

Understanding and responding to the experiences of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in a university setting

Building capacity of university staff to work with refugee & migrant students: A collaborative project between MYAN NSW & UNSW



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March 2021



Section 1

Background

Education is a key factor in achieving successful settlement outcomes for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. The National Youth Settlement Framework (NYSF)¹ considers being engaged in pathways towards employment — including education and training — as an indicator of active citizenship and good youth settlement.

Students from migrant and refugee backgrounds have specific educational and wellbeing needs that can differ from their Australian-born peers. Newly arrived students commonly face barriers related to the challenges of settling in a new country, including: learning a new language; navigating a new culture and social systems; building new peer relationships; negotiating grief and loss associated with separation from significant others; and an unfamiliar (and often very different) educational

environment.² At the same time, they are navigating the developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence, and establishing their identity and a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar environment.

Despite the many barriers to access and participation, young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds also have a wide range of skills, strengths and resources. They are often multilingual, have high educational aspirations, possess 'grit' or determination, have broad international and cross-cultural experience and high levels of resilience. Building on these strengths is an effective approach to addressing the rights and needs of young people in all areas of their engagement with the service system including education.

Educational disadvantage experienced by young people with a refugee or migrant background can impact on their ability to achieve positive education outcomes in higher education settings. Universities need to understand and respond to these unique experiences to ensure young people's sustained participation, engagement and success in their university studies and university life in general.

¹ MYAN Australia (2020) National Youth Settlement Framework. Melbourne.

² Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. (Foundation House) (2020) School's In for Refugees, <https://sifr.foundationhouse.org.au/>

Section 2

Aims of the project

UNSW embarked on this pilot project to meet the professional development needs of its teaching and support staff, as well as the students involved in the University's outreach program ASPIRE, who come into contact with culturally and linguistically diverse, migrant and refugee (CALDMR) students— both domestic and international. In recognition of the distinct needs and experiences of this student cohort, the resources and guides created as part of this project will be of use and freely available to universities across the country.

The project is supported by the Refugee Education Special Interest Group (RESIG, <http://refugee-education.org>) and aligns with its mission to enhance the educational opportunities and outcomes of students from migrant and refugee backgrounds, through information sharing, resource development and national-level advocacy.

As part of the project, Multicultural Youth Affairs Network (MYAN) NSW was engaged to deliver tailored training on the National Youth Settlement Framework and create learning tools to apply the framework within a university setting.

This report provides a summary of MYAN NSW's contributions in this collaborative project including:

- Findings from two consultations with refugee and/or migrant young people (living and or studying in NSW) about access to higher education
- Training feedback and evaluation



Section 3

Methodology

Youth Consultations

MYAN NSW's consultation process involved:

- Developing consultation questions and activities in collaboration with UNSW
- Promoting the consultations to young people through Facebook and Instagram
- Recruiting up to 20 young people through MYAN NSW's Youth Ambassador program and community partners
- Facilitating two online consultations in partnership with youth peer facilitators
- Remunerating young people for their time and expertise
- Writing up consultation findings

MYAN NSW facilitated two 1-hour consultations with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. These were co-facilitated by young people and held over two evenings in September 2020. Due to COVID-19, the consultations were hosted online via Zoom. Young people were offered a \$30 honorarium for their contributions.

Through these consultations, MYAN NSW aimed to:

- Identify key challenges faced by students before entering higher education

- Explore barriers to access and support when seeking enrolment
- Understand the nature of current support available within higher education, and
- Identify what recommendations young people have about practical approaches to put in place before, during and after completing tertiary education.

A total of 15 young people participated in the two consultations. They ranged in age from 14 to 29 years and identified their cultural backgrounds as:

Indian and Indian Australian
Vietnamese and Egyptian
Pakistani
Arabic Iraqi
Australian Filipino
Ghanaian Australian
Afghan and Afghan Hazara
Asian Latina Australian
English and Urdu Hindi
Persian Kurd
Syrian

Five participants reported to have arrived in Australia within the last five years. 11 participants had completed high school in Australia and all but one was looking to apply to continue their studies in a higher education institution. Six participants were currently enrolled in a higher education institution.

Findings from the sessions are detailed in Section 3 of this report.

Pre-training engagement

MYAN NSW also facilitated two pre-training consultations sessions with UNSW stakeholders — one with staff and one with volunteer students with the Access and Equity (Students) Program, to identify learning needs and goals, explore current levels of awareness and inform the development of relevant learning materials.

Pre-training consultations with UNSW staff and UNSW Aspire Ambassadors aimed to:

- Understand the experiences, strengths and needs of teaching and support staff and UNSW University Ambassadors in the context of working with students with refugee and migrant backgrounds
- Identifying knowledge and understanding of the refugee and migration experiences of young people
- Identify current barriers to access and support within higher education
- Explore mechanisms, systems and supports that would be needed to make targeted support possible
- Identifying training expectations and outcomes
- Gather feedback to develop learning materials e.g. case studies tailored to the experiences of participants.

UNSW staff and students were consulted on October 27, 2020 in two separate 1.5 hour sessions. A total of five UNSW Aspire Ambassadors and four staff took part.

Development of tailored training resources

MYAN NSW's scope of work included the development of tailored training materials to be used as part of two face-to-face training days. Training resources would be developed based on existing resources included as part of the National Youth Settlement Framework. Findings from both the youth consultations and UNSW pre-training sessions were used to inform the development of these resources.

In addition, an external consultant was engaged to gather additional qualitative data from young people about their experiences with trying to access higher education. This data, along the consultant's own lived experiences, provided evidence for the development of four individual scenarios used during the training sessions. These scenarios were further developed into a stand-alone resource (with a user guide) to be use by UNSW stakeholders to further their understanding and support their work with students from refugee and migrant backgrounds into the future. These resources will also be made available to universities across the country through the RESIG.

³ Access and Equity (Students) located in the Division of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at UNSW, leads an educationally focussed outreach (Aspire program) for disadvantaged schools in NSW with the core objective of improving post school learning outcomes for students and increasing access rates or equity cohorts to higher education. <https://www.access.unsw.edu.au/ambassadors>

Face-to-face training sessions

MYAN NSW facilitated two full-day, face-to-face training sessions in November 2020. The sessions were delivered by qualified trainers with extensive experience in developing and delivering a range of training at the state and national levels, across the government and non-government sectors, with young people and community groups. The sessions were co-facilitated and supported by young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds with lived experience in the higher education setting.

The session with UNSW teaching and administrative staff focused on building participants' skills and confidence in a range of areas, including:

- Understanding refugee, migrant and asylum-seeking experiences of young people
- Exploring educational barriers, needs and aspirations of students from refugee and migrant backgrounds
- Exploring concepts of culture, cultural accountability, inclusion and social justice
- Understanding the National Youth Settlement Framework (NYSF) and how it can be implemented in a higher education setting
- Understanding the factors that contribute to good settlement for young people and how universities can contribute to good settlement outcomes
- Exploring good settlement (including positive educational outcomes) through the principle of active citizenship

- Exploring the NYSF Good Practice Capabilities
- Assessing and improving individual practice with students from refugee and migrant backgrounds

Training with UNSW Aspire Ambassadors focused on building students' skills and confidence in a range of areas, including:

- Understanding refugee, migrant and asylum-seeking experiences of young people
- Exploring concepts of culture, cultural accountability, inclusion and social justice
- Exploring educational barriers, needs and aspirations of students from refugee and migrant backgrounds
- Exploring creative and empowering ways to engage with students from refugee and migrant backgrounds
- Exploring the NYSF Active Citizenship Domains and the Good Practice Capabilities and implications for UNSW Aspire Ambassadors' engagement with students from refugee and migrant backgrounds
- Understanding youth participation from a diversity and inclusion perspective

A total of 13 UNSW staff and 10 students ambassadors participated in the training. Workshop evaluations were collected via individual participant feedback forms. A summary of their responses has been included in Section 4.


Findings from youth consultations

Young people were asked a series of questions about their experiences before enrolment, during their studies and after completing university. Responses to these questions and key emerging issues are reported over page, including direct quotes from participants.

What things have helped you get support to enrol in higher education?

Finding out about different pathways into higher education directly from universities...

“Encourage CALD young people to apply to university directly rather than the normal pathway.”



“Doing a foundation course that helped me get into second year uni. But I found out about this on my own.”

“Seeing an opportunity
in its tangible form
through universities
visiting/open days.
The environment of uni
helps.”

“There are other pathways to get into uni. It's not normalised to go through other pathways, that is why so many people don't find out about them.”

“Studying high school in a low socio-economic zone also helped me. It created partnerships with various universities where speakers came in to talk to high school students.”

Doing my own research...



"I had to do a lot of research on my own as career advisors were unsupportive."



"The UAC process – one of the most stressful and difficult things in my life. No one else told me how the UAC process worked. I had to figure it out for myself."



"The school was not familiar with different courses and pathways available for me. I kept researching, then found the pathway at WSU. When I told the school about it, they asked me to come and present and share the information with other students."

Talking to others already at university...



"Talking to people that were already studying the degree helped."



"The mentoring program through UNSW called "Aspire" came to my school. I met a very nice mentor and they helped me a lot to understand the enrolment process. This is a very good program for refugee students."

Having young and informed teachers...



"IEC teachers supported me through the enrolment processes."



"Having younger teachers to develop a better connection with students and provide more support."



"We had a change of career advisor at school – a young careers advisor that was very supportive and was more like a mentor."



"Having positive role models, connections made through high school."



What things do you think would have helped you more?

A better understanding of what is available...

“

“Understanding what the options are with university degrees so you don't waste time (and money!) in choosing degrees and majors.”

“

“More info about where and how to access student services. High schools don't educate students on what's out there.”

Services being equipped to work with refugee & migrant students...

“

“Refugee, migrant and international students need help to understand their degree structure. Language support for foreign students.”

“

“Multicultural services to make unis more equipped to work with refugee/ migrant students. I didn't talk to my uni when changing majors because I found them intimidating.”


Having a mentor...

“

“Someone who was at university, same age, similar experiences who could've been a uni buddy, available to ask questions.”

“

“We need support before, during and after students graduate.”



What are some things that make it hard to get the right support and information?

Unsupportive and uninformed career advisors & teachers...

“

“We need more collaboration between universities and schools.”

“

“Career advisors and teachers are not up to date with new initiatives and programs that could support the students — I didn't even know who my careers advisor was. My careers advisor was using a 2013 UAC book in 2016”

“

“Teachers and counsellors not believing in you. When someone looks down on you based on your experience.”

Social, financial and familial barriers...

“

“Financial support — most people cannot afford university.”

“

Being the first person in the family to go to uni and not knowing what support services are available. Also, my family not understanding that uni is not the same as high school and would require more time and effort to pass.

“

“There is not a single uni who has centred on equity. They do not deal with racial injustice, sexual and gender-based injustice or refugee experiences.”

What does getting support to get into higher education look like?

Confusing and disjointed enrolment process...

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"Unis need to have an easier, less confusing system to provide support for international students and migrant and refugee students."

“

I had to go to the student centre three times and each time I had a different answer. The people who work there need to be more educated on how to deal with situations and have a clear line of communication between each other."



Inflexible support...

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"Expectations of university students to get special consideration are unrealistic — it's too much! We need more leniency."

“

"Widening participation is not equity-centric — universities tend to support white upper-class people or white people from the country."

“

"Asking for extensions while dealing with mental health issues is very difficult. It can be really intimidating to ask for leniency and flexibility when it comes to mental health."



**Once at University,
what have been your
experiences when
seeking support?**

What specific services or support do you think would help you the most?

Mentoring and leadership programs...



“Leadership programs that target people from refugee backgrounds so that they don't lose confidence.”



“More flexibility with international programs as some of us cannot leave home for long periods of time given our responsibilities with family. This limits our ability to take on these programs. ”

Specific help for refugee and migrant...



“Having people of similar lived experience as me being hired to support me.”



“Information for parents of refugee and migrant students — ‘This is what university is like in Australia’-type information.”



“Having support officers at universities for refugee and migrant students. I need to understand my rights as a student so I can ask for more support. Sometimes it's intimidating to ask for what you need.”

Additional and more flexible support...



“Simplify the language used on websites and uni resources.”



“More mental health support — a lot more work needs to be done in this area. Culturally sensitive and safe mental health support.”



What support would you like to transition out of university and into employment?

Job readiness, mentorship, internship and leadership programs...

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“University and government should be responsible for providing support programs.”

“

“Mentorship in the industry to help students understand what to expect. Work experience, exposure to various industries. I think they focus a lot on marks rather than on providing students with work experience.”

“

“Universities need to have equity-centric bodies looking for academic and professional programs. Universities need to consider equity concerns for CALD and refugee communities in their future planning and proactively create opportunities for them and so they feel safe on campus. An example of that could be universities creating a public statement on being anti-racist.”



Section 4 **Training Evaluation**

Following the training sessions, participants provided feedback via individual evaluation forms.

The evaluation assessed the level of confidence reported following the training with regards to identifying needs and pre-settlement experiences of CALDMR young people, exploring factors that impact on good settlement and identifying and applying strategies to support CALDMR students within the university setting.

UNSW Aspire Ambassador Feedback

A total of 10 UNSW Aspire Ambassadors provided feedback. All participants reported a high or very high overall level of satisfaction with the training. All participants reported either very high (7) or high (3) levels of confidence in regards to exploring concepts of culture and identity as well as reflecting on the settlement needs of CALDMR young people. In terms of participants' confidence in identifying and applying strategies to support their roles within the Aspire program, nine out of ten reported a high level of confidence. With regards to their confidence in exploring the National Youth Settlement Framework fewer students reported high levels of confidence with up to 3 of them reporting feeling somewhat confident.

General student comments included:

"I really valued the concept of active citizenship. Enjoyed developing practical strategies."

"Good discussion, engaging participation. To improve: slides a bit more interactive rather than just reading off."

"I love how this training opened my eyes to the needs of young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds."

"I really enjoyed the research-based workshop today, the activities were practical. Thank you for a great workshop today, lots learnt about the framework".

UNSW Staff Feedback

A total of 13 staff provided feedback. Overall, 12 out of 13 participants felt very satisfied or satisfied with the training session. Levels of confidence when exploring concepts of culture and identity varied among participants, with most reporting feeling slightly or somewhat confident and five feeling confident following the session. With regards to reflecting on the needs and identifying pre-settlement experiences of CALDMR young people, the majority of participants reported feeling confident following the workshop. Their level of confidence in identifying and applying strategies to support CALDMR students in their role within the university was reported as confident for nine out of the 13 participants.

Confidence in exploring the NYSE, understanding active citizenship and its role in good settlement varied amongst participants. Some reported to feel slightly

or somewhat confident (4) while nine staff reported feeling confident in this area. This lower level of confidence could point to the limitations of a one-day session when learning new concepts and exploring its applicability within a university context.

Further training suggestions put forward to help increase their confidence in the training area included the following topic areas:

- Trauma-informed care and understanding trauma specific support
- Schemes, programs and information available around the area
- Referral pathways
- Refresher courses in 3 to 6 months to revise and build on knowledge from today

General Comments

"Great energy and interesting design. Would like to learn more about pre-settlement information."

"Loved the activities and the videos."

"It was a good reflective day."





Section 5

Conclusion & next steps

Throughout this collaboration, a number of issues were identified in relation to access to and support for young people from CALD, migrant and refugee backgrounds in higher education settings.

University staff identified a significant gap in data available on the number of CALDMR students enrolled at university. Not being able to adequately identify students limits the ability of staff to provide CALDMR students with the support they need. Currently, staff rely on anecdotal data and conversations with students, to gather information about cultural background including country of birth and language spoken at home.

There is an under-representation of demographic and cultural diversity in support and teaching roles within universities. Existing support services are not tailored specifically to the needs of CALDMR students and are predominantly targeted at white Australian and regional students. Coupled with this is the challenge of developing trusting relationships with CALDMR students given the changing nature of how people are employed within university departments.

There is a lack of awareness by university staff of support services available outside of the university for CALDMR young people and their communities. University staff are not confident in making referrals as they are unfamiliar with the wider service system and appropriate referral pathways.

Staff highlighted the need to make a genuine investment in training to understand the context, needs and

challenges of CALDMR students. This training should be considered an essential component of university staff professional development. Any attempt to address the education and training needs of staff requires a sustained and systemic approach with across-the-board support from executive leadership and a recognition of the value of this investment.

Access to and success in education is a significant factor influencing good settlement outcomes for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and universities have an integral role to play in ensuring the full participation of CALDMR students in university life. As identified in the National Youth Settlement Framework, young people are more likely to successfully navigate their educational challenges in the presence of adequate and targeted support that addresses the full-range of structural barriers. This targeted support should be part of all national policy and practice responses in higher educational settings.