

## **University Transition Challenges for First Year Domestic CALD Students from Refugee Backgrounds: A Case Study from an Australian Regional University**

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*Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) is used broadly and inclusively to describe communities with diverse language, ethnic background, nationality, dress, traditions, food, societal structures, art and religion characteristics. Domestic CALD people are either refugees or voluntary migrants and have obtained permanent residency or citizenship. This paper identifies the key issues, challenges and needs of first year domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds at a multi-campus regional university in Queensland, Australia. The term refugee background is used in the paper as the students are no longer refugees having successfully transitioned from refugee status to being*

*permanent residents. Qualitative data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews and focus groups with domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds, and from key informants including teaching, administrative, and senior management staff members. Other than language and differences in education styles, this cohort of students faced other challenges, particularly in a regional setting, including socio-cultural issues, technology issues, family and health challenges and limited staff awareness of refugee needs. The findings provide insights into how Australian regional university policy makers could develop effective strategies, practices, procedures and policies to support CALD students from refugee backgrounds and to improve their retention and progression.*

**Keywords:** *Domestic culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students, refugees, Australian regional university, higher education, equity*

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## **Culturally and linguistically diverse in Toowoomba, Queensland**

Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) people, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), are generally defined as those who are born overseas and who originate from non-English speaking countries other than those from English speaking countries such as Canada, Republic of Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the U.K. and U.S.A. (Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV), 2012). CALD is often the preferred term for many government and community agencies as a contemporary descriptor for ethnic communities (ECCV, 2012). Most CALD people from refugee backgrounds have experienced protracted violence and hardship and thus may have suffered from a traumatic experience of migration (Copping et al., 2012).

Australia is home to a significant number of refugees. The total number of refugee-humanitarian entrants to Australia under the 2012-2013 Humanitarian Program was 20,019, a noticeable increase of 45% from the previous year (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). Immigration programs currently encourage refugee-humanitarian entrants to resettle in regional and rural Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008 cited in Omeri & Raymond, 2009). Toowoomba, a city in the Darling

Downs region of Queensland, is representative of many regions in Australia where its population is diversifying as many migrants and refugees are encouraged to settle into the area by Federal and State Government policies. The Toowoomba region is now the third largest refugee settlement area in Queensland. It has almost twice the average per-capita population of Sub-Saharan migrants in Queensland and a population containing almost three times the state average of residents from North African and Middle Eastern backgrounds (Department of Infrastructure & Planning, 2007).

Most of the CALD refugee-background newcomers settling in Toowoomba are relatively young. For example, of those refugees settled in Toowoomba as part of the Humanitarian Settlement Services program in 2013-14, 67.3% were under the age of 26 and 91.7% were under the age of 45 (Multicultural Development Association, 2014). Many of these refugees are likely to be qualified to study in universities. As this population grows, many CALD students enrol at university with significant educational needs. It is believed that the demand for higher education from this group of students is to be consequentially increased. However, their language proficiency and unique cultural and social differences suggest their needs are different from those of their local counterparts (Sawir, 2005).

The literature highlights the challenges CALD students face in higher education (Jeong et al., 2011; Livock, 2010; Salamonson et al., 2012). However, the studies mainly examined the challenges that CALD students face from either the perspective of a sole faculty or an urban university. There is a paucity of research specifically focusing on first year domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds who are studying and living in regional cities in Australia. Sawrikar and Katz (2008) suggest that domestic students from CALD and refugee backgrounds often face more complex situations such as linguistic, educational and emotional issues when they study at regional universities. They argue that these students' experiences and challenges and their challenge of acculturation may be differentially related to area of residence (Sawrikar & Katz, 2008). Townsend (2006) states that Australian regional and rural communities have distinct localised cultures in themselves, often White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant and rooted

in the colonial history of a specific region. Being minorities in these communities, CALD newcomers are often expected to adjust to the mores and codes of local life (Townsend, 2006). Examples of these are the concept of gender equality both within and outside the family and laws against corporal punishment of children.

Sawrikar and Katz (2008) speculate that being a more conspicuous minority in regional Australia can exacerbate the extent to which racism and discrimination are perceived or experienced. CALD arrivals from refugee backgrounds are more likely to experience social exclusion and difficulty in developing localised, supportive social networks within regional communities. Clarke (2007) argues that CALD refugee-background students from urban areas are likely to receive more English support, in the form of second language (ESL) education support, than those who reside in regional areas. Similarly, urban-based students are more likely to have greater support and resources from extensive community networks than those living in regional Australia (Sawrikar & Katz, 2008).

If the education needs of domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds are not addressed, these students are likely to achieve significantly lower education participation rates, lower employment rates, and lower average wages when compared to non-CALD students (Macrine, 2010). The challenges that domestic CALD refugee-background students face make the concepts of equity, social justice and democracy even more important in tertiary education. Australian educators, particularly those from regional universities, need to be able to respond to this unique group's needs if they want to assist the group to succeed at university (Krause et al., 2005). Accordingly, this paper investigates the nature of transitional experiences of first year domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia (a regional university with its main campus based in Toowoomba).

USQ has been offering university pathways to students from refugee backgrounds since the mid-1990s when the first wave of refugees arrived in Toowoomba from South Sudan. Students from this background may have spent a long period of time in refugee camps and have no access to formal secondary school education. They enrolled in the Tertiary

Preparation Program, a six to twelve month preparatory program for people without university entry qualifications. However, this program was not targeted at students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Therefore when the second wave of refugees arrived from Francophone countries such as Congo and Rwanda, it was decided to encourage them to enrol in the English language pathway programs offered by USQ. English Language Intensive courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses have been offered to international students for many years at USQ (and many other universities). Unlike other universities, USQ accredited these courses for domestic students in addition to international students. It was able to offer them on a fee-free basis to students with permanent residency status. EAP is now offered on the same basis as Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP), including guaranteeing admission to USQ degree programs after successful completion. Students who do not pass these courses can repeat them a limited number of times or are counselled to enrol in TAFE or other vocational courses if they do not yet feel ready to enter the work force.

The third wave of refugees, from Muslim countries in Africa and the Middle East (mainly from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, northern Sudan, and Eritrea), are also following the ELICOS/EAP pathway. There are therefore some hundred students in undergraduate degrees from refugee backgrounds who have enrolled after completion of pathways that are alternatives to completion of high school in Australia. These pathways have assisted students to develop their English language, academic and ICT skills and have even provided laptops through a USQ Social Justice grant. However, students still suffer from a lack of skills compared to non-CALD students, owing to the comparatively short time of six to twelve months they have had to develop those skills. There are also a number of refugee background students enrolling at USQ who have been through the high school system and entered USQ through the traditional pathways from completion of year 12.

The paper will report on a case study undertaken with this domestic cohort from CALD refugee backgrounds as well as with key informants including teaching, administrative and senior staff members from USQ. The case study aims to provide insights into this group of students' tertiary experiences and to make recommendations to regional

university policy makers that will help them to improve their first year study experience, retention and progression.

## **Methodology**

Very limited research has been conducted to date examining first year domestic CALD refugee students who are studying and living in regional cities in Australia. To explore a relatively new area of scholarly inquiry like this one, a qualitative approach was used, incorporating semi-structured interviews and focus groups for CALD refugee students and key informants including teaching, administrative, and senior management staff members. Ethical issues which may impact on research participants as a result of the data collection process were carefully considered prior to data collection (Creswell, 2003). This consideration was consistent with ethics guidelines set by USQ's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

The CALD students from refugee backgrounds were identified based on available data from the University. After receiving an ethics approval, an email was sent to the students explaining the purpose of the project and inviting them to participate in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for key informants such as Student Relationship Officers (SROs), academic staff, and university senior management staff members as the method provided 'a clear set of instructions for interviewers and can [allow] reliable, comparable qualitative data' to be revealed from the key informants (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006: 1). Purposive sampling (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011) was used to recruit the key informants who had extensive experience working with CALD refugee-background students and who could thus provide insights regarding the cohort's learning at the university. In other words, the researchers deliberately chose specific people possessing knowledge about the research topic and who could provide crucial information which was not obtainable by other recruitment channels (Liamputtong, 2010). In addition, a snowball technique was also used to locate staff with experience working with CALD students and who had knowledge about the university services offered to students from different cultures. This technique enabled the researchers to locate people who were 'unknown' to the researchers via referrals from the first contacts (Atkinson & Flint, 2001: 3).

During data collection, refugee students were encouraged to talk about their learning experiences in Australia, especially in higher education, with open-ended questions. The interviewers posed the first question about their past learning level in order to help them to answer without difficulty and to encourage them to open up (Mathers et al., 1998). Similarly, academic and professional staff were encouraged to discuss their experiences when supporting and teaching CALD students at the university in a relaxed manner without intervening. In total, eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 interviewees, along with four focus groups. Table 1 summarises the demographic details of the participants:

**Table 1:** *The participants' demographic details.*

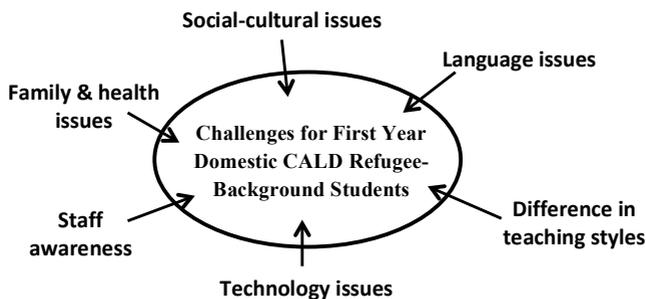
		Staff		
Gender	Students	Academic staff	Professional staff	Senior managers
Male	5	1	0	2
Female	3	4	5	0
Total	8	5	5	2

To ensure the accuracy of data collection and subsequent interview transcription, audio recording was undertaken for all interviews and focus groups (Johnson, 2002). The qualitative data was analysed by using NVivo, adding to the reliability of the data analysis through the consistent identification of codes and themes.

## **Findings and discussion**

Data analysis highlighted several factors that impact on the experiences of the students during their first year of university at USQ. Participants discussed challenges relating to a number of themes, including language, socio-cultural issues, understanding a new learning and teaching environment, technology, family and health matters and limited staff awareness.

**Figure 1:** Themes emerging from the interview data.



While the interview data revealed barriers facing CALD refugee students (e.g. inadequate English language proficiency and lack of understanding of plagiarism) which are common in both regional and metropolitan universities, the following discussion will focus on the findings of this particular cohort and their first year study journey in a regional setting. Of those, barriers associated with low English language proficiency levels were most notable.

### **Language**

Many student participants commented on challenges they experienced due to English language proficiency. Whilst their language proficiency was deemed adequate for enrolment by the university, functioning at an academic level in a second or subsequent language was an on-going challenge. The language issues faced by CALD refugee-background students related broadly to general English language difficulties and specifically with issues of academic English. This distinction between general English and the demands of academic English was made clear by a student who had completed the required hours in a community English course but experienced significant difficulty in a degree program:

English is very hard because ... there are many times we are speaking English but we cannot cope [with] the kind of English ... (African student D).

CALD Students from refugee backgrounds often had difficulty understanding local lecturers because they spoke too fast and with an Australian accent:

English is all difficult because you need to use it to understand, to listen ... and in Australia when [people] speak English they are speaking too fast. The teacher does the same ... and I didn't have the habit to speak. It was very hard to ... use it [and] to understand ... (African student D).

Students who completed some of their high schooling in Australia also commented they still had problems with English comprehension. One student's limited English proficiency impacted directly on the time needed to complete course work:

... someone who speaks English ... as the first language if ... [they] read [study materials] once then ... [they] can understand but you need to read three or four times to understand ... if the teacher says that ... [students] need 106 hours to study, you have to put 250 hours to do this course (African student D).

Students were reluctant to speak in class in case they made mistakes and were more comfortable speaking with students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Their English levels also affected their abilities to make social connections. For instance, '... my language barrier would prevent me from being social ... (African student G)', a common feature according to Joyce et al. (2010). In terms of suggestions, one student wanted staff to better understand some of the issues and difficulties CALD refugee-background students faced. It was also suggested that the university's cultural sensitivity and equity policies may prevent staff from understanding the unique needs of CALD refugee students:

the university ... are [sic] not considering that you are from Africa or from [the] Middle East. They are taking all equal, so that's the problem ... (African student B).

Students revealed they needed help with academic writing, with one student suggesting a need for a staff member to provide targeted support in this area. It was also suggested that an academic writing class would be beneficial.

While the university provides resources to support students' academic writing, many of these are online. StudyDesk, the university's online learning management system, provides students with additional support

as they work through their courses. However, CALD refugee students have difficulty with this learning tool, which is:

... confusing, maybe due to language, so students ... on the forum  
... get confused ... (African student C).

Staff too commented on problems CALD refugee-background students experience with both general English proficiency and academic English. They raised similar concerns, commenting that general English language programs were not preparing students for the rigors of academic study and questioned pathway programs:

[These students] need a better English and better academic English knowledge both reading and writing ... within the Toowoomba community they get their 500 hours [of general English training from AMEP program] which was just basic conversational, survival English ... Then where do you go from there? ... Straight from there to the [Tertiary Preparation Program], which is six months [and then] entering a degree ... [its] not achievable, not sensible ... (Senior professional manager A).

... it is not really that they don't have the skills, thinking skills. It is just the language and is a huge obstacle and it is not very easy to really find the solution to it ... (Academic staff E).

Whilst a student may gain entry into a degree program, fundamental academic English language deficits result in long-term progression and retention issues (Crawford & Candlin, 2013). One staff member suggested a problem with how students are admitted into degree programs, questioning university processes:

I think it comes back to the way [in] which we admit students in terms of assessing skills; we saying yes, you've got the math, you've got this, you've got that, but English is not sort of on the criteria ... (Senior academic manager A).

... the scrutiny on the English language skills weren't there, now this student is getting by but is struggling ... (Senior academic manager A).

Being overly culturally sensitive may also contribute to some of the challenges faced by CALD refugee-background students:

We think we are being culturally ... sensitive and it is because we are native speakers. I think ... we are hesitant to say ... we are over culturally sensitive to those who have got a second language background [because] [we don't] say ... you don't write well enough [and you should] go and fix it up. (Academic staff C).

### ***Socio-cultural***

Other barriers also emerged which directly impacted on the CALD refugee students' learning journey. These related to the regional university setting. Participants described a number of concerns relating to socio-cultural issues, the social and cultural knowledge and skills needed to understand the university setting. The skills were needed to make connections with staff and fellow students. Connections help students to develop a socio-cultural understanding of the university setting but they proved difficult for CALD refugee students to establish and maintain.

CALD refugee students experienced issues relating to making connections with peers, heightened by the regional university setting. In smaller regional centres, many students have long established friendship and community networks stemming from childhood. In addition, the regional setting is less culturally diverse than larger urban settings (Townsend, 2008). For these reasons it can be difficult for CALD refugee students to make meaningful connections with local students who do not have a comprehensive understanding of their life journey. This can be problematic in the classroom for CALD refugee students:

What ... they have learned from ... the countries where they have come from, they behave differently, so [this] can cause a lot of impact on the relationship ... [between students in] the classroom as well ... (Professional staff B).

This contributes to CALD students' apprehension when establishing themselves at the university in the first year. Formal and informal communication is an integral form of communication for university

students, an aspect that refugee background students have significant difficulty becoming proficient in:

Sometimes it makes it harder when you feel shy to ask another student ... you might try to ask a colleague and they say how did you end up at university when you don't know how to do this? So ... you just block yourself to ask other people. So it was hard for the first year because we came from the war cultures where [there's no] ... formal writing ... (African student C).

[Here] people send a lot of emails and they expect you to respond by email. Sometimes [I] ignore some emails. What am I going to do now? If I [reply] ... will they understand what I am saying? There are a lot of things in your brain ... (African student C).

Staff commented on issues such as academic misconduct, difficulty calling lecturers by their first names, and a lack of understanding of teacher and student roles in Australian higher education:

... you have to explain over and over ... I am the lecturer and this is your job as a student ... to take control of your learning ... this is the first step (Academic staff B).

CALD students from refugee backgrounds also have difficulties adjusting to the regional culture outside the classroom. They often came from dangerous and volatile conditions overseas before resettling in Australia (Oka, 2014). The conditions are in stark contrast to the quiet regional city and university life in Toowoomba. With the continued increase in CALD refugee-background students enrolling in programs of study, the regional university too is learning how to better cater for increasing cultural diversity in its student population. A number of programs have been launched to offer support to the students' transition to university, including Retention for Academic Completion Help, CALD to Success, Meet-up for refugees and ICT for refugees. However, university staff see areas where the university can continue to improve their support of CALD refugee-background students' retention and progression:

... with the Islamic faith ... the feasts and events which happen through a semester are very disrupting to their academic progress and we haven't properly tackled [this]. We haven't worked well

together as academic staff and students to help them or work with them to manage this ... (Academic staff C).

The data suggests that these socio-cultural issues accompanied by differences in teaching styles create significant challenges for CALD refugee-background students in a regional university setting.

### ***Issues with new learning and teaching environment***

Due to their refugee experience, student participants described experiencing a variety of different teaching styles, educational settings and interrupted schooling (Earnest et al., 2010). Students and staff commented on a range of issues impacting CALD student adjustment to new learning and teaching practices.

Many of the issues identified are typical of those experienced by refugee-background students pursuing higher education in Australia (Joyce et al., 2010), independent of location. However, it can be argued, in the regional setting, that these adjustment issues contribute to the overall challenges faced by CALD refugee students. As Livock (2010) claims, for some individuals these challenges can become overwhelming, resulting in issues with progression and retention. One significant issue CALD refugee students face in the learning context is participating in group work:

... they are not accepted by Australian students, they don't relate easily to them, one student who was having a huge problem in group work was told by his lecturer 'just take them out for coffee and sort it out' and he said to me 'how can I take people out for coffee when they won't make eye contact' ... Another student said the way he dealt with group work was that he always attached himself to a group of middle aged women, because they were great and he knew he would be okay ... and that was his strategy. (Professional staff F).

## **Technology**

Adjusting to new learning and teaching practices in higher education is challenging, as is the use of information technology. University education in Australia is heavily grounded in the use of technology for all aspects of learning and teaching. Thirty percent of student responses suggested the online materials supported their learning:

... the best thing here is the study desk online ... [it] is really helpful...because I can read the lecture online before I go (African student A).

... we have recordings and we have lectures online so whenever you don't understand ... we can check online for lectures, written materials. We can print out things if [we] want to understand ... (African student E).

The remaining 70% of responses indicated that students experienced significant difficulty with information technology at USQ. Participants commented that use of technology presented substantial challenges during the first year of university.

The data suggests CALD refugee students have varying skills, knowledge and experience using all aspects of computing technology, as highlighted by the Multicultural Development Agency (2010). For many CALD refugee-background students, low computer literacy skills stem from very limited access to this form of technology in both their country of origin and while studying at a university in Australia. This makes them unprepared for studying in a blended or online learning environment.

Students discussed their experiences with technology in their country of origin. Those interviewed commented on their limited access and experience with computers:

Well in Africa everything is just talking and talking, you don't really use computers. [But] here they do everything with computers and that becomes very hard for us (African student E).

Those students who spent time in refugee camps also had no access to information technology:

... in the refugee camp there was no internet, so there was no

computing (African student C).

University staff said that refugee-background CALD students continued to have limited access to information technology once enrolled in their degrees. Students who live off campus experienced difficulty when relying on public transportation to access on campus computer labs after hours. In Toowoomba, the bus service is the only public transport available, operating just five routes across the city, with four routes taking passengers to the university. However, all services stop at approximately 6pm Monday to Saturday and do not run on Sundays. This limited access to computing facilities is a unique challenge. The difficulties students face accessing computing services can then become a financial barrier:

... the financial side ... you will be paying \$80-120 per month for internet access [at home], not a lot of people can afford that, so if you have no choice but to be on the internet to do your course, you might only be able have an hour or two a day. Now how are you going to get through a course on an hour or two a day? (Professional staff D)

For those students who did have computing facilities at home, staff commented that access might still be restricted:

... a lot of my students they work on a computer at the kitchen table, everybody uses it, you have high school kids using it for their assignments, people using it for their banking and then you have got normally the mum, she is trying to use it to do her assignments for her study ... (Academic staff B).

Restricted access directly impacted on the development of digital literacy skills. One participant commented on specific skills which were difficult to perform:

... so it gets harder to get a lot of materials from the computer, you need to type, you need to download you need to do some research to get some articles and do the references, there was a lot of confusion ... (African student C).

Students also commented on their lack of conceptual knowledge and

understanding of using computers as a tool to conduct research:

I don't know how to access the computer especially when doing research (African student B).

Staff were increasingly concerned about the impact of low digital literacy skills on the students' future progress. With a reputation for distance learning, USQ now offers their course materials exclusively online, without optional print materials. Whilst this is an innovative development for the university, staff predicted it would create additional problems students accessing their learning materials. This initiative could further disadvantage CALD refugee-background students who are already experiencing significant problems:

... if it is going to go online then we need to ensure that our equity groups have access to that, so we will have to be thinking of ways of providing them with laptops ... (Professional staff D).

Awareness of how this university-wide initiative impacts CALD refugee students could help staff to develop strategies to support these students:

... my point, is that things can be done a) to help people access but b) to also suggest ways in which ... online ... can be loosened a little bit so that there might be ways to make it easier to download online material for instance ... (Professional staff D).

However, a prevailing challenge in this setting is being able to meet the needs of students who value one-on-one personal contact and the opportunity to talk face-to-face. Staff experience shows that CALD students from refugee backgrounds have a strong preference for this style of interaction:

... a lot of them would come into me at my desk and ask me to go and sit with them and show them. They come and ask me where to find ... [a] book or how to print their cover sheets and need just that one to one assistance ... (Professional staff E).

### ***Family and health issues***

Many CALD refugee-background students have extensive family networks both here and in their home country. Their diverse values

and cultural obligations to family mean students experience a variety of pressures from these large networks (Joyce et al., 2010; Multicultural Development Association, 2010). Students often have to balance their parents' expectations in their home culture with the contemporary Australian culture experienced outside the home in their daily life:

There are also parental expectations and lack of knowledge [about] what they should be doing. You just get parents ... who don't understand the culture, won't let them do what they would like to do because they have [different] ideas about something ... Australians are more likely to stand up to their parents, [CALD refugee students] don't, again it is collective. If my mother says ... I can't do [it but] I would really like to ... but my mother just won't let me, [as] a 25 year old. You can't argue [with the student] if you try and argue they will go [and] they won't come back (Professional staff F).

CALD refugee-background students are also often expected to financially support family members. They are pressured to balance long-term education goals with financially supporting their family's day-to-day needs:

... his family wanted him to work all the time ... he needed to drop out because he could not get enough time to study (Academic staff B).

With limited training or experience and low English proficiency, CALD refugee-background students have few opportunities for paid work. In a regional setting, demands are heightened by limited low-skilled job opportunities and the distance needed to travel to seasonal work (Department of Communities, 2008). Most low-skilled seasonal work is located in surrounding small towns such as Gatton and Laidley. Transportation to these jobs is costly and time consuming, adding to the challenges they experience.

Distance and very limited public transportation in a regional setting also contribute to the demands placed on CALD refugee-background students. Students with driving licences are often called upon to support family members within the local community:

... now my wife, that is the big problem because my wife is not driving, and I have to drop her to work and bring her back ... I think that is my responsibility to cope with this and ... try to manage my time and to study and to fulfil all my commitments at home ... (African student D).

Conversely, CALD refugee-background students without family in the local community can experience isolation (Carrington & Marshall, 2008), compounded by smaller numbers of their ethnic community in a regional setting:

It was really hard for the first year; when I came here there was no family (African Student C).

Without a strong family network behind you study is very, very difficult ... (Academic staff B).

In addition to isolation, many students have complex physical and psychological health issues relating to the refugee experience. Very often they feel guilty for leaving family members behind in their home country.

... another problem that I face is when you remember your family in my home country as war country, there will be a problem when you see your brother or dad dying ... (African student A).

The feeling of guilt being away from family members who remain overseas in dangerous and volatile conditions and depression can cause physical and psychological health issues (Multicultural Development Association, 2010). As Morris, et al. (2009) argue, accessing health care services can be difficult to this cohort due to low English proficiency. The students often have difficulty discussing their medical conditions in English, which often delays them seeking medical advice and assistance. Murray and Skull (2005) also identify a number of additional barriers including low staff awareness of the health care needs of refugees, along with the financial burden of accessing services. These limitations are heightened by the added difficulty of accessing culturally appropriate services (Department of Communities, 2008), and the shortage of general practitioners accepting new patients in regional cities (Davies, 2013).

### **Limited staff awareness**

To meet the needs of a student cohort, staff must first understand what those needs are. However, this proves challenging due to the changing profile of CALD students and student reluctance to seek help, often culminating in limited staff awareness of the experience in the regional university of students from a refugee background.

CALD student profiles at regional universities are possibly different from those of CALD students enrolled in urban universities. This is likely a direct result of Federal and State Government policy to settle many refugees in regional Australia (Townsend, 2009). The domestic refugee-background students have diverse and unique needs requiring a different level of support offered to international CALD students in urban universities:

In urban areas ... dominantly the NESB [Non English speaking background] were made up with [international] Asian students from often high-income families, with higher educational aspiration, strong supportive families. They had a completely different profile as people, in terms of their ethnicity in terms of SES [social and economic status] standing, in terms of their background, in terms of the amount of educational resources in their home ... Our students [who] tended to be low SES in the sense that is defined by the department [of Communities], tended to come from poor backgrounds, trying to improve themselves often independently as young adults...we've gone through a period of having a high numbers of Saharan-African, Sudanese students predominantly refugee background students, coming in as young adults not predominantly but typically as often as young males. They had a particular profile in terms of their background ... that necessitated particular strategies in order to deal with them. Now we've moved toward refugees from [Middle Eastern] backgrounds, often literate in first language, so again they will have a different profile. They will have a different performance profile. They will require different strategies and that's quite unusual in terms of equity, usually you can say we want strategies for lower SES ... but with the [CALD students] you really need to profile every couple of years, and you need the ability to ... change as the student body changes ... (Senior professional manager A).

Staff are continually challenged by the changing profile of CALD students and express concern about inadequate cross-cultural training. They suggest inadequate training creates a barrier preventing them from addressing the specific needs of CALD refugee-background students, a notion supported in Jeong et al.'s (2011) findings. There is also some concern about not being able to accurately identify refugee-background students, which inhibits communication and student-staff engagement:

... there are a lot of things ... that we are not aware of that can impact on these students ... as generalisation of the team, we would have no idea at all. We should be able to deal with them sensitively, we really need to know ... [how] these students' backgrounds ... might impact on ... learning ... (Professional staff B).

Both staff and students share this concern, with a staff member commenting:

Understanding what their needs are, what I have at the moment is my anecdotal knowledge ... (Academic staff D).

Similarly a mature student suggested:

I think many staff are not aware of my background. Many of them ... don't get it ... It is good the young people finishing high school today they are okay, they are coming out with ... iPhones, iPads ... [and] texting but [in] my generation it's hard (African Student C).

The findings suggest that engaging this group of students is challenging for university staff. Staff aim to assist students to make a successful transition to university by enhancing their learning and teaching outcomes, supporting them to engage with regional university support services. Student reluctance to seek help makes it difficult for staff to understand and support their learning journey. Refugees often come from countries with no tradition or custom of seeking assistance from authorities or any concept of counsellors:

... these kinds of students, do not come from individualistic cultures; they come from collective cultures, they also come ... from very dangerous situations. Someone in an individualistic

culture ... they are used to having complaints procedures, appeals procedures, procedures whereby they can find their way through the maze, where they can bang on the table to be heard, where they can expect good service ... These are people who do not see themselves as having those individual rights, they are not used to finding their way through that kind of individualistic structure where there are complaints and procedures, individual rights, policies and keeping records of emails, following up discussions with emails. If they do complain, sometimes they don't do it quite appropriately or if they do, they just get intimidated and run away (Professional staff F).

Combined with language barriers, this makes it very difficult for these students to participate in established support and complaint systems, especially if they have concerns about academic or relationship issues that may impact on their study. These students are unwilling or unable to express themselves to academic staff and resist seeking help

## **Insights**

The data analysis highlighted different factors that impact on domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds' learning experiences during their first year of university at USQ. Although barriers associated with low English language proficiency levels were most notable, other issues with socio-cultural, new learning and teaching environment, technology, family and health matters and limited staff awareness were also revealed from the data. The findings suggest that the issue is multifaceted and providing English training alone may not resolve the issues. This paper suggests that more long- and short-term strategies can be implemented in order to provide full support to this particular cohort during their university study. For instance, what can be done to enhance staff awareness (both academic and administrative staff) towards the students' needs? What support can be provided to assist with the students' family and health issues? What can be done to improve the students' social and cultural knowledge and skills so that they have a good understanding of the university setting? The findings from this paper provide insights into how Australian regional university policy makers can develop long- and short-term strategies, practices, procedures and policies to support CALD students from refugee

backgrounds and to improve their retention and progression.

### **Limitations**

In this study the researchers were able to utilise suitable techniques to collect reliable data from domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds about their first year experience, key informants who were teaching, professional staff, and senior staff members. The recommendation section in the study showed important advice that could enhance domestic CALD refugee-background students' progression at the university. However, as with any study, there are limitations in this study. First, the sample size of the participants, particularly the students, was relatively small. Even though care has been taken with recommendations interpreting the findings, it is not possible to generalise the findings to the broader domestic CALD refugee-background students' tertiary transitional experiences in Australian regional areas. Nevertheless, the key informants had direct responsibilities to deal with CALD students. Thus, the findings provide some insights on the subject.

The second limitation of this research is that the study was conducted in one regional university in Australia. The literature indicates that there may be differences in support services offering to CALD communities in urban and regional areas (Multicultural Development Association 2010). It may be beneficial to educators, when future research is conducted, to investigate how areas of residence may impact on domestic CALD refugee-background students' study. Any future studies of a similar nature should consider these differences in demographic and cultural factors in regional settings (Laursen & Mahnke, 2001; Batt, 2002).

### **Future research**

For future researchers, the current study is not the end of the journey, but rather it is a stepping-stone for exciting and valuable future studies to further explore the transitional experiences of CALD students from refugee backgrounds into the higher education. It would be useful to study the experiences of CALD refugee-background students by birth countries. This would allow future researchers to extrapolate the needs of these students by specific nationality rather than grouping all students from CALD backgrounds in one study. For instance, African

refugees originate from a variety of different countries on the continent, which might have different educational systems depending on the political and financial systems of the individual country which in turn impact on students' transition to higher education in Australia. This paper argues that the Australian higher education sector needs to be better prepared in order to meet the higher education needs of domestic CALD students from refugee backgrounds in the years to come.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study found that domestic CALD refugee-background students had different previous learning and educational experiences which likely affected how they adapted to the Australian learning system. Prior to their commencement at the university, the students with refugee backgrounds possessed varying degrees of language proficiency levels, computer and technology literacy, and total amount of time spent in Australia. Although they had differences in their abilities, the study found that they had similarities in issues, including language difficulty, where almost all of them indicated they had problems making connections with their peers and understanding their lecturers. Furthermore, pre- and post- resettlement issues affected students' progression and retention at the university. Therefore, the study recommends that cross-cultural awareness training should be provided to teaching and administrative staff. With the likelihood that the higher education sectors in many developed countries may face more challenges due to an increase of refugee intakes in the coming years, the findings of the study can assist university policy makers to establish more support services that can reach the needs of domestic students from CALD and refugee backgrounds such as comprehensive preparatory computing courses and targeted orientation sessions. Despite the difficulties that the students experienced at their transition into the university, the current study found that the CALD refugee-background students felt welcomed by the university and they found it a safe place to achieve their success and be integrated into the society.

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