Supporting higher education key to resettling Syrian refugees

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Published by Policy Online
apo.org.au

19 Oct 2015

Abstract
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5 pages

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DOI: 10.4225/50/562429275D855

Available online: http://apo.org.au/node/58011
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Last month the Australian Government announced that it will open the door to 12,000 refugees fleeing Iraq and Syria, focusing its resettlement efforts on women and children. 7000 people will be settled in New South Wales alone, with a great number of these likely to join the existing Syrian community in Southwest Sydney. This will pose a huge challenge for schools and social services. Around half of displaced Syrian children have been unable to continue their education. Young men express shame and depression at their inability to study in camps. Education is a vital aspect of humanitarian resettlement in that it offers opportunities to develop cultural understanding, psychosocial wellbeing and employability skills. To allow them to rebuild lives successfully in Australia, equal access to education must be guaranteed.

Australia’s program for refugee settlement provides reasonably comprehensive, integrated support services to ensure some level of stability. But given this number of additional resettlement places, policymakers will have to strategise to assist the already-overstretched community sector to cope. Schools and higher education institutions will also have to play a significant role in helping young people adjust to their new lives here.

Refugees in Australia already have relatively low rates of educational success and are underrepresented in tertiary education. This is the result of interconnected factors such as post-traumatic stress, disrupted experiences of prior education and a raft of other difficulties that adjusting to a new society presents. Many arrive in Australia with minimal or no ability to speak English. Often a child’s chronological age does not match their level of educational experience. Unlike their peers, students from refugee backgrounds regularly do not have English-literate family members that can help them with homework or conversational practice.

They nevertheless have a language. Be it Arabic, Farsi, Tamil or Rohingya, students’ knowledge of an existing language is an asset rather than a hindrance to their success in the Australian education system. The cognitive benefits of bilingualism are widely documented. Whether or not it is the product of prior formal education, they also have knowledge, ideas and creativity to contribute. These skills simply need to be harnessed.

Initiatives for encouraging engagement and participation

Since the 1980s, Australian schools with significant populations of students from asylum seeker or refugee backgrounds have provided additional, culturally appropriate assistance for students to integrate into a new education system. Adopting best practice from the UK and Europe, widening participation in post-school education for students from refugee backgrounds has been a relatively recent policy objective in Australia. There have, however, been a number of demonstrably effective programs for encouraging engagement with school and university education.

Gaining an ATAR that is too low, or not gaining one at all, acts as a major barrier to refugee students’ enrolment in university. But students with lower university entrance marks can perform on a comparable level to their higher ranked peers, given there is access to an inclusive curriculum, quality teaching, academic support and counselling.
Mentoring of high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds is a cost-effective way to promote students’ confidence, educational success and intention to enrol in university. For students from refugee backgrounds it has particular benefits in increasing educational self-efficacy, as well as knowledge of career options and the Australian education system. This is particularly effective when part of a targeted first year program and delivered by an older, more experienced student who has successfully negotiated the barriers to university learning. It provides a space for English-language practice and personal support outside of their family and existing social networks. University mentors themselves report positive impacts upon their own leadership skills, motivation and academic achievement. The whole community thus benefits, not least from the promotion of cross-cultural experience.

The Educational Access Scheme (EAS) provides additional entrance points for students from refugee backgrounds in applying for university. There are some examples of in-school programs where support staff identify and work with refugee background students to provide targeted assistance to supporting their access to tertiary study. While the refugee population is predominantly children and young people, 1 in 4 are between the ages of 18 and 29. Many newcomers are thus beyond the age of compulsory schooling and require greater access to special pathway programs, for example those offered through TAFE.

Community organisations such as migrant resource centres provide essential forums for initial, informal learning among young adults. They also offer referral to formal learning institutions, tutors and interpreters to develop English language literacy and vocational experience. Refugees who have used these services are able to reciprocate by mentoring, advising and giving back to other refugees as well as to the wider Australian community.

Equity scholarships are an obvious way in which to incentivise students to enrol in university. Virtually every Australian university offers places for students from refugee backgrounds as part of their equity scholarship programs. For students from low socio-economic backgrounds, providing financial assistance is a powerful tool in supporting social mobility and educational equality. Many young people from refugee backgrounds are often prematurely adultified, required to take on elevated social responsibilities including being a key breadwinner for their family. Scholarships can detract from this burden by alleviating financial stress and promote retention by allowing students to focus on their studies.

Engaging the parents of refugee young people is another important aspect of quality education. Whilst generally supportive of their children’s learning, they often lack the cultural capital and knowledge of Australia’s tertiary education system to be able to provide guidance. They therefore may be disappointed by their children’s educational outcomes, compounding intergenerational tensions that often arise in resettlement countries. A number of universities facilitate specialised campus visits, allowing exposure to study options so that students can imagine their future and parents have the capacity to advise their children about post-school opportunities. Importantly, this facilitates familiarity with the university environment and builds informal linkages with existing staff and students.

An opportunity for Australia

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Whilst the primary motivator of resettling refugees should be humanitarian as a signatory of the Refugee Convention, ensuring they succeed in education and beyond offers significant opportunities for Australia. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has recognised tertiary education as a human right, reflecting its importance for maximising refugees’ potential for contributing to their communities and broader society. Despite immense challenges in adjusting to life in Australia, refugee populations have historically proven extremely resilient and motivated to succeed in their new country. Second generation Australians from Polish, Hungarian and Vietnamese refugee families have higher than average rates of educational attainment and employment in professional roles.

More recently, resettlement initiatives in regional centres has seen refugees contributing to rural development by stimulating economic growth and the revitalisation of country towns. For example, settlement of Karen refugees from Myanmar in Nhill, Western Victoria, has injected $40 million into the local economy and created 70 fulltime jobs. Despite a perception that they are a drain on public money and resources, no Australian study has shown refugees to impose an economic burden over the long-term.

Room for improvement

Despite the efforts of schools and community initiatives, there are few systemic, centrally funded programs for ensuring humanitarian migrants’ educational success. According to a report co-published by the University of Western Sydney, Charles Sturt and the University of Canberra, refugee-specific programs in schools are generally ad hoc, dependent upon the effort of individual staff members, and the availability of programs and capacity of schools to take advantage of these opportunities are often poorly matched.

Programs for promoting tertiary pathways are also at present fragmented and sporadic in their coverage. A greater number of students from this cohort would be able to access and succeed in higher education if post-Year 12 support were available in the form of a tailored university preparedness program, offering cultural and social support in addition to developing the skills needed for tertiary efficacy. Outcomes for assisting students with diverse needs could be improved with a more consistent, unified approach between universities, schools, government and other community stakeholders.

Earlier this month, the new Education Minister Simon Birmingham noted in his address to the Times Higher Education World Summit that whilst overall participation in tertiary education is at a record high, there remain problems in access and success rates for equity groups. He pointed to the need “to ensure that good quality higher education is accessible to all students who have the ability and well informed motivations to benefit from it.”

Students from refugee backgrounds have much to offer the Australian education system. In the vast majority of cases they are very academically able, demonstrate incredible resilience and are highly motivated to succeed in their new country. Those soon to arrive from Syria will be no different. While lacking the necessary social and cultural capital to immediately reach their full potential, they are young people with diverse interests, talents and aspirations which we cannot let go to waste.