

Duelling identities in refugees learning through open, online higher education

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Abstract

This paper reports on a qualitative study of the transition experiences of refugees studying through open and online higher education. Online, open education programmes have considerable potential to provide flexible access to education for refugees, who are not well represented within higher education. As part of a wider University of Sanctuary initiative, interview data from six Ireland-based refugees was analysed using a data-led, qualitative methodological framework grounded in discursive psychology. Findings indicate that participants' transition narratives are typical in many ways as they form student identities while managing their existing identities and begin to feel, or not, that they belong. Participants constructed a stark divide between two duelling identities, between their identity as a refugee and their new identity as an online learner. Identification with the university was emphasised in contrast to disidentification with the 'asylum world'. These findings indicate that a strategically connected approach to supporting refugees transition into higher education can impact positively on these students.

Keywords: higher education, online learning, refugee, asylum seeker, identity, access initiative

Introduction

The crisis of population displacement is one of the most significant global challenges of our time, with over 70 million people driven from their homes by conflict, climate change, poverty, etc. (Burzynski, Deuster, Docquier, & De Melo, 2018; UNHCR, 2019). Linking to the UN Sustainable Development Goals there is a collective responsibility to ensure that educational systems adapt to the needs of refugees to ensure this vulnerable group is visible and accounted for in educational provision. However, access to and successful participation in Higher Education are key challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers. According to the UNHCR (2015a; 2015b, p. 3) "around 1% of refugee students are enrolled in tertiary education".

In the Republic of Ireland, a system referred to as Direct Provision was set up in 1999 as an emergency measure to meet the basic needs of food and shelter for people seeking asylum while their claims for refugee status are being processed. The Direct Provision system provides them with accommodation, a minimal living allowance, state-funded medical care, and mainstream access to the primary and post-primary education systems for children (RIA, 2010). Twenty years later Direct Provision remains the system within which those seeking asylum in the Republic of Ireland are contained (O'Reilly, 2018). There were 5,370 refugees and asylum seekers reported as being accommodated in 33 Direct Provision centres in 2018 (RIA, 2018). The living conditions for people living in these centres are cramped, with limited access to cooking, social and transport facilities and little or no access to computers or the internet (O' Reilly, 2018). Direct Provision living conditions have been criticised by human rights groups as inhuman and degrading. Asylum seekers experience

long waiting periods in Direct Provision of up to three years while their cases are processed, and have very limited rights to work (figure 1). All of which impacts their physical and mental wellbeing (Ní Raghallaigh, Foreman, & Feeley, 2016). If they are granted refugee status they can access Irish state financial support for further and higher education. Asylum seekers, however, are not entitled to these supports (RIA, 2018). It should also be noted that the Irish state does not provide financial support for learners designated as part-time, online learners (Delaney & Farren, 2016) and so asylum seekers and refugees studying in that mode have no state supports to access regardless of their status.



Figure 1: An image of Direct Provision accommodation at Lissywollen, Athlone, Ireland in 2013. Braca Karic, Direct Provision centre, Athlone, CC BY 3.0.

The Universities of Sanctuary initiative is made up of a network of universities committed to welcoming those seeking sanctuary into their communities and to providing a safe place within which they can pursue their educational goals (Universities of Sanctuary, 2019). Since becoming Ireland's first University of Sanctuary in 2016, Dublin City University (DCU) has awarded 23 University of Sanctuary scholarships to refugees and asylum seekers. Sixteen of those scholarships were provided for flexible, open education programmes designed for off-campus adult learners, with ten students studying at undergraduate level, and the remaining six studying at postgraduate level. These online scholarships link to the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4, Quality Education, and Goal 9, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure in the area of digital equity, through enabling access to information and communication technology (UNHCR, 2015b). Central to the DCU online scholarships is not only the provision of access to HE but also the provision of access to the internet, a laptop and the digital skills training necessary to overcome the inequalities inherent in the Irish Direct Provision system (Farley & Willems, 2017). The aim of this initiative is to aid refugees and asylum seekers in overcoming the significant financial, structural, cultural, and digital equity barriers to accessing higher education (Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Traxler, 2018).

For those who do access university, there are further challenges. Students who are asylum seeking or have refugee status often experience challenges in having their prior learning recognised (Hannah, 1999). A lack of staff awareness of these students' situation, coupled with limited support from the institution, may also impact on them and their studies (Earnest, Joyce,

deMori, & Silvagni, 2010). This situation can be made worse where students feel the need to keep their refugee status a secret (Morrice, 2013). These students are also impacted by socio-cultural issues, regularly experiencing difficulties connecting with other students and staff in the institution, finding group-work, as well as the observation of academic regulations more generally, to be challenging (Kong et al., 2016). These specific challenges are in addition to the fact that for any new student the process of becoming a student is an intense experience that challenges their sense of coherence with regard to their identity (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). This requires these new students to engage in identity work, defined by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2006) as where people are engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness. New students must engage in the identity work of changing from their old way of being to a new one that has to accommodate their new student identity (Allen-Collinson & Brown, 2012). This is a process that often results in duelling identities as they manage the interaction between their new identity and their existing portfolio of identities (Baxter & Britton, 2001; O'Boyle, 2015). In the context of this paper, the term 'duelling identities' is used to mean to those instances where an individual engages in identity work during a time of crisis or transition, also referred to as identity conflict or identity struggle, and draws on the general literature relating to identity as a multidimensional biopsychosocial process (Askham, 2008; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011; Stapleton & Wilson, 2003; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Persistent barriers, for example relating to financial status or digital skills, can also impact on the study experiences of students who are asylum seeking or who have refugee status (Castaño-Muñoz, Colucci, & Smidt, 2018). These students often feel they are not treated equally to other students, leading to perceptions of racism, feelings of isolation (Onsando & Billett, 2009), and of simply not belonging in the institution (Harris, Ngum Chi Watts & Spark, 2013). This lack of a feeling of belonging is significant as a number of authors emphasise the importance that student engagement and a sense of belonging in the institution has on student success (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas, Hill, O'Mahony, & Yorke, 2017). Feeling that one does not belong will impact on the process of identity formation, perhaps with a resulting disidentification (Kriener & Ashforth, 2004) with the institution. It is also possible that the identity formation process may result in a disidentification with an existing identity as they come to identify more with their student identity. Disidentification can occur with a context in general or with specific elements that exist within the context (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). The concept of disidentification raises the issue of nonparticipation, where a conflict or identity struggle exists between an individual's activity and their identification (Hodges, 1998). For example, when an individual is engaged in an activity, within a context, where they disidentify with the activity, the context or both. For such an individual to remain in the context may be harmful to that context and the individual. Many institutions engage in activities designed to facilitate student transition into higher education (Brunton, Brown, Costello & Farrell, 2018a; 2018b; Cook & Rushton, 2009; Farrell, Brunton, & Trevaskis, 2019; Garder, Siegel & Cutright, 2001), as active support during transitions can develop the skills needed for longer-term success (Nash, 2005; Thomas et al., 2017).

Based on the above literature the programme teams supporting these online scholarship students augmented existing student success practices in order to establish a strategic approach to supporting their transition into online study at higher education level. This approach to student success comprises both pre-entry and on-entry supports with financial, logistical, digital, and programme-specific actions targeted at the early stages of the study life cycle (see table 1).

Table 1: Supports provided for online University of Sanctuary scholars

| | |
|-----------|--|
| Pre-entry | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online socialisation course in virtual learning environment • Individual welcome emails and phone calls |
| On-entry | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-campus orientation event: introduction to programme, socialisation opportunities with programme staff, existing students/graduates, campus tour, and overview of university support services • Logistics: aid in opening a bank account and obtaining a student travel card • Online orientation to the virtual learning environment, online classroom, online library resources, and university supports |
| Financial | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of textbooks, study materials, and travel expenses/meal allowance for on-campus events |
| Digital | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online training on the use of the virtual learning environment, online classrooms, and on-line library resources • Provision of a laptop and mobile broadband |
| Support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicated academic support contacts throughout the year • Check-in emails and phone calls |

This paper examines the narratives of six adult University of Sanctuary scholarship recipients in their transition into open, online programmes in Irish higher education and their first year of study on online programmes, facilitated by a strategic student success programme. This examination was conducted in order to explore how these refugees and asylum seekers talk about higher education, and about themselves as higher education students. It is important that such research is conducted in order that an in-depth examination of these transition experiences is available to inform the design or adaption of student success programmes used to facilitate refugee and asylum seeker transition into higher education. This is our response to the UN Sustainable Development Goal that educational systems should adapt to the needs of refugees.

Methodology

A qualitative study was designed to seek a greater understanding of University of Sanctuary scholars' narratives in the early stages of the study life cycle. This study demonstrates an interpretative, data-led approach to the study of participant discourse, especially around identity, grounded in a Discursive Psychology (Edwards, 2012; Wiggins & Potter, 2008) methodological framework. Discursive Psychology "provides a systematic, empirical analysis of talk and text... using a coherent set of concepts and methods" (Edwards, 2012, p. 427). McLean (2012, p. 99) summarises this approach as a view of identity as "co-constructed, negotiated in everyday interactions, and related to the interaction between forms of structure and agency". Discursive Psychology underpin this study's theoretical framework, with language utilised as a resource in analysing the participant's constructions of their social world. However, beyond these constructions that emerge in participants' interviews, this study maintains a broad focus on the production of meaning in social life, and we recognise that identity is a multidimensional, biopsychosocial process with individuals having a coherent sense of their general identity over time (Askham, 2008; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011; Stapleton & Wilson, 2003), albeit one that is challenged during times of transition when an individual must engage in identity work in order to restore that sense of coherence and distinctiveness (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

Following a review of the relevant literature the following overarching research question was formulated:

How do asylum seeker and refugee students talk about higher education, and about themselves as higher education students?

The setting for this research is DCU Connected at Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland. DCU Connected delivers flexible, undergraduate and postgraduate open education programmes through the mode of online learning. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the institutional Research Ethics Committee. Participants were selected based on purposive sampling and are asylum seekers and/or refugees based in Ireland, who have been awarded a scholarship to study online at undergraduate and postgraduate level across different subject domains. The first cohort of participants recruited is comprised of six students of which four are male and two are female. Participants are geographically distributed around Ireland and are primarily living in state-run Direct Provision centres.

As insider researchers, who work in DCU, this has limitations for the study, as issues of power and bias can emerge. The issue of power was dealt through the use of institutional gatekeepers to access the participants, and interviews were conducted by members of the research team who did not directly teach the participants, so as not to exert influence.

The data collection technique was semi-structured recorded interviews conducted online by the research team. Interviews were conducted in real time online using a private Adobe Connect classroom. An interview schedule was created which contained sixteen open-ended questions which were shaped by the research questions. The interview schedule had questions around starting to study, community and social integration, supports and services, experiences of studying online, expectations, and goals.

Transcribed data was inputted into a computer aided qualitative data analysis software package (NVivo 12) and analysed using a methodological framework grounded in Discursive Psychology (Edwards, 2012; Wiggins & Potter, 2008). The analytic process involved a first step of coding by breaking data down into manageable chunks or categories, before moving to a second step of identifying the “pattern within language in use, the set or family of terms which are related to a particular topic or activity” (Taylor, 2001, p. 8). The analysis was data-driven and not structured by prior theory as findings emerged from the iterative identification of patterns within the data resulting in a cohesive and coherent thematic map.

Findings

The analysis of participant data indicates that these learners’ transition narratives are typical in a number of ways, compared to other learners studying open and online programmes, as they: form new student identities while managing their existing identities; begin to feel, to a greater or lesser extent, that they belong in the institution; make friends; and establish support networks with fellow students, academic staff and administrators, and in their personal lives. However, these learners also constructed a distinct and stark divide between two duelling identities, describing a struggle or conflict between their identity as a refugee, in particular those going through the asylum-seeking process, and their new identity as an online learner. Becoming an online learner was constructed as a way to escape the stressful ‘asylum world’ that participants otherwise inhabited, connecting higher education study with the potential future identities to which participants aspired. Identification with the university was emphasised in contrast to their disidentification with the ‘asylum world’ (see figure 2).

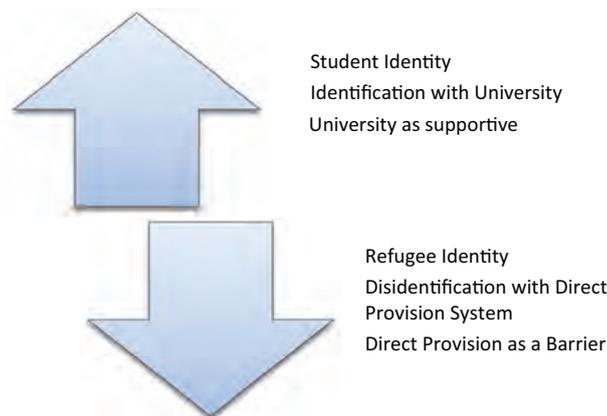


Figure 2: A distinct division between discourse about being a student and being a refugee/being in Direct Provision.

Direct Provision versus the university

When participants talked about Direct Provision it was with consistent constructions of a space that is a source of stress, anxiety, depression, idleness, and lethargy where conditions were simultaneously cramped and lonely, “life in direct provision is not an easy life. It’s a place where you live with other people with a different nation, with different culture and I share my room with two other people” (Participant 6). There was a strong discourse present in the data of participants seeking educational opportunities but being frustrated by the Direct Provision system and systemic barriers to accessing educational opportunities as refugees:

in Ireland it was very, very difficult for me and getting back to education, you know, education programmes I always wanted to, you know, get back to school, you know. And to access the level of education was fairly impossible. I remember staying in my hostel, you know, having sleepless nights with my computer writing emails to private organisations, churches, you know, seeking for funding because I just felt, you know, education was the only thing which could help in such a stressful situation. (Participant 2)

The consistently negative construction of Direct Provision sits in sharp contrast to the way in which participants built up a picture of the university in their interviews as being: helpful, “It has helped me to be more organised” (Participant 1); prestigious, “I was aware, you know, getting to DCU which is a world class and top level university” (Participant 2); and as a route to a desired future:

I wanted to do psychology at that time and the fact that I’m doing it now and it’s an opportunity that I’ve been afforded by DCU, they’ve helped me so much to achieve my goals. I’ve always wanted to study psychology.. I know that this is my goal and this is where I want to be, this is a direction that I want to take so they’ve helped me so much to achieve that. (Participant 3)

In their discourse participants frequently set their construction of the university as a positive against their construction of Direct Provision as a negative:

I used to be idle in the hostel. I didn’t have anything to do as we are not allowed to work, not allowed to study. So when I got the scholarship and I started to study, it was a big achievement. It helped me to come out of my loneliness mood. I was always lonely, I was always idle, feeling depressed all the time, but I now am feeling like I can see the future. (Participant 6)

The origin narratives given by participants relating to how they came to study in the university tended to be structured as stories of a journey away from the negative asylum system and towards a brighter future, enabled by entry to the university. The scholarship programme and the open access it provided to online learning for these participants was constructed as a means of overcoming existing barriers to higher education for them as refugees. The following extract shows Participant 5 talking about receiving news on his scholarship application, and how it was associated with a strong, positive emotional response to that news:

Then I waited, like on [date] [month], it actually happened, the way it happened was like a miracle to me because I remember on [date] [month] it was my birthday, 7th September, and it was in the afternoon. That day I had nothing to do, I was in the hostel, I was in bed. Then all of a sudden, I woke up because my phone vibrated like an email came in. Then I read the email. The email was from DCU and the email was congratulating me like to be one of the people that got the scholarship and it also said out of 62 applicants, you were considered to be one of the people that are getting the scholarship. That's how I ended up at the DCU. (Participant 5)

The university is constructed as a source of support, broadly in terms of the support of the scholarship programme and provision of central services but especially with regard to academic and pastoral support from programme teams. Participants described themselves as being part of a community:

I think it's, you know, it's a network, it's a network of everything, you know, online classroom is a good contact on, you know, on the DCU campus, contacts with the DCU staff, you know. I think all that, it just makes me feel so good. You wake up and you get a mail from, you know, from [Name] or from yourself, you know, this or from [Name] or [Name], you know, it just feels good, you know. You feel like you're part of, you know, a wealth, educational community. (Participant 2)

The descriptions of the University as Supportive were reinforced by the content of participant discourse around their participation in an organised welcome day at the start of the academic year. The welcome day was part of a strategic student success programme delivering key messages designed to facilitate transition into higher education. Participant discourse around the welcome day and associated student success activities demonstrated internalisation of key messages around success:

Oh yeah, the welcome day, I liked that especially the, okay the message was very encouraging because when I went there I was thinking, well where am I going it's going to be hard, about the welcoming message and to hear stories from past students who have gone through that and they tell you that yes, there will be challenges here and there but you will make it. It was encouraging and when we went into the second room there were students, some of them were doing second year and there were some that had graduated and they told us that yes the first year will be challenging but as soon as you find your feet you will be fine. That gave me some hope and I carried that hope with me up until the exam. (Participant 1)

Again, the supportive university discourse sits in stark contrast to descriptions of Direct Provision as unsupportive, as a barrier to the pursuit of their educational and life goals:

I always do the research on my own online and as I told you I'm living in direct provision. There is nowhere that it is provided for as a study room or anything, but what I do I always go to the Manager, ask him to provide me one of the entertaining rooms in the hostel by night time, when they are not using the room. I only do my revision during night time. I can't do it during the day, because there is too much going in the hostel. I can't find a quiet place to study. (Participant 6)

Discourse on duelling identities

The distinction seen in the section above between participant discourse on the university versus Direct Provision also carries through into their discourse on belonging and identity. Acceptance to the university through this open education, online route was constructed as a personally transformative event with regard to identity, again associated with a strong, positive emotional response:

I got this call regarding, you know, and that was it, they said will you hold on the line and a few minutes after they were like oh congratulations, you got it, then I was there, honestly I can't express the feeling, you know, I felt this different kind of person inside me (Participant 2)

Participants constructed strong narratives of belonging to, and identification with, the university:

I: do you feel part of the DCU community?

P1: Absolutely 100%, yes.

I: And what made you feel part of the community?

P: I think the services that are offered by DCU. Like it's like the community within a community that I belong to my own community but then I have the DCU community. Everybody's welcoming, you are at home (Participant 1)

Within these strong narratives there was some construction of their physical distance from the university, as off-campus online learners, as a point of frustration or disadvantage:

If I was a day student it would be different, you know, I would be part of the community, I would be more involved in the university work but being an online student, you know I am not on the school campus all the time. (Participant 4)

Participant talk around the formation of their new student identity, tied to their strong identification with the university, was frequently set against participants disidentification with their way of being in Direct Provision. Through their discourse participants disconnected their talk about their identity, about who they feel they are, from the negative aspects of Direct Provision that they describe. Direct Provision is constructed as something that negatively impacts on identity, rather than providing a source for identification. The following data extract shows Participant two articulating this identity struggle as their social world is split between these two different contexts, and its impact on their motivation to study:

...this is two different worlds, you know, you have the asylum world and you have, you know, you have the study world. And, you know, you might have, you know, a little clue about what it could be. The asylum world is very, very depressing, you know, you're constantly anxious, you're constantly in limbo and then back to the study world it's where you need, you know, you need to put in that 100% concentration, especially when it comes to third level education you need to put your head down. And so it was a little bit hard because there was times where I felt, you know, depressed and stressed, I wouldn't even want to go on my computer. But again when I flashed back to the support that DCU is giving me, you know, I tell myself no, I cannot, you know, I cannot let this happen. And so when I think of the support that the DCU family has given me, it gives me, you know, it tells me, it's like a voice talking to me, [name], wake up, wake up from the bed, go on your computer, you need to get these assignments done, you need to do this, you need to do that and so that was it. So it was a little bit difficult for me. (Participant 2)

Discussion

This section presents a discussion of the findings shown above in the context of the related literature and this study's research question:

How do asylum seeker and refugee students talk about higher education, and about themselves as higher education students?

The key finding emerging from an analysis of participant data grounded in discursive psychology was the interplay between two social worlds constructed as being in opposition to one another, the university/being a student and Direct Provision/being a refugee. This can be seen in participant constructions of those contexts and in relation to how they construct their own identity within those contexts, and as they 'move' (physically, temporally, and psychologically) between them. Participants often employed the discursive device of setting their construction of the university as a positive against their construction of Direct Provision as a negative.

Participant constructions of the Irish Direct Provision system, as well as the negative impact that being in that system has on accessing and being able to study successfully in higher education, align well with existing literature in this area (Harris et al., 2013; O'Reilly, 2018). This finding is further supported by studies from other jurisdictions (Castaño-Muñoz et al., 2018). In contrast the university was constructed in very positive terms, as helpful, prestigious, and as a route to a desired future. Many of the pitfalls experienced by students who are refugees or asylum seekers in the literature, such as socio-cultural issues, regularly experiencing difficulties connecting with other students and staff in the institution, finding group-work difficult, etc. (Kong et al., 2016) did not feature in these participants' narratives. A possible reason for this that can be seen in participant narratives is that they are University of Sanctuary scholarship recipients entering the institution through flexible, open education programmes designed to be taken online by adults with other time consuming commitments. This open education teaching and learning model facilitated flexible entry into higher education. These participants were also supported by a specific student success programme and received financial, logistical, academic, and pastoral supports. Such active supports during the early parts of the study life cycle can facilitate student success (Nash, 2005; Thomas et al., 2017). This highlights the importance of strategic student success programmes for facilitating transition into higher education for refugees, in order to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals of having a collective responsibility to ensure that educational systems adapt to the needs of refugees to ensure this vulnerable group is visible and accounted for in educational provision. Through the provision of these supports for refugees the financial, structural, cultural, and digital equity barriers to accessing higher education may be overcome (Crea & Sparnon, 2017; Traxler, 2018).

The distinction between the social worlds of university and Direct Provision carried through to expressions of participant identity, who they felt they were in each context. Participants constructed a consistent disidentification with the Direct Provision context, or "Asylum World" as Participant 2 describes it (Kriener & Ashforth, 2004), with Direct Provision being constructed as something that causes identity struggle in and of itself as they struggle to hold on to their sense of who they are while living in those circumstances (Hodges, 1998). This disidentification is set against a forceful construction of very much belonging to, and identifying with, the university context, or "Study World" (Participant 2). With regard to the student success literature this strong sense of belonging and accompanying sense of a strong student identity having been formed can be seen as a positive (Allen-Collinson & Brown, 2012; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Thomas et al., 2017). This juxtaposition between their refugee identity and student identity paints a picture of two duelling identities with students engaging in identity work during their transition into open, online higher education in order to overcome identity struggle caused by the process of becoming a student.

Conclusion

This paper's findings further support the literature indicating that a strategically connected student success approach to supporting asylum seekers and refugees transition into online higher education, accounting for the structural, financial, logistical, digital, and social barriers typically experienced can

impact positively on these students. It also emphasises the importance of providing flexible, online, open education study routes at higher education level for under-represented groups. Although limited by the fact this is a small, in-depth, qualitative study, the findings presented above provide useful insights into how institutions can develop and deploy effective policies, practices, and procedures to assist asylum seekers and refugees to integrate into online programmes at higher education level. To conclude, this paper adds credence to the proposition that access programmes such as the University of Sanctuary scholarship schemes can successfully facilitate participation in higher education for asylum seekers and refugees. Further research should move beyond the transition phase and first-year to examine the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees across the entire study life cycle. Further research should also focus specifically on how educational providers can specifically support students with the types of identity struggle between two (or more) duelling identities described in this paper.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the DCU Educational Trust for their support in the provision of University of Sanctuary scholarships for online study.

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