the outreach program and encountering significant academic difficulty.

An Integrated Approach

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

Through 2009 we are working 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; exposure to workplace cultures; and, ultimately, clearly articulated strategies for entry to the job market.

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