

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) serves the fastest growing urban region in Australia. The region is large, young, culturally diverse, and with significant areas and groups that suffer socioeconomic disadvantage. Almost 50% of Sydney's population, and 10% of Australia's, live in the "Greater West". The population has lower rates of higher education participation than the rest of Sydney. Over 50% of UWS students are the first in their families to attend university.

Over the years the region has become home for waves of refugees from many countries. Recently, groups of Sudanese refugees have arrived in the area, many of them after years of living in camps in southern Sudan. UWS is involved in a number of programs to help them adjust to cultural, linguistic and environmental settings.

The Sudanese Learning and Literacy Alliance aims to support improved literacy skills and acculturation of Sudanese refugee students and their families. The program is run in partnership with the State Department of Education and Training and the Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation (ALNF), a charity dedicated to raising language, literacy and numeracy standards in Australia.

The Alliance has three components:

- A literacy tutorial program in which UWS Master of Teaching students provide support to small groups of refugee students at local high schools. The tutors receive 15 hours of intensive training on cultural orientation and literacy development, and are supervised by a teacher-coordinator paid by ALNF. In addition UWS is employing a Sudanese Community Liaison Officer to establish and sustain effective liaison with the high school students' families.
- Teaching to make a difference: supporting Sudanese refugee students in Western Sydney is a new project that will use interviews with high school teachers whose classes include African refugee students to develop and refine descriptions of pedagogical strategies that have been found to support effective learning among those students.
- Learning through community service - youth transitions for African students is being developed for introduction in the second half of 2007. After intensive training and orientation, education students will provide cultural transition, literacy and job search support to groups of African refugee students who are moving into the post-compulsory high school years and making choices about whether to continue at school, undertake technical education or look for a job. Again, the Community Liaison Officer will sustain liaison with the students' families.

A similar program is the Pacific Islander Learning and Literacy Alliance which provides support for a homework centre attended by high school students from Samoan, Tongan, Fijian and other South Pacific Island migrant families. The families of the students also attend. The project focuses on a range of culturally specific teaching strategies and provides an option for education students to learn how to plan and implement learning experiences for students from those backgrounds.

The Indigenous Students Learning and Literacy Alliance is under development. UWS students will be matched with an Aboriginal Education Assistant (AEA) in a particular high school in a reciprocal mentoring program. AEA's are Aboriginal (indigenous) staff employed in schools to help students, teachers and communities to understand indigenous issues, and with achieving better educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. UWS students will be required to develop and negotiate a program around the AEA's specific needs, and the UWS student's own needs and wishes to learn about Aboriginal cultures. The partners will work together (for one day per week for 15 weeks) on their negotiated program and on locally specific projects designed to enhance the skills and knowledge of each, and to have a tangible outcome that is of benefit to the Indigenous children in the school.