

Supporting high school students from refugee backgrounds to successfully transition to higher education

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The Federal Government aims to increase participation rates of students from low socio-economic status (low SES) backgrounds in higher education. Within the broad category of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students are those from refugee backgrounds. Macquarie University is currently piloting an innovative program in partnership with the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) to support wider participation in higher education specifically by high school students from refugee backgrounds. The LEAP (Learning, Education, Aspiration, Participation) mentoring program involves Macquarie University students, many themselves from refugee backgrounds, providing regular mentoring to Year 11 and 12 students at five schools in Western and South Western Sydney. The program will link into the on-campus Mentors@Macquarie program to offer seamless and sustained peer support to students from refugee backgrounds during their first year at university. As part of an action research project, mentors, mentees, schools and families critically reflect on their expectations and experiences at each stage of the program, thus contributing to increased cultural capital and tertiary efficacy among the refugee community.

Introduction

Many students from refugee and humanitarian entrant backgrounds have experienced significant disruption to their education and have had little or no schooling prior to enrolment in an Australian school (DET, 2010). As a result, they face great challenges in education and training. Many struggle emotionally and practically to acquire the language, literacy, cultural knowledge and concepts required for academic success at high school and progress to tertiary education, despite in many cases being subject to high parental pressure to succeed.

Access to, and participation in, higher education bestows a huge advantage on a student entering the competitive job market, both in terms of earning potential and through the building of social capital (Baum & Payea, 2005; Murray, 2009; UK Government, 2011). This is especially important for the integration of refugees into Australian society. However, many refugee students and their families have little understanding of the range of higher education options available, and possess limited social capital to navigate the maze of vocational and educational pathways. The result is that a disproportionately low number of refugee students are currently studying at Australian universities.

As part of its plan to reform the Australian higher education system, the Federal Government aims to increase the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds participating in higher education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). A major tool in achieving this will be projects undertaken by universities in partnership with other stakeholders, including schools and communities.

The Macquarie University LEAP (Learning, Education, Aspiration, Participation) mentoring program for refugees is one such partnership, recognizing the need for ongoing support of targeted high school students from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds to enable and support their successful transition into higher education. The program is run in partnership with DET and the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS). DET developed a Refugee Transition Program to assist students in transitioning from Intensive English Centres to High Schools (DET, 2010), but as yet no programs exist specifically to assist in the transition of high school students from refugee backgrounds to higher education.

Overview of the LEAP mentoring program

40 volunteer student mentors from Macquarie University provide weekly mentoring support for 80 high school students from refugee backgrounds at five schools over a 12-week timeframe. The program includes visits to the university campus and on-campus activities and also involves the students' parents and/or caregivers.

Aims of the program

The LEAP mentoring program aims to support students to engage in school life, progress well in their studies and plan their transition from school to further education. The specific aims of the program are to assist students from refugee backgrounds to:

- develop confidence, resilience and agency
- raise aspirations towards further study
- develop social and cultural capital to navigate the tertiary education system
- develop study and research skills, including ICT skills
- develop an awareness of school and university cultures and expectations in the Australian context
- develop an understanding of available educational pathways and make decisions regarding appropriate pathways
- increase refugee parents' and communities' understanding of tertiary education pathways.

Program elements

University mentors work with their mentees to design a personalized program for them, with support from the DET and university coordinators. The program includes in-school one-on-one mentoring activities and group sessions to help students identify their strengths and interests and investigate university courses, application processes and requirements, as well as visits to the university campus.

Parents and guardians are invited to attend community events which are held to provide information about the program, raise their awareness about tertiary education pathways and provide the opportunity for them to participate in an evaluation of the program. They also participate in university campus visits.

Transition into First Year Experience

Outreach programs are often successful in raising aspirations and building capacity among students to ease their transition to tertiary education, especially those that are based on wide stakeholder collaboration, develop ongoing relationships, are early, long-term and sustained, and which contain a mixture of information, site visits and capacity building (Gale et al., 2010). However, without integration into the networks and programs that support new students during the application, enrolment and orientation processes and throughout the entire first year in higher education, the full potential of outreach programs is unlikely to be realized.

As consistently noted in the literature, effective First Year Experience programs are longitudinal in nature, multi-layered and part of a coordinated framework across the whole of campus (James Cook University, 2009; Kift et al, 2010; Skeyne & Evamy, 2009; Waters, 2004; Wilson, 2009.) Students from refugee backgrounds in particular, as a needs analysis at Murdoch University has found, “require a high level of encouragement and assistance particularly in their first year of undergraduate studies” (Silburn et al., 2008, p.13).

The LEAP outreach mentoring program builds on the success of the long-running Mentors@Macquarie on-campus peer mentoring program (Dickson et al., 2002), and has the potential to link into that program to offer first year students from refugee backgrounds continued support once they arrive at university. It is therefore anticipated that a seamless transition can be achieved between pre-university outreach and first year experience initiatives. In addition, other programs and projects within Macquarie University’s First Year Experience framework combine to offer support to new students from refugee backgrounds, for example refugee scholarships, pre-entry programs, targeted tutoring, cultural competency training for staff, and language cafés and other student-run projects that foster social connectedness.

Evaluative research

A multi-method, longitudinal evaluative strategy has been developed, involving a mixture of surveys, focus groups and individual interviews. For a community-focussed project in its pilot phase, Participatory Action Research (PAR) has been identified as offering a flexible approach for the ongoing evaluation of the project. The PAR cycle is: Plan, Act, Observe and Reflect (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988), and is a collaborative process that involves all participants in each stage of the research cycle. In the LEAP mentoring project, mentors, mentees, teachers and families critically reflect on their expectations and experiences at each stage. PAR, like the LEAP mentoring project itself, has at its heart a process of transformation in which participants become co-researchers who work together to improve outcomes for the community.

Key questions for discussion

1. How can we best work to increase cultural capital and tertiary efficacy among the wider refugee community? What are the best strategies to engage with the wider community of students from refugee backgrounds, especially parents and/or care givers?

2. How can we best link outreach programs into continued support during the First Year Experience? What are the best strategies for engaging with and supporting our university students to provide ongoing peer support for optimal student success?
3. How effective is Participatory Action Research as a means of achieving increased participation in higher education?

Nuts and bolts session plan:

This session addresses the conference topic: Strategies for supporting wider participation in Higher Education.

1. Presentation and overview of LEAP refugee mentoring program (5 mins)
(Brief handouts will be provided as context to allow more time for discussion)
2. Split into three groups to discuss issues and strategies to address the key questions above (15 mins)
3. Reporting back to whole group and summary (10 mins)

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