



VIEWPOINT

Hidden from view? Bringing refugees to the forefront of equity targets in Australian higher education

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Students from refugee backgrounds are a legitimate equity target group in higher education. They bring personal assets such as resilience and educational aspiration developed through their life experience, but they also have complex backgrounds of educational, social and economic disadvantage that predispose them to under-representation in undergraduate and postgraduate education. It is difficult to evaluate Australian educational participation rates for these students given the lack of visibility in equity-related data collections. Arguably, this is due to their historic inclusion in the 'Non English Speaking Background' equity target group, which disappeared as a policy making focus in the late 1990s. Currently, and more broadly, students from refugee backgrounds fall within a larger collective target group of 'low socio-economic status' and, consequently, still lack visibility. Using the 'Refugee-Humanitarian Birthplace Groups Approach' and Australian Census data, a potential refugee equity target rate of 3.59% for Australian universities is proposed. We argue that it is timely to consider this student cohort independently of other existing equity targets. Universities should not only collect data relating to the participation of these students, but the Australian Government should require its universities to report these data to ensure transparency of participation at a national level.

Keywords: Australia; equity; higher education; refugees; socio-economic status; non-English speaking background

Background

The human, social and economic impacts of war, including the educational toll, are devastating. Conflict is a major barrier to education and with 35 countries identified as experiencing armed conflict (1999 to 2008), the extent of the problem internationally is substantial (UNESCO, 2011). The role that education can play in peace building means that the higher educational prospects of those who do leave their home countries are paramount (UNESCO, 2011). The current large-scale migration of Syrian refugees across Europe is a case in point. Second to the provision of basic needs such as food, drink and shelter, higher education prospects are a key priority, as reflected in the emergence of initiatives to support Syrian (and other) refugees to access higher education (Redden, 2016; de Wit & Altbach, 2016). Given Australia's commitment to receive 12,000 refugees from Syria in addition to its standing annual humanitarian quota (Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2015), we argue that students from refugee backgrounds should become a priority group for equity discussions, research and policy making. Students from refugee backgrounds constitute a unique group in the educational landscape because of their complex personal histories. They may have been forcibly displaced from their homelands with little or no warning, experiencing a profound loss of personal, material, social, cultural and economic resources (Kinzie, 2007; Ryan, Dooley, & Benson, 2008). In addition, they

may have experienced traumatic events such as witnessing the deaths of family members, the destruction of their homes, and falling victim to physical and sexual abuse (Marshall, 2006). Those with such backgrounds can experience lengthy waiting periods associated with resettlement application processes. During this time, they may have little or no access to adequate nutrition (Pittaway & Muli, 2009), few material possessions, and limited education and employment prospects (Bethke & Braunschweig, 2004). Yet, for the small and fortunate proportion of displaced people that are granted resettlement (i.e., less than 1%; UNHCR, 2012), research indicates that these life experiences may be a source of enrichment (Harris, Marlowe & Nyuon, 2015).

Refugee experiences may foster the development of personal strength, resilience and educational aspiration that can be brought to higher education (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Naidoo, 2015). Resilience may not only come from adaptability, hope and a focus on the future (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012), but also a strong sense of agency (Lawson, 2014). Relational contexts and social capital can support the development of resilience (Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Naidoo, 2015); for example, through the provision of social support (King, 2013). Yet, despite the strengths developed as a consequence of the refugee experience, the complexity of the social, educational and economic backgrounds of these individuals predisposes their under-representation in higher education. This paper contextualises the participation of students from refugee backgrounds in Australian higher education within the prevailing policy framework established in the early 1990s (Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training/National Board of Employment, Education and Training [ADEET/NBEET], 1990). We argue that students from refugee backgrounds are a legitimate equity target group whose under-representation remains hidden in reported data. Further, we propose an approach for identifying a target participation rate and offer recommendations in terms of data collection and reporting.

Equity targets in higher education

The Australian Government defined equity in higher education as ‘proportional representation’, wherein a university’s student population should proportionally reflect the underlying composition of Australian society as a whole (ADEET/NBEET, 1990). Using this notion of proportional representation, a number of national equity objectives for the participation of disadvantaged groups were proposed. These disadvantaged groups and respective target participation rates were based on Australian census data and initially included: lower socio-economic (low SES, target 25%); Non English Speaking Background (NESB; born overseas and less than 10 years living in Australia, 4.66%); disability (8%); regional (23.32%); remote (0.60%); Indigenous (2.23%); and women in non-traditional fields (40%) (ADEET/NBEET, 1990).

In identifying these groups, the Australian Government acknowledged that there was overlap between them (i.e., someone could belong to more than one category), and that some disadvantaged groups were not readily defined or differentiated (ADEET/NBEET, 1990). Particularly problematic, in terms of its scope and definition, was the NESB category (Martin, 1994 as cited by Mestan, 2016). Nevertheless, the nominated groups and target participation rates became the basis for subsequent reporting. By 1996, a performance review

against these targets concluded that the most under-represented groups were those from low SES backgrounds, and rural and isolated students. It was also reported that NESB access and participation rates had increased to the extent that as a group, access was no longer an issue (Australian National Board of Employment, Education and Training [ANBEET], 1996). The more recent Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) similarly concluded that the previous 10 years had been characterised by an increase in enrolments by disadvantaged students (such as women and those from NESB) but that those in the low SES, rural and remote, and Indigenous categories were the most seriously under-represented. Given that the crude measure of proportional representation had been met, NESB disappeared from the equity agenda (Gale, 2012).

Discrete sub-groups within the NESB category, such as refugee and humanitarian entrants, arguably remained under-represented at the time that NESB lost the focus of policy makers. The collective measure of NESB effectively obscured the true participation rates of both students from refugee backgrounds and other migrants, potentially overestimating and underestimating the rate, respectively. Australian census data from 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010) supports this proposition, reporting disaggregated data with substantially different higher education participation rates between sub-groups of the NESB category in both undergraduate and postgraduate education. These data show 34% of skilled migrants had completed a bachelor's degree, compared with 22% of family migrants and only 5% of humanitarian migrants. These differences were mirrored in postgraduate education (18% of skilled migrants, 7% of family migrants and 1% of humanitarian migrants).

While the Australian Government's acknowledgement in 1990 that some disadvantaged groups had been ignored or subsumed within other identified groups (ADEET/NBEET, 1990), the issue has persisted in more recent times (Gale & Parker, 2013). Certainly, subsequent policy focus has left the issue unaddressed. In response to the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008), the Australian Government announced a reform agenda with a central objective of becoming a fairer Australia. A key goal was that higher education should 'provide opportunities for all capable people from all backgrounds to participate to their full potential and be supported to do so' (Australian Government, 2009, p. 7). Its key reform focusses on increasing the participation of those from low SES backgrounds (inclusive of Indigenous students), from 15% (a static rate over the past two decades), to a target participation rate of 25%.

Despite empirical evidence that individuals from refugee backgrounds fall within the targeted disadvantaged groups of lower SES and NESB, this group has not been specifically identified in any key Australian Government higher education reports (ADEET/NBEET, 1990; ANBEET, 1996; Australian Government, 2009). While they continue to bear little mention, there is an emerging focus on students from refugee backgrounds in the scholarly literature. A relative dearth of academic literature concerning this distinctive student body in Australian higher education was noted only a few years ago (Ferede, 2010; Harris & Marlowe, 2011). Since that time and more recently, the scholarly focus has increased, suggesting a growing recognition of the importance of understanding the experiences and challenges facing students from refugee backgrounds (e.g., Harris, Marlowe & Nyuon, 2015; King 2013;

Lawson, 2014; Lennette & Ingamells, 2013; Mestan, 2016). Indeed, in reviewing the last 25 years of equity targets for those from an NESB background, Mestan (2016) concluded that ‘...access and participation objectives should be amended to concentrate on people with refugee backgrounds’ (p. 132).

Students from refugee backgrounds

From an educational perspective, students from refugee backgrounds often arrive in Australia with a history of disrupted formal schooling (Bonfiglio, 2010; Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006) in the range of a few months to many years (Bethke & Braunschweig, 2004). For some, this significantly reduces opportunities to develop literacy skills (Ndhlovu, 2011), creating obvious challenges for participation in education and employment. It is little surprise, therefore, that this group typically experience greater unemployment and lower labour force participation when compared with other migrants (Hugo, 2011).

In Australia, migrants on humanitarian visas have been shown to receive a lower mean annual income compared with those arriving under family and skilled migrant visas (\$34,171.60 compared with \$51,278.40 and \$76,094.00) in the first five years of resettlement (Australian Survey Research Group, 2011). In addition, social disadvantage characterises the daily experience of newly arrived refugees (Harris & Marlowe, 2011). This is because becoming a refugee ‘...changes where you go, what you do, who you see (or where, what and who you don’t)’ (Luzia, 2010, p. 360). Furthermore, those who belong to a visible or religious minority can experience racism in various structural and interpersonal contexts (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007).

Consequently, individuals from refugee backgrounds can be considered a unique group, occupying various facets of disadvantage including lower SES, NESB and, in some cases, disability, and regional and remote. Because disadvantage is persistent and multidimensional (McLachlan, Gilfillan, & Gordon, 2013), it is likely that individuals from refugee backgrounds will constitute a disadvantaged group not only in their early years of resettlement but also beyond this period.

Refugee data: hidden from view

Because refugee background is subsumed in the disadvantaged ‘umbrella’ groups of low SES and NESB, it is not readily identifiable and is, therefore, effectively hidden. The Australian Government requires its universities to report data relating to enrolled students, including country of birth, year of arrival in Australia, language spoken at home and residential location (Australian Department of Training and Education, 2016). These data enable an assessment of NESB and, to some extent, low SES, but do not facilitate any disaggregation of possible prior refugee status. NESB is determined using a definition that, even in 1994, was based on the data that universities already collected at that time (i.e., domestic students who are born overseas; speak a language other than English at home; and have lived in Australia for less than 10 years) (Mestan, 2016).

Universities do collect their own additional admissions and enrolment data. However, the paucity of published data relating to students with a refugee background means that it is likely that few have reliable datasets for this group. If universities do have access to such

information, it is not part of a more visible national dataset. Even citizenship status is unhelpful, as those who migrate under Australia's humanitarian migration program become citizens over time, their background becomes opaque, and it becomes more difficult to disaggregate their data (Lawson, 2015; Mestan, 2016).

These data issues not only make it difficult (if not impossible) to assess whether this proposed equity group are fairly represented, but the issues, barriers and enablers in facilitating academic success also remain obscured. Skilled migrants may have an NESB and can encounter difficulties in transitioning from one education system to another. Yet, they likely lack the substantial educational gaps and possible traumatic histories encountered by refugees as a consequence of forcible displacement (Ben-Moshe, Bertone & Grossman, 2008; Refugee Council of Australia, 2010). In addition, their migration is often well planned, enabling them to arrive in Australia with adequate social, economic and material resources. Refugee resettlement outcomes (although certainly not homogeneous) can also differ when compared with those who arrive on family or skilled migrant visas (Australian Survey Research Group, 2011), although some refugees may also be included in these categories. Given the unique set of circumstances faced by students from refugee backgrounds, it is clear that this group warrants further exploration as an identifiable equity target group. This was reflected by Mestan (2016) who recently argued that universities should explicitly focus access and participation objectives on those with a refugee background as a specific sub group.

In some ways, the near invisibility of higher education participation rates amongst students from refugee backgrounds in Australia is unsurprising. It reflects a broader dearth of reliable data concerning the underlying prevalence and distribution of refugees in the broader Australian population. Hugo (2011) explained that Australia has excellent data relating to immigration flows (i.e., the movement of migrants including differentiation between different visa categories), but not stocks (i.e., the number of migrants at any point in time). The Australian census, which could be a useful tool for the collection of stock data, does not differentiate between different visa types for migrants. The absence of this data complicates the process of determining refugee participation rates in higher education, making it difficult to understand the issues and challenges they face.

Determining a target

While knowledge of higher education participation rates of students from refugee backgrounds would be useful and is arguably necessary, such data alone are insufficient for comprehensive equity discussions. Integral to such discussions is the need to determine whether participation rates reflect the population of individuals from refugee backgrounds at any given point in time, relative to the overall Australian population. We argue that while a target equity rate does not currently exist, it is possible for one to be calculated, as we now describe.

In a report to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Hugo (2011) argued for a method known as the 'Refugee-Humanitarian Birthplace Groups Approach' to identify current stocks of Australians who migrated under a refugee or humanitarian visa. This approach has established distinctly different birthplace distributions for refugee-humanitarian

settlers versus non-humanitarian settlers. Using 2011 Census data, a total of 772,776 Australians were identified as originating from pre-identified countries with historical refugee flows (G. Hugo, personal communication, January 10, 2014). Thus, a robust indicator of Australians with a refugee-humanitarian visa background could be calculated as a proportion of the overall population, that is, 3.59% (772,776/21,507,717) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Based on these data, then, it is reasonable to argue that Australian universities should have a refugee-humanitarian participation target rate of 3.59%. So, whilst the Australian government and the universities it funds may not be able to assess the numbers of refugees they have admitted into their courses historically, Hugo (2011) provides an approach for at least estimating a reasonable future target.

Participation of refugees in postgraduate and high stakes courses

Gale (2012) argued that whilst proportional representation targets are not a particularly sophisticated approach, they do highlight deficits in equity. Even so, he says ‘for equity to have real teeth, proportional representation also needs to apply across institutions and course types’ (p. 246). Just how well institutions do this is difficult to readily assess because the evaluation of participation rates for equity groups in higher education courses is collapsed into ‘fields’ in public reports. For example, ‘health’ includes nursing, dental and medical studies, rather than specific courses (Gale & Parker, 2013). The true representation of specific equity groups in high stakes and highly competitive courses such as medicine, which has student enrolment numbers capped, are rarely publicly reported.

If refugee participation rates are hidden in datasets for undergraduate entry courses, then the situation is even more opaque for graduate entry courses. Furthermore, if population groups are under-represented in undergraduate studies, they almost certainly will be under-represented in graduate studies. Equity in postgraduate study has received little attention by both universities and in Government policies in Australia (Gale & Parker, 2013). Yet, with a general move toward postgraduate study in the developed world, including Australia (Harvey, Burnheim & Brett, 2016), and with postgraduate students accessing greater employment and earning opportunities across their lifetime (Smith et al., 2010), it constitutes a significant issue that implores further investigation.

Recommendations and conclusions

In order to progress the important issue of identifying students from refugee backgrounds as a legitimate equity group, we offer a number of recommendations. Firstly, based on the evidence reviewed in this paper, the challenge for Australian universities is to demonstrate why they shouldn’t take affirmative action for this group of students, in particular, by establishing an equity target. A proportional representation rate of 3.59% is as justifiable as any rate previously set as a target by the Australian Government for any other named equity target group, and this is recommended as an initial target.

Secondly, more precise data need to be collected and evaluated by universities in order to assess and monitor participation. It is recommended that, as part of their admissions processes, universities ask students to provide information pertaining to their previous humanitarian visa status. We do, however, acknowledge that obtaining such information is

complex and likely to prove problematic. For example, some students from refugee backgrounds may not have migrated to Australia under the humanitarian migration program. In addition, some students may be reluctant to disclose this information because of a perception that this could disadvantage them. In order to improve the reliability of this data, strategies could be employed such as reinforcing the university's privacy commitment and providing a rationale for the data collection (i.e., the positive intent to improve the higher educational prospects of students from refugee backgrounds). While such data would likely provide only estimates of participation rates, it would nevertheless provide a useful starting point. Further consideration would, therefore, be needed to ensure that data collections yield the most accurate data.

Finally, understanding *national* higher education participation levels for this equity group requires knowledge of prior humanitarian visa status. This would necessitate a revision of the data elements that the Australian Government requires its universities to report. Changing such requirements would align national practice with the recommendations made by the Bradley Review to improve equity and access for students from non-traditional backgrounds (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). It is arguably achievable and feasible if there is the will to do so. More broadly, this would contribute to addressing the Government's 'fairer Australia' objective.

In proposing a target participation rate, there is a need to underpin this, as with other equity targets, with funding and policy strategies to not only support access, but also achievement and outcomes (Mestan, 2016). Facilitating access to higher education alone is insufficient (Lenette & Ingamells, 2013). If we are to truly widen participation rates for students from refugee backgrounds, we must ensure that the curricula, pedagogical practices, and classroom dynamics value and acknowledge the diversity of our students, and recognise the strengths they bring to the teaching and learning context. In this sense, we must recognise and integrate 'multiple ways of knowing' (Harris, Marlowe, & Nyuon, 2015). This involves adopting strengths-based approaches and avoiding a reliance upon deficit models to understand the refugee experience in the context of higher education.

In introducing its 1990 policy paper, the Australian Government argued that lack of precision in defining disadvantaged groups was not a cause to delay action to redress apparent disadvantage (ADEET/NBEET, 1990). Some 25 years later, students from refugee backgrounds remain hidden in higher education datasets and in targets generated by policy statements. However, almost perversely, they are able to be defined as a sub group of both low SES disadvantage and NESB. Perhaps the 2016 corollary is that universities should not let precision in defining low SES (given it is now the umbrella term in policy statements) be a cause to delay action to redress apparent disadvantage. A population-based estimate of 3.59% for proportional representation is suggested as a guide for establishing a target. Not only should universities collect data relating to the participation rates of these students, but the Australian Government should require its universities to report these data to ensure transparency of participation at a national level. For such students to remain hidden in data collections and unnamed in equity targets is, arguably, a secondary injury to their original displacement.

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