Title – Developing University-Community partnerships to support African refugees in Greater Western Sydney

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Abstract

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) Regional Council has placed support for African humanitarian refugees and recent immigrants high on the University’s engagement agenda. This paper discusses how UWS is responding to this imperative, how our interactions with refugee groups are being structured, and how these interactions and negotiations are shaping academic service learning programs and other activities. The paper also outlines an emerging program of research that aims to identify strategies that will be effective in a range of areas, including education and literacy development, counseling and social support, and youth transitions. Substantial numbers of African refugees have entered Australia over the past three years, many of them from the Sudan. After 21 years of civil war which has destroyed their infrastructure, most Sudanese families entering Australia have lived for extended periods in refugee camps. Their educational and social needs are extreme but they hold high hopes for a better future. A range of well-tested strategies are available to support young people and in terms of literacy development, engagement with school, counseling and stress management, and transition to work or further study. However, many of these strategies make assumptions about levels of cultural familiarity and contextual knowledge that cannot be assumed to apply to recent African immigrants. UWS is at the beginning of a three-year program of research and development aimed at identifying what is needed, developing service learning programs that will deliver effective and sustainable support, and offering strategic assistance to other agencies and groups who are active in this field.
The UWS Regional Council has placed support for African humanitarian refugees high on the University’s engagement agenda. This paper outlines a program of engagement through academic service learning and research, being developed by UWS, in partnership with government agencies, community organizations, and members of the African community. The program aims to identify strategies that will be effective in a range of areas, including education and literacy development, counseling and social support, and youth transitions.

The first section of this paper outlines the nature and scope of the issues we are addressing: who the refugees are, where they are from, and what they have endured. It also discusses the nature of the resources and services are currently available to assist in the settlement and acculturation of refugees in Australia, and outlines some of the complexities and unmet challenges that service providers and members of the African community are identifying. In the second section, we indicate how UWS is responding to these challenges, how our interactions with refugee groups are being structured, and how these interactions and negotiations are shaping academic service learning programs and other forms of engagement.

1. Refugees and recent immigrants from Africa: the scope of the challenge

Over the past decade Australia has provided full support for substantial numbers of refugees who have come from several African countries, including Eritrea, Somalia, Sierra Leone, and the Sudan. Specifically, the Australian government provides support for newly arrived humanitarian entrants through its Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS). Services under this program include
case coordination, on arrival reception and assistance, accommodation services, and short term torture and trauma counselling services. Volunteer groups work with service providers contracted to the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), to support entrants, and to assist them in settling into the local community (Fact Sheet 60, www.dimia.gov.au).

The Sudanese are currently the fastest growing immigrant group in Australia. They were Australia’s priority refugee group in 2004 and 2005. It has been estimated that in 2006, there were 4000 Sudanese refugees in Sydney, mostly concentrated in Auburn and Blacktown. In 2004-2005 Australia took about 70 per cent of its Humanitarian Program migrants from Africa, and in the past 10 years has granted 14,442 humanitarian visas to Sudanese people. Almost 10,000 of these were granted in the past two years (DIMA 2005, p10). The offshore humanitarian visa granted to most of the Australian Sudanese population entitles the holder to permanent residency, onshore family reunification and eventually, citizenship.

After 21 years of civil war which has destroyed their infrastructure, many people from southern Sudan have permanently left their home country. Crossing the border to the north, they may enter refugee camps in Egypt, while those who escape to the south may live for five to ten years in large refugee camps in Kenya before being granted visas to enter Australia. While living in southern Sudan, many of the young people in refugee camps received little schooling. Some teenage refugees arriving in Australia have never been in school, have never sat in a desk, have never held a
pencil or a book. Many children have lived through the death of relatives, and have experienced severe brutality.

Like all immigrant children, they face the challenge of learning English as well as acquiring an understanding of how Australian schools work as social institutions: i.e., how to behave in formal and informal settings, what the rules are, and how to relate to peers and teachers. Unlike most other immigrant groups, however, refugees from the Sudan often cannot read and write in their own language. As equatorial Africans, their language may be Dinka or Nuer, or one of a dozen lesser known languages. However, the Khartoum government has declared that the official national language is Arabic. School texts and school instruction (in the public schools) are, therefore, in Arabic, and as a result, many refugee children from the Sudan cannot read in their mother tongue. This, combined with the lack of regular schooling provision in refugee camps, means that most refugees from Africa arrive in Australia without the literacy skills that they need in order to manage the requirements of the standard curriculum.

Some years ago, the Commonwealth government established the New Arrivals Program to meet the initial needs of immigrant children. Its’ prime purpose is to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) support to enable children to access the curriculum as quickly as possible. Newly arrived students from language backgrounds other than English who meet eligibility criteria are able to access free intensive ESL tuition for between six to twelve months, in schools that have an Intensive English Centre (IEC), or in IEC’s that function as ‘stand alone’ units. However, as the recent report of the Community Relations Commission of NSW
(2006) noted, “IEC centres are regularly full and unable to take on more students, with alternate arrangements having to be made” (2006, p. 94).

Once students have completed 6 or 12 months in an IEC, they remain eligible for additional ESL support. In its submission to the Community Relations Commission, the NSW Teachers Federation pointed out that while ESL teaching staff increased by 20 percent between 1983 and 1993, since 1993 there has been no increase in full-time ESL staff, despite an exponential increase over this time in the need for ESL programs (Community Relations Commission, 2006). A recent motion in the NSW parliament, in response to recommendations of the Vinson inquiry, to employ 100 more ESL teachers, was voted down. The Community Relations Commission has argued that the $5039 per student granted by the Australian government for ESL support under the New Arrivals Program is grossly inadequate. It is estimated that to be effective, the financial outlays on ESL programs should be *three times* the amount provided by through federal sources (Community Relations Commission, 2006, p. 94). While the political challenge of advocating significant increases in funding should not be ignored, schools and philanthropic organizations are being asked to fill the gap, meeting the immediate needs refugee students for tutorial support, particularly during the critical months after they have been discharged from an Intensive English Centre and placed in mainstream classes.

Students with limited English language facility face significant problems in the construction of new social identities. Improved linguistic skills and increased acculturation to the school as a social setting are essential for teenagers who are
attempting to understand how to negotiate their transitions from school to adult life, and who are seeking to explore the options available in terms of work or further study. Initial consultations with Sudanese community members indicated that they are most concerned about educational achievement and support for transition to work or further study. In discussions with UWS staff, they placed these concerns ahead of a focus on counseling and other activities that aim to remedy the effects of the trauma and abuse that many of them have suffered (Fallaw, 2006).

This section has outlined some of the complexities and challenges that teenage refugees, their families, and the service providers, are currently grappling with. In the next section, we indicate how UWS staff are responding to these challenges, and outline some of the programs that we attempting to develop together with our partners.

2. Partnerships, programs, and research: Responding to the challenge

Beginning in late in 2006, a new program of community engagement, research, and service learning is being developed at UWS in an attempt to respond to the challenges outlined above. The process began with a period of negotiation, where UWS academics invited known elders of the Sydney Sudanese community to meet with UWS academics, with the purpose of identifying the issues they considered to be of greatest importance for refugee children, families, and the broader community. In August 2006, UWS commissioned Helen Fallaw, an education and development consultant whose background includes senior
positions in tertiary education in Australia, and in aid projects in Africa. Over a period of two weeks, Helen interviewed several Sudanese community leaders, school principals, and senior teachers who have responsibility for refugee students. She also interviewed staff from voluntary agencies and migrant resource centres, and researched a wide range of electronic and documentary sources (Fallaw, 2006).

Following presentation of the Fallaw report to the UWS Regional Council, the University committed $80,000 to launch a new initiative to support the Sudanese community in Greater Western Sydney. In early December 2006, two community meetings were held where UWS academics, NSW Department of Education and Training personnel, Sudanese community members, and representatives of local high schools, discussed possible initiatives and put forward ideas that might be considered. Both meetings were attended by members of the Australian Sudanese Students’ Association, and two Elders of the Sudanese community. These meetings led to the formation of the Sudanese Learning and Literacy Alliance (SLLA). Based on the wishes expressed by African refugees at the community meetings, SLLA has been set up in order to support the development of English literacy among refugee students, increase awareness within schools and families regarding practices that lead to school success, and provide resources to assist teenagers and their families with the transition from school to work or further study.

The first initiative to emerge from SLLA is a collaborative project involving UWS Master of Teaching (Sec) students, Western Sydney high schools, and the Australian
Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF). Working with the support of the Department (DET), and four Western Sydney high schools, homework centres have been established to provide a program of literacy support and acculturation for students who are in their first 12 months out of an Intensive English Language Centre. This initiative was initially proposed by the ALNF, a philanthropic organization that brings considerable experience and expertise to a range of literacy projects across Australia.

Early in 2006, ALNF contacted UWS and offered to provide intensive training to selected M. Tch students, and then place them in homework centres as tutors. Since the UWS M. Tch (Sec) degree includes a compulsory service learning unit, this was a welcome invitation. In establishing this program, ALNF also asked DET to explore the possibility of establishing homework centres that would be supervised by coordinating teachers who are being appropriately remunerated for this work. In keeping with the commitment of UWS to maximize the involvement of members of the Sudanese community, a Sudanese community liaison officer is being employed to work in these homework centres, assisting the tutors, and creating closer links with the families of refugee students. This program is now referred to as the Refugee Action Support Partnership (RASP).

The compulsory service learning unit within the M.Tch (Sec) is known as Professional Experience 3. PE3 represents a third ‘practicum’ alongside the two conventional classroom-based placements, but its goals are quite different from those of the conventional ‘prac’. With its emphasis on prepared lesson plans, set classroom performances, and the attachment of the trainee teacher to a single
supervisor, the conventional professional experience placement often fails to introduce beginning teachers to the full scope of the professional responsibilities they will face (Cochran-Smith, 1991). This is a particular problem in the Greater Western Sydney region, since many beginning teachers in this region will be appointed to high schools where a majority of the students are poorly prepared for learning, or have difficulty in remaining engaged. They may be refugees; they may be responsible for the care of younger siblings, or be homeless; or their preparedness for school may be compromised by family poverty and low levels of parental education.

Given the diminished levels of support now available for the educational and social programs, many of these schools have become exceptional places that, with great inventiveness, offer services such as youth mentoring, literacy support, homework centres, and in some cases, meals and clothing. Through PE3 we seek to ensure that our trainee teachers become aware of the broader professional responsibilities that are carried out in public schools across Western Sydney, and the ways these responsibilities link public schools with local community organizations. Over 280 secondary teacher education students complete PE3 each year. The University organizes a range of placement options and students may choose among these: every PE3 student is required to complete a total of sixty hours in their service learning program. In most placement options, staff who operate the programs hold reflection sessions with the teacher-education students, encouraging them to examine the effects of mentoring and immersion in alternative educational environments on the school students participating in the
programs. All teacher-education students submit written reflections on their experiences at the end of their placements. Examination of these written records allows for a comparison of student-teacher responses to these different kinds of placements.

Each year, UWS teacher education students move into new contexts where they are invited to deliver essential services in schools and in the community. During the past four years, we have been researching the impact of the PE3 service learning experiences on beginning teachers. Interviews and written reflections from students indicate that the PE3 experience is often transformative, deeply influencing beginning teachers’ ideas about what means to ‘be a teacher’ (Vickers, forthcoming; Gannon & Roots, 2006; Vickers, Harris & McCarthy, 2004).

RASP is our most recent addition to PE3. It is also one of several service learning activities at UWS that are linked to, and supported by, the Sudanese Learning and Literacy Alliance. Through RASP, student teachers gain intensive training provided by ALNF, which prepares them to work in the homework centres described above. Over the next nine months we will be researching the impact of this program on all stakeholders, including refugee students, their teachers, and our teacher-education students.

3. Concluding comments: related SLLA initiatives, and future directions

In this short paper, it has not been possible to do justice to the range of programs being supported by the UWS Sudanese Learning and Literacy Alliance. The co-
researchers on this project, Tania Ferfolja, Trinh Ha, Mo McCarthy, Loshini Naidoo, Rosemary Suliman, and Margaret Vickers, have written two research grant proposals. We have gained one grant, and have another pending. Our proposed research projects will (a) evaluate the impact of RASP, examining in particular what happens to refugee students’ language practices over the weeks of participation in small-group tutoring, (b) involve experienced teachers in ‘research circles’ leading to the publication of protocols to guide other teachers who have less experience in teaching refugee students, and (c) examine the relationship between educational participation and the psycho-social wellbeing of refugee students, and seek to identify effective ways of monitoring resilience and providing support for teenage refugees.

In addition, there are two other service learning programs under way in the College of Arts at UWS. Both focus asking what it will take to ensure effective transitions from school to work of further study for teenage refugees. Much has been written about the diversity of the pathways most young people now follow as they navigate their way from school, through combinations of part-time work and part-time study, often experimenting with numerous options, treating themselves and their careers as a ‘work in progress’ (White & Wyn, 2004; Vickers, 2007). Refugee teenagers face numerous barriers that the well-established native-born never encounter, yet at the same time their parents may be immensely hopeful and even unrealistic about their future options. Currently, in order to fulfill the requirements of the UWS subject known as Learning through Community Service, a group of third-year video students is creating a half-hour documentary video film that features Sudanese young people who have negotiated successful transitions from school to work or further study.
Another group of students enrolled in *Learning through Community Service* are working in with small groups of refugee students to examine how they experience the process of ‘transition’, looking at what they know, how they feel about possible options, what they think their parents want, and how they think they might make up their minds.

Following discussions between community members and UWS academics about each project, it was agreed that these initiatives should serve all refugee students, not just Sudanese refugees. In each of these initiatives, UWS academics will be responsible for project management. A steering committee that includes community members and staff from participating schools will meet to oversee progress. UWS believes that these activities should be negotiated and conducted in partnership with the refugee community, with relevant state government agencies, as well and through local partnerships with schools. Despite the constraints this may place on us as academics, we aim to include the African refugee community in negotiations with us at all stages, examining what we are doing, how we are conducting our research and our teaching, what we are finding out, and what we might do next.

**REFERENCES**


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