



Building cultural and linguistic bridges: reflections on a program designed to support students from refugee backgrounds and their transitions into enabling/ higher education

Key Words

refugees, transition, language, culture, enabling education, Adult Migrant English Program

Abstract

Although many students struggle with the complexities of moving into and through higher education, these transitions can be particularly challenging for students from refugee backgrounds (SfRBs). Education is recognised as being essential to successful resettlement; it leads to better employment prospects and health outcomes (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006; Willott & Stevenson, 2013) and enhances engagement with new communities (El Jack, 2010). While federal government resettlement initiatives provide English language education opportunities for new refugee arrivals up to a 'functional' level, there is little in place to support the educational, linguistic and cultural challenges encountered by SfRBs who wish to enter and progress through higher education. In addition, universities often struggle to provide adequate resources to fully support SfRBs, and often overlook the rich and diverse range of languages, cultures, knowledges and practices that SfRBs bring to their studies (Cocks & Stokes, 2013; Lenette, 2016). Indeed, the cultural and linguistic assumptions made by universities can preclude SfRBs' success in their studies, particularly as they enter the academy. This paper presents reflections on the design, delivery and evaluation of a program developed to facilitate SfRBs' transitions into an enabling education course at a regional university. A primary goal of this program was to purposefully and explicitly unpack the cultural expectations and linguistic requirements of higher education study. Underpinned by a curriculum which is both flexible and responsive to cultural, educational and funding contexts, this program was first mapped to the outcomes of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) — delivered at a TAFE institution — and then redesigned as a pre-semester university-based 'bridging program'. Reflections from the practitioners who designed and delivered the program will aim to shed light on the challenges of working with a responsive curriculum in real-time to attempt to fill the gaps created by institutional assumptions and misrecognitions. The program reflected on in this paper was supported by a longitudinal OLT-funded project that explores the pathways taken and experiences of transition of SfRBs into Australian higher education.

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