Improving Educational Outcomes for Students from Refugee Backgrounds in the South Australian Certificate of Education Project

A CASE STUDY OF TWO CATHOLIC SCHOOLS
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Executive Summary

This project was initiated by Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) in response to identification of the challenges for students from refugee backgrounds in completing the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). The Pathways to Success Program, a funded program to improve the support available to refugee background students in the senior secondary years, was introduced in two Catholic secondary schools in 2016 and 2017.

These two schools have a significant number of students from diverse backgrounds and make use of a number of approaches to support refugee background students. Through the Pathways to Success program, the two schools implemented a range of additional strategies and provided additional support with the aim of improving the SACE outcomes for a select group of refugee background students. These included: additional English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) one-on-one support, lunch time support groups with subject coordinators, bilingual support staff to improve family engagement and provide role models for students, and teaching of study and organisational skills.

The research was conducted using online surveys, focus groups and interviews with staff and students at both schools. The findings identified a range of school approaches that can foster good outcomes for students with refugee experience in the SACE. Through analysis of the data, key themes were identified and these were used to develop a framework which provides guidance on how schools can support students with refugee experience.

The framework is grouped into the following four key areas:

— Know students and their contexts
— Build an inclusive school culture
— Understand the SACE and its flexibilities
— Staff practices.

While the project was based on two case study schools, the practices described in the framework can be used by all schools supporting students from refugee backgrounds who are undertaking their senior secondary school certificate of education.
Introduction

Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) has identified significant challenges that refugee background students face in successfully completing their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE)\(^*\).

This is particularly the case when these students arrive in Australia during their early secondary school years. Two Catholic schools, with diverse student groups and significant numbers of students with refugee experience, received funding through CESA (from a government funded program) to provide additional support to refugee students who were undertaking the SACE during the period of this study. This report details a framework that was developed from the findings of research into the programs that were introduced, as well as broader approaches to refugee student support in these schools. Using mixed-methods case studies the project explored:

1) how policy contexts facilitate or limit the successful completion of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) for students from refugee backgrounds;
2) the school, community and policy interventions that are most likely to support and improve the SACE outcomes for students from refugee backgrounds.

Senior Secondary schooling for refugee background students: An Overview

CESA has identified a range of challenges for students from refugee backgrounds in completing SACE, particularly for students who arrive in the early secondary years\(^1\). The challenges CESA identified resonate with the research findings in a number of studies including:

- low levels of first language literacy\(^2\);
- low levels of English language acquisition and literacy\(^2-7\);
- interrupted schooling\(^1,3,4,6,8,9\); and
- challenges adjusting to school and life in a new country\(^10-14\).

Much of the research into the schooling of refugee background students places an emphasis on the students and the problems, barriers and challenges that they face\(^*\). Research and school perspectives on refugee background students frequently default to deficit views of students which can result in a lack of reflection on the broader contexts. This may contribute to the success rates of refugee students, negatively influencing policies and interventions which shape and support education\(^15\).

Little research has been conducted on the nature of and extent to which schools in the major countries of refugee resettlement (Australia, the US, Canada and the Nordic countries) initiate and implement practices that engage successfully with students from refugee backgrounds and support them in their secondary education. There have been some specialised programs initiated within Australian secondary schools to provide support for these young people. These include the School Support Program (SSP)\(^27,28\), Refugee Action Support (RAS) program\(^22,23,24\), and Classroom Connect Project (CCP)\(^25\). Research on these programs has identified a number of successful approaches to support refugee students in senior secondary years. These approaches include:

- **Out-of-school-hours programs** (homework clubs) that offer support for students and families.
- **Career information sessions** to support students to make decisions about their subject choices and goals\(^26-30\).
- **Vocational training** outside of school responding to the employment related needs of some high school students.
- **Group sessions for families** to provide regular information, supported by bilingual staff, helps families to become more engaged with their students’ learning and to feel more comfortable interacting with school staff.
- **Sports clinics/sessions** specifically for refugee background students offer socialising opportunities with peers and professional coaches, as well as connections to community during competitions.
- **Changes to enrolment procedures** to identify students with refugee background; identify languages used at home and enlist translators and/or bicultural workers where relevant; understand previous schooling histories; and assess learning needs.
- **Transition support programs** to support transition between primary/high school and English language school/mainstream school. Initiatives including buddy programs, welcome packs, inclusion of wellbeing staff upon arrival at the new school, and communication between old and new schools to transfer information about the students.
- **Whole school approach** promoting inclusivity through embedding diversity issues into curriculum, sharing multicultural celebrations and cultural programs\(^11,12,35\).
- **Professional development** opportunities for school staff, increasing knowledge and understanding of strategies for teaching students with refugee experience\(^26-28\).
- **Pre-service teacher education and experience** working with refugee background students.

\(^*\)There is currently no data available on the completion rates of SACE by refugee backgrounds students outside of records collected by individual schools.
What is the SACE?

Australian states and territories offer different options for senior school certification, such as the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). The SACE is the main option for students completing their schooling in South Australia, although the International Baccalaureate (IB) is also available in some schools. Students can begin the SACE in year 10, and the majority of SACE subjects are usually attempted in years 11 and 12. The SACE is comprised of a combination of compulsory and elective subjects offered in two stages – ‘Stage 1’ and ‘Stage 2’. Students need to achieve a total of 200 credits in order to attain the SACE, with non-compulsory elements available via a wide range of topics.

Compulsory elements of the SACE total 110 credits:

- minimum literacy achievement (10 credits in an English subject)
- minimum numeracy achievement (10 credits in a Mathematics subject)
- Personal Learning Plan (10 credits often completed in year 10)
- Research Project – a stand-alone, student directed topic (10 credits in Stage 2)
- minimum of 60 additional credits at Stage 2.

Non-compulsory elements of the SACE provide the remaining 90 credits from a range of topics including:

- any Stage 1 or Stage 2 SACE subjects
- vocational education and training (VET)
- community learning.

Students wishing to apply for entry from school to higher education or training institutions must complete the SACE and gain their entry ‘score’ called the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). Entry pathways and processes are arranged by the South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre (SATAC). Alternative pathways to university study are available, and entry to some Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses does not require the SACE, nor an ATAR.

The Pathways to Success Program

From 2016-17 Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) introduced an Australian Government funded support program into two Catholic secondary schools in South Australia. This program is called the Pathways to Success Program (Pathways Program) and is intended to facilitate further support for students from refugee backgrounds who undertake their SACE. CESA was responsible for selecting the two secondary schools which participated in this study.

Methodology and Participants

This project investigated and analysed school-based support for refugee background students undertaking the SACE.

Two schools engaged in the Pathways to Success Program were identified by Catholic Education South Australia for participation in the research. A mixed-methods approach to data collection was used. Data were collected during 2017. The research team collected school data, policy documents and assessment data for students engaged with the Pathways to Success Program. Two online surveys were conducted. One survey was conducted with school staff at both schools (n=34). A separate online survey was conducted with students from a refugee background in Years 10-12 at both schools (n=29). Staff and student participation in the survey was voluntary. School staff at both sites were emailed the survey link and requested to participate. Schools assisted in obtaining written consent from parents and students prior to student participation. At one school, students participated in the online survey during EALD classes promoting a higher response rate.

Staff survey respondents had a variety of roles at the school including in leadership, as specialist teachers, classroom teachers, support staff and administration. Over 70% of the respondents had been teaching for over 10 years and taught in diverse subject areas across the curriculum including English, EALD, sciences, mathematics, health and physical education, arts and humanities.

At the time of the student survey, respondents were aged between 14 to 19 years. Participants self-identified with a range of national, ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds including, Afghan, Hazara, Sudanese, Muslim/Islam, Liberian, Congolese, Ugandan and Ethiopian. Eighteen languages were spoken by student survey respondents. Sixty-one per cent of respondents spoke two languages, 21% spoke three languages and 18% spoke four or more languages.

Following a brief initial analysis of the survey responses, questions were developed for staff and student focus group discussions. Two staff and two student focus group discussions were conducted with 17 staff participants and 17 student participants. At each site, schools identified and recruited participants for both the staff and student focus groups and assisted in gaining written consent from parents and students. Staff focus group participants at the two schools reflected a range of teaching roles and expertise including EALD teachers and support staff and classroom teachers from a range of subject areas. Student focus group participants were from a range of cultural backgrounds and year levels, but predominantly Year 11 and 12 students who were undertaking SACE.
Following initial analysis of the focus group data, further interview questions were developed for semi-structured individual interviews with staff and students at both schools. Ten individual interviews were conducted with staff (five at each school), and ten interviews with students (five at each school). Schools again identified staff and student participants for individual interviews and assisted with obtaining written consent from parents and students.

Thematic analysis of the data was undertaken. Interview transcripts and relevant survey data were coded using NVivo software. Key themes were identified and formed the basis for the development of the framework which informs this report.

The Case Study Schools

There is a high incidence of diversity, particularly in numbers of students with refugee experience, at the two school sites identified by CESA for participation in the Pathways to Success Program. Prior to the commencement of the Pathways Program both schools already had a number of strategies in place for refugee students including EALD support teachers and staff, and homework clubs. The two schools implemented the program in different ways as outlined below.

Background to School 1

School 1 is a boys’ Catholic school with over 900 students in Early Learning to Year 12. At the time, more than 30% of students spoke English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD). Four per cent of students were from refugee backgrounds. In 2016, 10 students who were in Years 10 and 11 from relevant refugee related visa categories were identified for participation in the Pathways Program. With the funding received through the Pathways Program School 1 implemented a range of additional support over the two-year time period. The school:

- employed two community liaison officers (0.2 Full Time Equivalent [FTE] each);
- employed the existing EALD teacher for additional 0.2 FTE to provide in-class support across the curriculum;
- implemented a lunch time support program with a specialist subject teacher specifically for refugee students; and
- provided Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) training for one community liaison officer.

Background to School 2

School 2 is a girls’ Catholic Secondary school offering Years 8-12. At the time, the school had over 600 students, with more than 50% who had EALD. Sixteen per cent of students were from refugee backgrounds. Fifteen EALD students from specified refugee related visa groups were identified to be part of the Pathways Program. These students were in Years 10 and 11 when the program commenced in 2016. School 2 implemented a range of additional support with the Pathways to Success funding including:

- employing an additional EALD teacher to coordinate and implement the Pathways Program. This teacher gave predominantly out-of-class/withdrawal support to Pathways Program participant students;
- employing the existing Educational Support Officer (ESO) for additional hours to provide in-class support for students;
- providing students with study skills training, such as organisation and time management.
A Framework for supporting refugee students undertaking the South Australian Certificate of Education

As a result of this project, a framework has been developed to identify a range of strategies, which schools can use to support students with refugee experience who are undertaking the SACE.

Know students and their contexts

- Recognise students’ knowledge, expertise and language repertoires
- Understand and respond to past and present contexts of students, their families and communities
- Identify students’ goals and post-school aspirations and work collaboratively with students and families towards these goals.

Understand SACE and its flexibilities

- Strengthen knowledge of the SACE with students and their families
- Promote a range of subject choices
- Use the SACE assessment flexibilities to develop diverse assessment strategies
- Understand the different post-school pathways and their implications for student subject choices.

Build an inclusive school culture

- Foster an ethos and practices that engage students and families in the school community
- Provide support programs for refugee & EALD learners
- Build a staff profile and capability to address diversity and language learning needs of all students
- Enable and promote agency of school staff to support refugee students effectively.

Staff Practices

- Engage in professional learning to understand student diversity and language learning strategies across the curriculum
- Utilise diverse pedagogies in language teaching
- Identify and enact policies to support refugee learners
- Work collaboratively and communicate effectively with all staff to support refugee learners.

Background

This was a collaborative research project between the University of South Australia and Catholic Education South Australia. The research investigated the challenges for students from refugee backgrounds in completing the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). These challenges are particularly significant when students arrive in Australia during their early secondary school years.

Aims

The aims of this research were:

- To explore how policy contexts facilitate or limit the successful completion of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) for students from refugee backgrounds
- To examine school, community and policy interventions that are most likely to support and improve the SACE outcomes for students from refugee backgrounds.

Background to SACE

The SACE is made up of two parts: Stage 1 (which most students do in Year 11) and Stage 2 (which most students do in Year 12). Students need to get 200 credits to achieve the SACE, through a mixture of compulsory and free-choice subjects and courses.

Research Process

Case studies were undertaken in two South Australian Catholic Secondary schools. The research approach included online surveys, focus group and individual interviews with senior secondary student from refugee backgrounds and school staff. In addition, relevant policy and assessment data was collected. A roundtable discussion between the research team, CESA and SACE staff also informed the research. The data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the contribution staff and students who graciously participated in this study. This research has relied on the generous commitment of time and support from many people. The following organisations contributed funds and/or in-kind support to this project:

- Catholic Education South Australia (CESA)
- South Australian Certificate of Education Board of South Australia
- University of South Australia
Know students and their contexts

Students from refugee backgrounds have particular experiences which may not be well understood by all school staff. For schools to work productively with these students, understanding and responding to students’ individual experiences, contexts and aspirations is critical.

Recognise students’ knowledge, expertise and language repertoires

All students who participated in this project spoke between two and five languages. While students mostly identify this as an asset, few staff interviewed recognised the skills and resources that came with multilingualism. In addition, some students think that their speaking additional languages could be a barrier to English acquisition. Supporting and recognising students’ language strengths and abilities and facilitating the study of languages that they are skilled in as part of their SACE can improve student self-efficacy and achievement. In addition, the students’ diverse background life experiences demonstrate significant adaptability and resilience. Identifying and supporting students to understand their own abilities, strengths and weaknesses is recognised as beneficial by staff and students. While staff identify that time pressures and assessment regimes are significant barriers to getting to know students, they recognise huge benefits to understanding a student’s skills and assets.

Understand and respond to past and present contexts for students, their families and communities

Many staff and students described how a range of different individual and family contexts and experiences, both in Australia and overseas, shaped students’ ability to successfully undertake the SACE. This includes individual factors such as:
— student responses to previous life experiences, including trauma;
— previous schooling experiences;
— English language abilities;
— housing and living contexts (e.g. living in shared accommodation without families);
— personal skills such as commitment, time management, focus and motivation; and
— personal commitments and interests (i.e. social life, religion, sport, technology).

You come from a country that doesn’t have school and you come here to work for not only yourself but your family, so I feel like they’re more confident
— student focus group

... they [staff] were given a task to actually sit down and have a conversation with one of the EAL students, find out about them, chat to them, spend some time getting to know them and then part of that was getting them to teach you something... So we found out what skills they had and it was amazing little things... And so when the roles were reversed it was really interesting and that was a really powerful thing... – staff focus group

I think that when completing SACE, having a lot of distractions like friends and mainly technology can make it more difficult to complete SACE. There is also not being focused and committed to your studies
— student focus group

Family contexts also appear to have a significant impact on a student’s experiences undertaking the SACE. A range of family responsibilities and contexts were identified that can be quite specific to students from refugee backgrounds or who speak English as an additional language. These include:
— continued threat to safety and death of family members who have remained in home countries;
— obligations for students to work to financially support family members in Australia and overseas;
— the need for students to act as translators and interpreters for parents or caregivers;
— assistance with childminding of siblings and home duties; and
— supporting family members with health issues.
The schools utilise a range of strategies to respond to student, family and community contexts. These include:

— making time to get to know students, their backgrounds and family contexts;
— working with students to improve study skills such as time management and organisation;
— working with students to develop different ways of learning; and
— encouraging students who transition from an Intensive English Language school late in Year 10 to do a full year of Year 10 to further develop language and study skills before commencing SACE.

Identify students’ goals and post-school aspirations and work collaboratively with students and families towards these goals

Of the 29 student respondents to the survey, 23 identify ambitions to attend university or further education. Ninety-two per cent of the respondents feel supported by the school in working towards their post-school ambitions. Families are often very supportive and have high hopes for their children’s future, but this is not matched by a requisite amount of knowledge around potential pathways to further education or employment. Schools use a range of approaches to work with students and families toward post-school goals.

— Providing course counselling and career evenings with students and families at Year 10 to decide SACE pathways, with interpreters sometimes available. However, it was noted by the schools that family attendance at these evenings is often poor.
— Inviting guest speakers from universities, TAFE and other post-school pathway options to discuss requirements.
— Re-evaluating student’s aspirations and how these align with subject selections and achievement at the end of each year.

— a lot of kids, I guess from refugee background have high expectations that they want to get into fields like engineering or medicine, and I guess in year 11 they get the opportunity to experiment with biology or physics or chemistry, and that gives them the opportunity maybe to realign their goals... They have counselling at the end of every year, students can come in with their parents and discuss their career goals, their tertiary goals, and then their preferences, they’re counselled about their appropriate choices for the SACE.
— staff interview

... boys who also had that responsibility of providing financial support for the family as well... I know boys that leave here from school and go straight to Kentucky Fried Chicken or somewhere and do a 4-5 hour shift and then they’ve got to continue with homework sort of after that. So those pressures I guess require consideration. – staff focus group

I’m going doctor – I’m interpreter of myself, my parents, my family member – student interview

... a lot of kids, I guess from refugee background I guess they normally struggle from their time management and English skills... I can never manage my time with my assignments even handing them up on time, but I have to stay during after midnight to finish it because I’m very slow in choosing what words do I use in this area yeah, it’s very hard for refugee students to manage their time because they can’t actually – I don’t think they can be any faster, it’s just that they struggle to choose the correct word. – student focus group

... for students from refugee background I guess they over there is more about rote learning... whereas here we’re asking them to be independent and we’re asking them to go and research, we’re asking them to think for themselves and start to develop those sort of skills, which many of them have missed out...
— staff focus group

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— staff interview

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— staff focus group
Build an inclusive school culture

A whole school approach to fostering inclusion of refugee background students and their families is imperative for student success and engagement. This can be done through strategic staffing, additional programs and innovative approaches to engagement.

**Foster an ethos and practices that engage students and families in the school community**

Engaging students and families in the school community was identified as critical to student engagement and communication between home and school. A whole school approach to fostering inclusion is essential for this. A range of strategies were utilised by the schools including:

- developing positive staff-student relationships;
- fostering and enabling student friendships across cultures and backgrounds;
- celebrating and encouraging activities that focus on aspects of the school’s diversity (i.e. multicultural night); and
- engaging all staff with open and frequent communication with families, which is improved with the assistance of bilingual staff and professional interpreters when necessary.

**Provide support programs for refugee and EALD learners**

The schools provide a range of support programs for refugee learners. While a number of schools have after-school homework clubs to provide additional out-of-class support, some students indicate that attending after-school support was difficult as they had family commitments. A lunch-time support session is identified by students as better, because those with after-school commitments can attend. Having curriculum leaders or teachers available from a range of discipline areas was identified as beneficial. Having sufficient staff or volunteers to provide individualised assistance was also identified as key.

One-on-one support from bilingual and/or education support staff, particularly in-class (as opposed to withdrawal) was identified as particularly useful by staff and students. Students appreciate being able to ask questions of these staff. Classroom teachers indicate that having these staff meant that EALD students received the individual support they couldn’t necessarily provide in the busyness of the classroom.

“We employed a pastoral care worker, who speaks Persian... trying to get the relationship with the parents of these girls improved... he’s on the phone all the time to families... that’s been great to kind of build that connection. Once again, we get some teachers who go, well I can’t call, because they probably don’t speak English, so we just handball... I think he’s kind of learning he’s allowed to say back to the teacher, ‘oh no, the brother speaks really good English. Good luck’... like he doesn’t have to be deferred to, all issues Middle Eastern, we can go to other people.” – staff interview

“I think it’s through those community activities, religious celebrations, that we come together outside of the classroom and build those relationships and connections through the pastoral program.” – staff interview

“in the busyness of a day, you can actually overlook that particular student – not deliberately, but when you’ve got that time and you’ve got the extra support staff like the bilingual and educational support staff, they can follow those kids up quite easily because they’re assigned to them and they’ll go to that particular class and they’ll work with that student – rain, hail, or shin.” – staff interview
Build a staff profile and capability to address diversity and language learning needs of all students

One of the important elements of the Pathways Program’s success came from building upon the skills, knowledge and student relationships that members of the EALD team had with students. The EALD teams have exceptional commitment to building relationships with and supporting students and families. They also take significant roles in advocating for their students within the school and offering professional development and support for other staff, particularly in supporting other staff with skills to teach language explicitly. While the role of EALD staff is critical, it was also suggested by staff and students that it is imperative that all school staff in diverse schools understand and respond to the language learning needs of all students.

As part of the Pathways Program schools were able to employ additional staff to support refugee background students. One school appointed bilingual support staff (who were also old scholars) and this was identified by staff and students as particularly successful. These staff were able to connect with students which enabled them to help students and families understand the requirements of school and the SACE. Additional EALD support staff/Educational support officers were also employed through the Pathways Program.

Some key considerations identified for consideration when employing additional staff, include:

— experience working with developing English learners;
— ability to build relationships and connect with students and families;
— ability to explain concepts and tasks in clear, understandable language; and
— willingness and ability to scaffold learning and tasks.

Enable and promote agency of school staff to support refugee students effectively

The EALD coordinator is a key figure in both schools. The coordinator is a central point of contact for students and teachers. Employing an EALD coordinator who knows the school well and has developed relationships with students is a vital element for success. These staff are deeply committed to their work and students, are a ‘go to’ for staff, students, and parents and have a strong understanding of students’ needs and experiences.

However, EALD teachers sometimes feel limited in their scope to advocate and facilitate the necessary support for their students. Teachers from other subject areas also identified a limited understanding of refugee student contexts and experience which constrain their ability to support these students successfully.

There are two possible strategies that schools with high concentrations of students from diverse backgrounds use to support teachers. The first is to provide professional learning for all teaching staff to understand how they can support all learners with their academic language development. This is particularly to do with identifying the key vocabulary and language needed to understand concepts for each area of the curriculum. The second is to encourage teachers to engage in action research (classroom research) where they reflect and become reflexive about what works, what doesn’t, how to try something different and so on. Developing reflexivity and the confidence to try possible solutions leads to teacher agency.

If most teachers would be like [EALD teacher] I reckon refugee students would be able to succeed with much higher grades and stuff because [of] the way we get the attention they need and the support they need as well. – student interview

The Bilingual Support Officers, they provide really positive role models and really encourage the students to focus and succeed and set goals… they work also with the students a lot on mentoring and organisational things but then they also are fantastic translators with family, so when we have parent/teacher interviews and that kind of thing or any meetings with family they can act as a translator as well – staff interview

[EALD teacher] does a ridiculous amount of work to help them [refugee background students] out. Homework club – she’s always around for them and if you are struggling with an EAL student in your class not behaviourally but getting them to learn stuff, especially language, your first point of contact is to go to the EAL coordinator and say, “Okay what can I do?” And she will give you support and strategies to be able to teach them in a better way. – staff interview
Understand the SACE and its flexibilities

Undertaking the SACE is a complex and complicated endeavour that impacts on students’ post-school options. Supporting students by providing accessible information and utilising subject and assessment flexibilities will optimise SACE outcomes.

Strengthen knowledge of the SACE with students and their families

Many students report in the surveys and interviews that they and their families have a poor understanding of the SACE. Students rely heavily on teachers for information on:
— expectations within subjects;
— how to achieve sufficient credits to complete the SACE; and
— choosing subjects and how this may affect future pathways.

Students report that parents or caregivers have expectations that they go on to study at university, but they have a lack of knowledge of the requirements for achieving this goal. Parents and caregivers are not aware of a range of post-school pathways nor the links between the SACE, ATAR and university entrance requirements. Some students do not have parents or caregivers who can help them to make decisions around the SACE, nor with the study requirements within the SACE. Some students have older siblings or friends who are able to help them in this regard. In addition, students from refugee backgrounds who join a school part-way through the school year (particularly from English Language Centres) may miss out on SACE information sessions and careers counselling.

Promote a range of subject choices

The SACE includes flexibility around subject choice. Some students report that they feel some school staff underestimate EALD students’ capacity for success in a range of subjects. Individualising school support and advice around subject selection for each student may help to promote equity. Some students may benefit from transferring from one subject to an alternative topic such as Integrated Learning, whilst other students may prefer to remain in academically challenging subjects. Both case study schools offer VET courses as part of the SACE, either internally or through external providers. The VET options are viewed positively, with opportunities to learn a wide range of subjects. Some students from refugee backgrounds may have attended classes for languages other than English which can be counted towards the SACE in many instances. Overall, students are not aware of the opportunities to study their first language(s) as part of the SACE, and some students mention that they may have chosen this option had they known.

My experience with counselling families... [is] the student tends to understand the TAFE pathway and some of the various options that are available – the 2 + 2, that type of thing – go to TAFE for two years and then get across to university that way; and having then the families come in and parents really get quite agitated about that. It causes quite a tricky conversation between the student, the parent and often there is an interpreter as well... The parents really wanted them [the child] to go straight to university and the child didn’t have the interest for a start nor the obvious ability to be able to do that.

– staff interview

Q: So if they had Persian say at [the school] do you think that would be a good option?
A: Probably because there’s a student from Persian background. So and I’m, Afghan so I’ve been in iran and I’ve been studying the language so I could write and speak... It would be easier but I didn’t know that, firstly I went and they didn’t tell me that it has SACE... So I just, what’s the point of doing this?... And just try, after I was actually it’s helping me to improve my Persian language itself but then later on with my friends got SACE, (the) SACE, it’s like I wish I did it.

– student interview
Use the SACE assessment flexibilities to develop diverse assessment strategies

“Flexibility in the SACE means consciously thinking about and planning the best range of opportunities for all students to maximise their learning success.”

SACE assessment flexibilities may allow for multimodal assessment strategies to be employed that provide opportunities for students to exhibit their skills and knowledge in a range of ways. However, the ways in which these flexibilities are implemented in practice are varied. Findings in relation to the flexibilities include:

— Students report that they want culturally diverse assessment tasks but they were not offered. Staff reflect that culturally diverse assessment tasks may not be seen favourably during moderation.

— Provision of additional time is helpful as it enables students to seek additional one-on-one support and opportunities for drafting of work. Fewer tasks overall allows more time on each task. Additional time for students in exams is also beneficial.

— Explicit explanation and scaffolding of the SACE performance standards and assessment task sheets can ensure that students understand what is expected.

Some of the challenges and issues with utilising assessment flexibilities include the following:

— School staff comment that although there is scope to offer students multi-modal assessment tasks, students still need to build skills that can be used in exam situations. In addition, many students prefer written assessment tasks because they allow for assistance with editing and drafting. Staff also suggest that often written work enables deeper learning of subject matter as well as improving English skills.

— Moderation experiences of school staff mean that many avoid assessment tasks that are not clearly represented in exemplars available through the SACE website. Staff note the narrow scope of the moderation process and suggest that diverse exemplars may broaden opportunities for students to produce assessment pieces that encompass cultural and linguistic diversity.

— The quantity of work expected of students during the SACE was also highlighted as a challenge for students who are developing their study habits and English language literacy.

Understand the different post-school pathways and their implications for student subject choice

Some students report a clear understanding of pathways to their post-school aspirations. These students are very clear about their chosen pathway, the requirements for entry to their chosen university program and the expectations within the SACE subjects. School staff, particularly subject counsellors, play a strong role in facilitating this. In addition, information sessions with Universities and TAFE provide information to students and families. Other students report not understanding the importance of subject choices. These students are somewhat unaware of prerequisites for university courses, or the effect of choosing certain subjects on their future pathways. Students who are aware of alternative pathways often report that they find out about them from friends or older siblings.

I had a student who I counselled a couple of years ago. It’s about their understanding of what the expectations are in terms of what they need in educational requirements. So this [student] was choosing subjects like outdoor ed and when we had a conversation about [their] ambitions in life [they] wanted to be a pilot. But was choosing subjects which were probably not going to support that pathway.

— staff focus group

Students don’t want to be seen to be different than anybody else... if everyone’s doing a report, I’ll do a report. If everyone’s doing a PowerPoint presentation, then I’ll do that too... We offer that flexibility. Whether people take it up is another story.

— staff interview
Staff practices

All school staff teach students with diverse experiences, language and learning needs. School staff can use a range of policies, pedagogies and strategies to respond to individual students and enable their successful completion of the SACE.

Engage in professional learning to understand student diversity and language learning strategies across the curriculum

Some school staff in this research recognise the importance of understanding the diverse histories of students and the ways in which living between multiple cultures has an ongoing effect on their lives. However, staff and student data suggest that some staff may benefit from professional learning that explores the pre- and post-migration experiences of students from refugee backgrounds, and the ways in which ongoing discrimination may affect their lives.

In one of the case study schools the EALD team share teaching and learning strategies with other staff, with the aim of providing literacy support for all teachers rather than only from the EALD team. Staff from both schools report that professional learning for all staff with a focus on explicit language teaching strategies is helpful.

I feel like I’m a bit ignorant of what people have experienced in their lives because I think if we understand better then we can support the students a lot more. – staff interview

Utilise diverse pedagogies in language teaching

Although there was excellent support offered to students from EALD staff, particularly the EALD coordinator, this support is not implemented by all teaching staff in other learning areas. Students and staff both mention the difficulties faced by EALD learners in subjects such as Mathematics and Science. An inclusive whole school approach that supports students with developing English literacy would be beneficial. School staff speak of strategies to scaffold student learning in different subject areas. Staff from all disciplines can approach their teaching by explicitly discussing the requirements of assignments, such as subject specific terminology and the correct types of language structure to use for different text types (e.g. reports or essays). Use of glossaries help English language learners, but also support learning for all students by encouraging the correct usage of subject specific terminology.

So when they are getting 1:1 help the focus should be not just on all right how do we answer these questions – it should be on how do we answer all questions of this nature and what are the rules of the language that we have to follow to be able to answer this.

– staff interview

... I’m a science teacher, so English is not my thing, so took us through a course looking at normalisation, and themes, and reams, and all these terms that I’d never, ever heard about. And we had to implement it in our classroom, and it wasn’t at year 8 when you’ve got all the time in the world, it was in a year 11 classroom, teach the literacy for your subject, like it is not okay to keep saying it’s someone else’s job.

– staff interview
Identify and enact policies to support refugee learners

Schools have internal policies that can support students individually. For example, schools have their own policies around drafting and deadlines for students. In this research, some staff members are able to provide extra time or drafting opportunities for students from refugee backgrounds, usually in response to specific and individual needs that arose. School staff with good relationships with these students, in particular the EALD coordinators, are well placed to assess the importance of these extra supports. All staff can build relationships with students and use flexibilities in policy to support individual student needs.

In the case study schools, policies relating to students from refugee backgrounds are not explicitly and solely designed for these students. School staff work with general policies aimed at all students, interpreting and enacting these policies in ways that meshed with individual students. School staff can build strong relationships with students, recognise individual student strengths and capacities, and engage policy flexibilities to maximise student engagement and learning.

The policy around editing and proof reading; we will have policies and procedures with different things – uniform and attendance and all that but ultimately we’ve got to make judgements on their background and what’s happening at home. An example … we have a chat with the student concerned – ‘You’ve been late to home group four times in the last two weeks or eight times’ – if we don’t dig deeper and find out what’s going on we will try and implement something that works with that – there’s not a sort of black and white policy that we can put for that.

– staff focus group

Work collaboratively and communicate effectively with all staff to support refugee learners

Staff collaboration and communication can be a challenge in the senior secondary years. However, collaboration between staff is identified as important for facilitating improved outcomes for refugee background students. Communication between staff to share knowledge of individual students is often seen as the role of the EALD staff rather than as the responsibility of all staff. Both staff and students see the EALD coordinator as the ‘go-to’ person for any issue relating to students from refugee backgrounds. Teachers state that the EALD teacher is best placed to support these students as this teacher has specialised knowledge of the particular language needs of English language learners. The broader range of experiences that refugee backgrounds encompass are often not recognised as contributing to students’ academic challenges.

…in my position as… a PE teacher we have a task in the curriculum which is called the issues analysis which a lot of the students struggle with. So what I have done in the past is that I’ve contacted the EAL team particularly [the EAL coordinator] and worked with [them] to re-design or re-word the assessment task and so I can give it to the [students] and it should be a bit more clear and they’re giving the students a better opportunity to achieve success and in that, apart from that I have asked for support from the EAL team in regards to scaffolding to breakdown the task for the students. – staff interview

Staff are often unaware of which students had refugee experiences. Students speak of themselves as either students with ‘refugee’ experiences, as ‘international’ students, or simply ‘students’ without a qualifier. This blending of student identities and staff understanding of these complexities may make it difficult for specific support to be implemented in response to students’ backgrounds.

Knowledge of the Pathways Program is limited among staff not directly engaged with implementing the program. Students and teachers are often unaware that a program has been running at all. Some of the staff and a few students directly involved are able to articulate what the program was about.
Student Case Study 1

Asadi

Asadi was born in Afghanistan and his family moved to Pakistan when he was a small boy. They moved multiple times before arriving in Australia. Asadi can speak five languages, including English which he has been studying for the last few years. He has attended school intermittently over these years of moving. His father is well educated and encourages him to do well in his studies. Asadi has been living in Australia for three years and is feeling settled in school. He has friends from a range of backgrounds, including some who have also had a refugee experience and others who have been raised in Australia.

Asadi enjoys studying and has high aspirations to attend university. His parents also have high expectations, but they have little understanding of the pathways to university from school in Australia. Asadi doesn’t really know what SACE is or how it affects his university entrance, but he trusts his teachers to tell him what is needed. He is currently studying a VET course which he enjoys, but he is not aware of how this might affect his post-school aspirations. He studies hard and tries to maintain good results, but he is shy of asking for help in class. Sometimes he goes to homework club but the teachers there don’t always have specialist subject knowledge that he needs in Chemistry or Mathematics. Usually Asadi asks his older friends for help if he needs it, but they may not have this specialist knowledge either.

Asadi’s brothers were left behind in Pakistan when he moved to Australia. Sometimes the family speaks to these brothers and this can be upsetting for all of them. When Asadi is finding things difficult at school, he is hesitant to talk with his family about it because he knows that his brothers are in a much more challenging situation. Asadi does not want to upset his parents further by complaining.

Reflection Questions:
1. What are some of the possible skills, knowledge and expertise that Asadi might have which would assist him in undertaking the SACE?
2. What are some of the student and family contexts that might influence Asadi’s schooling and how could his school respond to this?
3. How could Asadi’s school ensure that his experience of the SACE is helping him work towards his post-school aspirations?
Akec moved to Australia when she was in the early years of high school after living in Sudan and Kenya. She speaks Dinka at home with her family, but also speaks Arabic, Swahili and English. Since moving to Australia, Akec’s family has become quite isolated, especially her mother who has chronic health concerns. Akec worries about her mother a lot and often stays home from school to provide companionship and support for her to attend medical appointments.

At school, Akec has a few close friends, mostly from similar backgrounds to herself. She has a great relationship with the EALD coordinator, and often seeks support from the coordinator with her school work. She likes the help that she can access from the EALD teacher because she clarifies requirements of assignments. Sometimes it is difficult for Akec to understand requirements as the assessments are very English language rich and she is still developing English language literacy. Akec would like to attend homework club for extra support, but she is not able to stay after school as she needs to go home straight away. She completes domestic work at home in the evenings and on weekends. She is a dedicated student so always tries to complete her homework. Akec enjoyed attending Dinka classes outside of school, but she has now stopped attending these classes in order to concentrate on her SACE. She was not aware that Dinka classes could be counted towards the SACE and may have continued these classes if she had known.

Communication between Akec’s parents and the school is limited. Events at the school are offered in English without translation available. When her father attends parent-teacher interviews, Akec and her sister act as translators for each other’s teachers and their parents.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. How could Akec’s school adapt their approaches to improve their support of Akec? You might think about:
   a. Assessment
   b. Additional support programs such as homework club
   c. Family engagement
   d. SACE subject knowledge and choice.
Points for Consideration

The findings from this research project suggest a range of practices, strategies and policy approaches that can be considered in order to improve educational outcomes for students with refugee backgrounds.

For Catholic Education South Australia
Consider how to facilitate:
— links between the framework developed from this project and the CESA developed English as an Additional Language (EAL) Elaboration to the Continuous Improvement Framework (CIF)
— centralised professional development accessible to schools on how to respond to learners from refugee backgrounds (including experience and language needs).

For the South Australian Certificate of Education Board
Consider how to enable:
— school staff to feel confident in utilising diverse assessment tasks (multi-modal and culturally diverse) that will withstand moderation processes
— the provision of diverse exemplars, including some from students with refugee backgrounds or EALD.

For further research
Consider how:
— the framework developed from this project applies in different school contexts
— structural changes might be necessary to further enable teachers to utilise and value diverse assessment strategies
— the role of language teaching can be embedded in all teachers’ practice.

For teachers
Consider how you might be able to improve your practice to:
— highlight key strengths of students from refugee backgrounds and construct learning from the broad base of students’ skills, knowledge and linguistic expertise
— recognise students as individuals to enable relationship-building through understanding and acknowledging students’ wide range of pre- and post-migration experiences
— build relationships with families as part of the process of knowing students and their contexts
— assist students to learn subject-specific terminology and text types in all subjects, as well as clear explanations of requirements for specific tasks and assignments.

For schools and school leadership
Consider how you might be able to improve your school to:
— encourage all staff to become competent in supporting EALD learners
— create an environment where all students and families feel welcome and a sense of belonging
— engage families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and develop knowledge and understandings of the SACE and post-school pathways
— ensure staff maintain high expectations of all students’ capacity for success.
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