

Migrant and refugee pathways to employment: a university initiative

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www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXLVRBgIByQ

Dirty, Dangerous and Difficult





Case Study

Emma came from Burundi, with her five children, after 12 years in a refugee camp.

She had trained as a nurse in Burundi, but Skills Recognition had been unable to verify her qualifications.

Her husband spent some time working in a chicken factory, and both now could not face the smell of raw chicken.

She studied at home after 10pm when the children had gone to bed, and it became very clear that she loved to study. She was an enthusiastic learner and her English improved rapidly.

Emma did her placement in a domestic violence refuge and her supervisor was glowing in her commendation, however, no job flowed on from this, or from the many applications Emma wrote.

Uplifted by her Uni experience and undeterred by job rejections, Emma returned to Uni to study nursing full time.

University as Equity Opportunity

The Bradley Report (2008) emphasised that well qualified people are essential if Australia is to meet the demands of a rapidly changing global economy, yet skilled people are settling for jobs that are way below their capacity.

- Universities can be part of opening pathways for skilled migrants
- However, the participation targets and funding criteria arising from the Bradley Review do not differentiate between equity groups, referring to people from low SES background as if they are a homogenous group.
- The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) guidelines outline funding criteria for “people from low SES backgrounds” as a whole and the higher education participation targets also fail to differentiate groups within this broad cohort. There is no mention of the specific needs of migrants and refugees. As Gale states:

» *Low socioeconomic status appears to have become an umbrella term for all under-represented groups. There are in fact distinct differences within this grouping that again are derived from their different social and cultural differences. (2009 p.4)*

The Equity Paradigm

- In equity narratives universities are construed as culturally and class neutral pathways for higher learning. Identified with this narrative are notions that students (in all their diversity) are transformed through the educational process to reach their full potential, as (culturally neutral) employees, professionals and leaders who will actively contribute to economic development and enhance the competitive position of their countries in both national and world affairs (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).
- Both business and funding models in this increasingly corporate venture reflect this. Whether people enter university under merit or equity arrangements they are expected to participate in the same curriculum, meet the same standards and achieve the same graduate attributes. Supports are provided, but with the aim of bringing low performing students to a set standard.
- Meanwhile, all those nuanced and responsive relationships and activities that students and teachers know have to happen if the boundaries between non traditional university groups and the university are to be spanned, are rendered invisible and the university itself is protected from change.

A Graduate Pathway to Employment for Overseas Qualified People – the context

- Logan and Logan Campus
- Logan City demographics reflect every wave of migration of the 20th and 21st centuries.
- There are now some 180 ethnic communities represented.



Project with Skills Recognition Unit

The Graduate Certificate was chosen because:

- it is short (40 credit points across 2 semesters),
- eligibility requirements have some flexibility (e.g. around language and nature of prior qualifications), and
- it could be modified for the cohort relatively quickly and with minimal impact on related qualifications and programs.

Fee scholarship for 10 students

- Professionals with a health related qualification
- To include an intensive English language and academic skills course provided by Griffith English Language Institute – taught around course content
- To include a 200 hour work placement
- To include two core post graduate academic courses which introduce the Australian health and welfare systems

Purpose and Deliverables

To facilitate the transition of skilled migrants with overseas professional qualifications in health and community services occupations to health related employment in Australia.

Improving labour market participation through

- Assisting participants to develop the skills necessary to gain employment
- Orienting participants to the health and community workforce
- Providing practice experience and access to networks

Deliverables for Participants

- 10 fee scholarships for overseas qualified people
- Enhanced understanding of Australian workplace
- Enhanced employment prospects

Benefits:

- Expand and enhance Qld's skills base and qualifications profile
- Encourage a culture of productive diversity in Qld workplaces
- Reduce delays in skills recognition/employment

Underpinning assumptions

| Problems | Course would address by: |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lack of English language skills | Intensive English language support – verbal and written |
| Lack of local work experience – lack of familiarity with Australian workplace and industry culture | Exposure through course learnings, placement and industry visits. |
| Undeveloped social networks | Expanded networks through university and placement contexts |
| Low confidence in applying for jobs | Build confidence through skills, knowledge and practical experience |
| Low awareness of employment opportunities, limited experience in seeking professional registration | Build broader awareness through course content, field visits and student sharing. |

The Program

| Course Code | Course | Credit Points |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| 7032HSV | Human Service Knowledge & Practice | 10 |
| 7031HSV | Community Work practice | 10 |
| 7012CAL | Workplace Communication for Health Professionals | 10 |
| 7013HSV | Workplace Practicum | 10 |

Response

Promotion, Marketing, Recruitment

Applications, Interview, selection

Semester 1, 10 commenced, 6 completed

Semester 2, 4 commenced, 4 completed.

Countries of origin: Afghanistan, Burundi, Brazil, Congo, South Africa, Sudan, Serbia, Korea, Rwanda, Cook Islands, Romania

Professional Backgrounds: Science, Nursing, Social Work, Community Work, Psychology, Law, Medicine, Literature.

Why hard to recruit?

- We were offering ten complete fee scholarships, yet we were not flooded with enthusiastic applicants.
- It became clear that the people we targeted had not at that time incorporated university into their aspirations.
- People knew they were overlooked for jobs despite having the skills. They had friends who had regained degrees in Australia and still could not get professional positions.
- They were not convinced the outcomes of studying would justify the commitment.
- In some cases they had settled for earning money through low status jobs and were reluctant to re-jig their hopes and lives.
- Nevertheless ten people did enrol and ten people did complete the program.

The Cultural Interface



The Teaching Experience

- The starting point for engagement had to change
- Teaching staff became increasingly aware of the cultural bias of both curriculum content and materials
- Very challenging to teach preconceived content, deliver pre-prepared lectures, or stay with pre existing readings
- Needed to research constantly to link course material to student knowledge and experience, so as to engage from their strengths and starting points
- The students were vocal and assumed power and voice in the classroom
- Exploration of life issues became an energetic part of curricula
- Mainstream minority students were impacted – some positively, some not so
- Between a small group of staff a debate about the cultural dimensions of curriculum opened up.
- Both ways learning became a reality – discussion was intense
- The notion of academic standards was subjected to scrutiny – intense discussion between staff
- The search for more appropriate reading material was constant
- Increased demands and expectations on staff to support students in their community lives
- Teaching staff put significant effort into supporting students to negotiate an unwieldy university system
- Celebrations were often and fabulous – family and community members sometimes came to class.

The Process of Studying

- Strong cohort relations and support – very supportive
- Intensive English language support – very helpful (IELTS 6 not achieved by anyone)
- Steep learning curve in critical thinking – a different kind of study from previous experience – lots of reading
- Acculturation struggles – course deals with values and social issues – students said this was a struggle, eye-opening, and interesting
- Intensifying sense of achievement leading to Graduation
- Lasting family and community outcomes
- Increased respect for social institutions
- Experience varied by cultural group

Graduate Outcomes

| Activity N=10 | Prior | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|------------------------------------------------------|-------|------|------|------|
| Working full time in professional human service role | 0 | 1 | 2 | 5 |
| Studying at Masters level | 0 | 1 | 3 | 3 |
| Studying Bachelors level | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Part time work in professional human service role | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Working in non human service role | 5 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Seeking Work | 9 | 7 | 4 | 1 |
| Accreditation | | | 1 | 1 |
| | | | | |

Note: some graduates are both studying and working – hence variation in numbers

Qualitative Outcomes

All students report a range of outcomes:

- Better English, interpersonal skills and critical thinking;
- Improved self expression, self esteem, self confidence - which all flow into improved quality of life;
- Learning computer skills has opened a new world;
- Most students said they were better able to contribute effectively to their own communities;
- Learnings 'have changed my life' – now listen and communicate much better in all contexts, - home, community, work;
- Have learned to work with young people, to understand their issues, help in family and community relationships;
- Improved understanding of the service system
- Better networks
- Improved leadership skills in own community.

Source: program evaluation

Outputs

- 14 students commenced the program as part of the scholarship scheme (10 in semester 2 and 4 in semester 2).
- Ten students completed and four dropped out.
- There have been three further enrolments of overseas qualified students since the scholarship was removed. These students are still completing.
- Four participants completed their work placement in community centres, two with Department of Child Safety, two with Multilink Services, one with a domestic violence refuge, and one with Southbank Institute of TAFE.
- Six further students were supported by another Griffith Partnership to complete the course (from NZ, Afghanistan, Sudan and Samoa).

Case Study

Anton came to the program as a father of four, unemployed, science graduate who had worked in a medical laboratory and clinic in his central African hometown.

After many years in a refugee camp, he came to Australia and worked in a meat factory for a while, but had little stomach for it.

He struggled throughout the program, less with English, and more because course concepts challenged his values and modus operandi. He wanted to apply rules to most situations and assert his authority as a way of addressing challenging situations.

By the end of the program, after many classroom discussions, much reading and assignment writing and significant exposure in the field, he reflected that the program had changed how he operated as a worker, husband, father, community member and human being. He said “I now do not have to control everything. I know the value of communication, listening, and I can work things out with others, rather than insisting on one right way”.

He secured a full time position as a case manager from his placement and is still working and learning in that position. He is also studying for a Masters of Mental Health Practice.

Teach them “our way” or co-construct new ways?

Trevor Gale recently noted that appreciation of socioeconomic mobility and people’s sense of place “could see universities working more closely with and making contributions to communities rather than offering lifelines to individuals within them to escape to a higher education” (Gale, 2010, p.11).

Similar views were expressed in a New Zealand review of strategies to engage Pacific Island parents in education which noted that the “co-construction of shared knowledges” (Gorinski & Fraser, 2006, p.1) was likely to be the most effective approach.

We suggest also that dialogue at *the cultural interface* is, or should be, core university business. However, at present this happens more through the dedication and energy of individual staff than through any structural arrangement.

The Industry

- School of Human Services and Social Work has strong relations with Industry
- Field Placements are part of most courses
- Agencies are under increased pressures and the supervision of students can add to this
- Nevertheless placements were found for all students as well as shorter work experiences
- Visits were made by university staff to all placements
- Students demonstrated the knowledge and skills to do the job
- One student only secured employment from placement
- Enquiries with agencies concerning this revealed that all agencies are so short staffed that if a vacancy does come up they are looking for the most skilled person who can work with the least support across the most dimensions
- The agencies most likely to employ graduates are multicultural agencies.
- Multicultural agencies tend to have stronger frameworks for employing and managing diversity
- Most Australian workplaces, including human service agencies, do not have such frameworks.
- Australia has poor macro and meso frameworks for employing diversity (Syed & Kramar, 2010).

The Project Experience

Universities must work with partners and communities to address pressing real world issues.

- This increasingly means staff are charged with delivering and managing short term projects
- This is usually on top of full workload
- Timelines are short and expectations are high
- Institutional support is low (for small funded projects)
- The broader system paradigm operates against/cuts across small project trajectories
- Everyone is too busy to engage with a small project that is not directly part of their workload
- Administrative support is routinised
- Project points to systemic limitations but no-one wants to engage
- It is easy to kid ourselves that we are doing our best with the opportunity and that our project is delivering meaningful change
- But how can we really know?

Grad Cert as Pathway

Hopes that the Grad Cert would provide an ongoing pathway to employment for skilled migrants and refugees have been impacted by:

- Commonwealth dropping its fee support for Grad Certs. So fees of \$3,200 for whole program increased to about \$7,900.
- Absence of further fee scholarships
- School of Human Services and Social Work rationalising Grad Certs into one program – larger cohorts, economies of scale;
- Increased workloads on staff that mean such a cohort would receive less support
- Centrelink issues did not get resolved.

University as Equity Opportunity

The experience of this short project indicates that tailored initiatives addressing specific local-level needs of specific population groups can offer an effective approach and do have potential to have a long-term impact, benefitting not only program participants but also their wider communities.

However achieving this will be more attributable to extra effort and initiative of individual staff, rather than as an effect of proactive structural arrangements.

Further, as Gale indicates, it may be that higher education institutions need to become more sophisticated in their equity thinking, and their range of equity practices if broader systemic issues are to be addressed.

The final message

Australian society and Australian workplaces are missing out on some very fine skills and knowledge, through the reluctance to employ overseas qualified people.

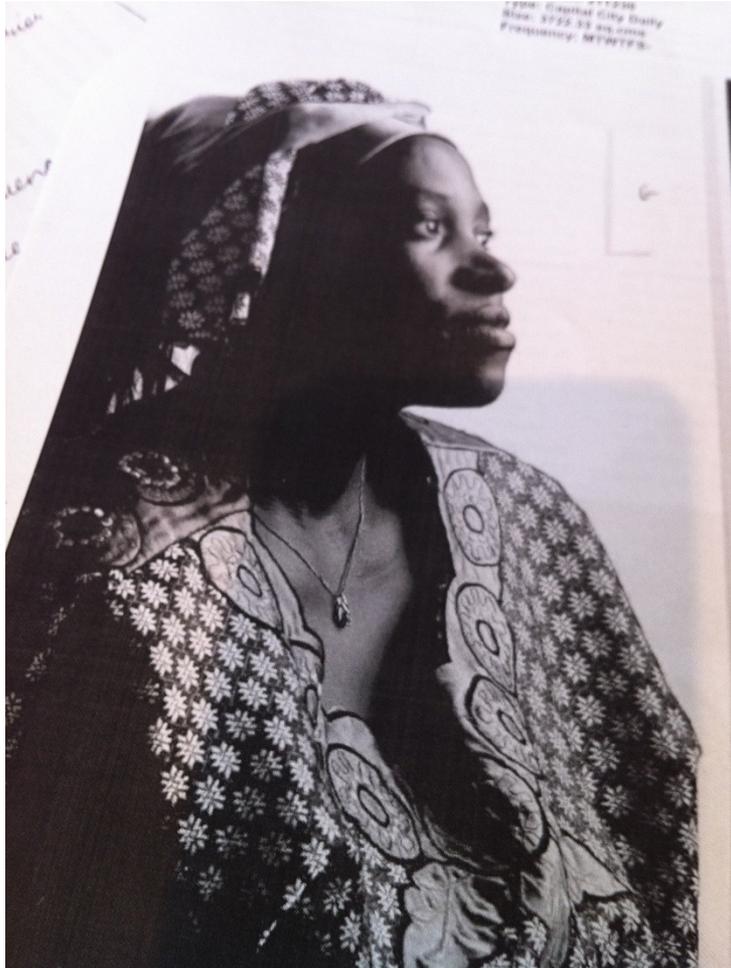
A short graduate course can provide a very adequate professional orientation, but the pathway into employment will open only slowly.

The experience of re-finding oneself through study is a joyous one and one that individuals, families and community benefit from.

Systemic barriers to employment of professionally competent graduates require other strategies to address.

Graduate certificates are useful vehicles for this cohort, and should therefore, attract Commonwealth subsidies and fee scholarships, as part of a socially inclusive policy agenda.

The tension between linear economic paradigms and the multidimensionality of small projects means the former will always prevail, and small projects will only provide local gains.



Opening my mind to University has opened the possibility to my children and to other members of my community. It has increased my confidence in study, and given me skills for work, It has enabled me to work with my community In many different ways.

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