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A Qualitative Exploration of the Tertiary Education Experiences of Refugee and Asylum Seekers in Australia

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ABSTRACT

The world currently has the highest documented level of displaced people in recorded history. This includes a large number of individuals who are spending their youth as asylum seekers or refugees, which often impedes their access to and engagement with educational pursuits. Given that education has been shown to be a fundamental factor to facilitative resettlement and acculturation for newly-arrived refugee families and individuals, continued research attempting to understand the barriers to accessing education is warranted. This study qualitatively examines the educational experiences (with a focus on access to education) of 10 refugee and asylum-seeking students in Australian tertiary education using thematic analysis on semi-structured interview data. Six themes were identified from the interviews as barriers to or facilitators in accessing education. These are: relationships, emotional well-being, logistics, knowledge, instability, and financial hardship. The findings from this study add to a limited empirical knowledge base on this topic, and improve our understanding of the experiences of accessing education for students with refugee backgrounds. This is discussed in relation to its implications for institutes and policy makers.

“Yeah at that time the war started ... and we were like ‘why do we have a new teacher?’ It’s because the other was killed.” – Participant #9

The influx of displaced people across the world is being referred as a global refugee crisis, with the largest documented number of displaced individuals recorded since World War II. According to the United Nations Refugees Agency (UNHCR 2017), approximately 65.6 million people are displaced around the world, and around 34.29% of these are displaced externally to their home country, and thus they are classified as refugees. The distinction between refugees and asylum seekers is based on the authorized grant of documentation to allow the resettlement in a host country; asylum seekers are externally displaced people who have not yet been granted a refugee status (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2016).

Typically, these displaced people are hosted by the poorer countries of the world, and it has been argued that industrialized countries (who can draw more easily on economic resources to support and provide aid to these vulnerable people) could – or should –

play a bigger role in sharing the global burden that is resulting from this refugee crisis (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013; see also Anderson, 2018; Haslam & Holland, 2012). For example, Australia (where the current study was conducted) is ranked 9th of 149 countries in the Global Prosperity index for 2017 (Legatum Prosperity Index, 2018) yet ranks 46th in the world for the number of recognized or resettled refugees (relative to national GDP; $n_{\text{refugees}} = 42,188$ equating to less than 1% of the global refugee population; UNHCR, 2017). One potential cause for this asymmetry could be based in false beliefs (i.e., factually incorrect statements) about this population (Hartley, Anderson, & Pedersen, 2018), or in fears that these vulnerable people will not resettle easily into their new host nation (see Louis, Duck, Terry, Schuller, & Lalonde, 2007).

A body of research has begun documenting methods that can assist the resettlement of migrant groups, including refugees and asylum seekers. One factor that has consistently been identified as a facilitative factor is education, both in terms of (a) acculturation (the acquisition [vs. rejection] of psychological identification with the host [vs. home] cultures; Berry, 1990, 2005), and (b) influencing socioeconomic status and ameliorating physical and mental health issues (e.g., Bang, 2017; Dinh, Weinstein, Tein, & Roosa, 2013; Duan & Vu, 2000; Valtonen, 1994; for a systematic review of this literature, see Sheikh & Anderson, 2018). Indeed, participation in education is perceived by both refugees and refugee-service providers as the most important factor in facilitating resettlement (after meeting primary needs such as securing housing and employment; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). The major aim of this paper is to document the experiences of accessing tertiary education for refugee and asylum-seeking students participating in tertiary education in Australia.

The importance of education in resettlement

A diverse range of outcomes have been linked to education, all of which facilitate the resettlement process. These include increased health and well-being, and being perceived more positively by others (including being evaluated more positively and as more trustworthy, see Easterbrook, Kuppens, & Manstead, 2016). However, education has also linked to resettlement itself – the evidence suggests that education is known to facilitate acculturation as it attunes people to the features of the new culture (Berry, 1997). For refugees, acculturation into the mainstream community has been demonstrated when quality education opportunities have been provided, across a variety of education levels (Cheung, 1995; Le, 2004; Ondis, 1994; Pham & Harris, 2001; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008; Ross, 2012). This could be for several reason – for example, Birman, Trickett, and Vinokurov (2002) argue that the positive participation of students in education from refugee backgrounds require the acculturation-relevant outcomes of language abilities, and behavior and psychological adjustment to the new culture. They claim these outcomes allow effective interaction and communication in the educational context. They demonstrated evidence for this by linking higher Grade Point Average (GPA) to host culture identification in a sample of Jewish Soviet refugee students living in America. Similarly, Kovacev and Shute (2004) demonstrated that acceptance from classmates and school-based peer acceptance both facilitated acculturation and buffered against the harmful outcomes of being socially marginalized.

Such findings are important for the longevity of resettlement satisfaction, because participation in education is linked to post-education life outcomes (e.g., employment, life satisfaction), and some research has demonstrated that acculturation statistically moderates this relationship for refugees. For example, Kodithuwakku (2010) demonstrated that having less tertiary education (as measured by the number of completed years of formal tertiary education - both prior to displacement and after arriving to the host country) was linked with difficulties in acculturation to American culture, which in turn created challenges in gaining post-education employment for refugees. Similarly, it has been demonstrated that refugees who are unable to access post-secondary education report being less patient with the process of resettlement and less satisfied with the completion or quality of goal attainment (Le, 2004; Ross, 2012). While education is certainly not the only factor facilitating resettlement, the evidence base supporting its importance is rapidly growing.

To reiterate these arguments of the importance of participating in education, the provision of quality education has been recognized by researchers and intergovernmental organizations as a fundamental right (i.e., United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization; UNESCO, 2016) and it has continuously been advocated for the provision of education to improve the quality of life for individuals across the world. Despite the evidence for the importance of education in resettlement and beyond, migrants of most backgrounds and social group memberships have been invariably encountering barriers when accessing education (with the exception of a small proportion of global elites). This is particularly true for individuals whose migration has been forced, with only 1% of young adult refugees attending universities (UNHCR, 2015). Taken together, the evidence unequivocally demonstrates the need for education to facilitate resettlement for refugees and asylum seekers, and yet we know that this population is not accessing or participating in education at the rate that they might were they not displaced, and thus a nuanced understanding of the barriers faced by refugees in this plight is needed.

Known barriers to participating in tertiary education for refugees

Migrants generally encounter many barriers when resettling into a new country. However, refugees face additional factors compared to other migrants that are attributable to the forced nature of their migration, including having a limited choice (if any) of country to move to, and trauma associated with forced displacement. Previous research has identified some of these barriers, often with a focus on language differences (Clark, Gilbert, Rao, & Kerr, 2014; Hatoss, O'Neill, & Eacersall, 2012; Watkins, Razez, & Richters, 2012), family separation (Savic, Chur-Hansen, Mahmood, & Moore, 2013), homelessness and housing affordability (Refugee Council of Australia, 2013), instability associated with residency status (Hartley, Fleay & Tye, 2017), refugee status-based stigma (Baranik, Hurst, & Eby, 2017), and navigating a new cultural system (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2012).

There is a limited amount of research on barriers faced by refugees in the specific domain of education and educational experiences. Whilst there is a body of research exploring barriers for school children and their parents from refugee backgrounds, the

body of literature on the experiences of tertiary education students with refugee backgrounds is sparse. The small body of research that does exist tends to focus on important issues such as refugee-specific pedagogy and intervention-based program evaluations (e.g., Matthews, 2008; Ramirez & Matthews, 2008). Only a small amount of work has specifically recorded the lived experiences of refugee students as they engage in education. An example is the work of Joyce, Earnest, de Mori, and Silvagni (2010) who conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups to investigate the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in Australian tertiary education. They found that students reported mixed messages about the best ('right') academic direction, the importance of the pre-university experience or prior life experiences, impacts of different teaching styles and learning methods (e.g., essays, use of web and technology, and assessment types), and cultural differences (e.g., language competency and identity or belonging). Finally, they reported feeling that university services/staff had a lack of empathy and understanding of their journey, and the unique barriers that they face. Moreover, work by Baker, Ramsay, Irwin, and Miles (2018) reported that refugee students at Australian universities found traditional institutional support services to be not easily accessible or appropriate for them.

One major theme identified by their research was the balance between family responsibilities and educational goals (see also Hirsch & Maylea, 2016; Naidoo, 2015). This is unsurprising given that contemporary refugees often have a migration history originating in Africa or the Middle East (Merkin & Ramadan, 2016; Schreier et al., 2010), and that individuals from these countries typically have a collectivist cultural background (i.e., cultures where members typically prioritize the needs and goals of the family and community over individual goals; see, for example, Triandis, 1988).¹ As such, at the individual level, refugee students from these cultural backgrounds might construe notions of the self in a collectivistic manner (at least relative to the typical members of the host culture). In this case, they would perceive the outcomes for their community as an integral part of their decision-making process (including those decisions pertaining to education). For the same reason, social status of the family becomes a responsibility for the refugee student to uphold, and this can impact decisions to participate in education (including attainment, learning goals, desired outcomes, etc.). This was demonstrated by Harris and Marlowe (2011) who reported that African-born refugees in Australia faced with excessive expectations from their families (both those living in Australia and overseas) pertaining to making the most of financial contributions or maintaining the pride that comes with having a social status of being a university student.

In summary, most research on the refugee population has been based on identifying general (non-domain specific) barriers they face as individuals forcibly displaced from their homes (Watkins et al., 2012), the outcomes of being forcibly replaced to a new

¹A report by the UNHCR (2017) identified the top 10 country of origin for refugees as Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan, Dominican Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Myanmar, Eritrea, and Burundi. Each of these countries has nation-level scores high on collectivism, and this indicates that individuals from these countries are likely to have a collectivistic self-construal (see the Geert Hofstede Country Comparison Tool: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>). As such, we acknowledge that not all refugee students will construe the self in a collectivistic fashion as we have described, however, we make these claims based on the evidence that the majority of refugees come from collectivistic cultural backgrounds.

Table 1. Demographic information (country of origin, age and level of education) of refugee participants.

Number of participants	Country of origin	Age (years)	Years spent in Australia at time of interview	Level of education
2	Afghanistan	23, 26	9, 10	Bachelor's degree
1	India/Tibet	22	3	Advanced diploma
1	Egypt	22	8	Bachelor's degree
2	Pakistan	21	9, 3	Bachelor's degree, Advanced diploma
1	Saudi Arabia	21	4	Bachelor's degree
2	Syria	20, 23	3, 3	Bachelor's degree
1	Somalia/Kenya	22	2	Advanced diploma

culture (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2012), or on understanding the attitudes of host cultures towards the group (for meta-analyses, see Anderson & Ferguson, 2018; Cowling, Anderson, & Ferguson, 2018; Deslandes & Anderson, 2019). Despite the importance of education on a whole range of outcomes, and the knowledge that forcibly displaced individuals are underrepresented in the education sector (even though it facilitates their resettlement), there has been limited research documenting the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in education systems. The purpose of this study was to add to the growing body of literature which qualitatively examines the educational experiences of refugees in the tertiary education system in Australia, with a focus on *access* to tertiary education, and to explore how they perceive their status as a refugee or asylum seekers has impacted this experience.

Method

Participants

Participants were ten self-identified refugees (4 female, 6 male), who are or were enrolled in a post-secondary course at a tertiary education in Victoria, Australia. All participants had been resettled in Australia (i.e., were no longer asylum seekers); however, sometimes recounts of their experiences were memories of a stage at which their refugee status was still being processed. The recruitment strategy involved a combination of social media advertisements, flyers circulated to not-for-profit advocacy groups, and direct contact with potential individual candidates (note: all recruitment materials were in English). All participants were either from an African, Asian, or Middle Eastern background (See Table 1).

Interview methodology and procedure

We conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Interviewing is a useful method when the researchers are interested in gaining an in-depth understanding of the interviewee's observations, experiences, expectations, and how they also interpret these experiences and make sense of their own world (Weiss, 1995). Since we aimed to explore the educational experiences of refugees in tertiary education in Australia, with a particular focus on access to education, we thought interviews were the most suitable approach.

Accordingly, we developed an interview schedule for this study (which is available on the open science framework at <https://osf.io/k5e84/>), in which questions were divided into four categories: (i) demographic information (including questions about age, country of birth, residency status, and academic history), (ii) experiences of education (regarding their relationship with education providers, the learning experience, and available opportunities) in their country or origin (i.e., prior to their displacement), (iii) experiences of education in Australia, and (iv) future goals. Interviews typically lasted between 30–45 minutes covering all four aspects of the interview schedule. Participants were offered interpreters, however these services were not requested, and all interviews were conducted in English². The study protocol was reviewed by the Australian Catholic University human research ethics committee.

Participants self-selected to be interviewed for this project, and at the initial contact stage were provided with an electronic copy of the Participant Information Letter (PIL). Individuals who expressed interest in the research were invited via e-mail to arrange a time and location of mutual convenience. Following a short introduction to the study and a statement explaining the limits of confidentiality, participants were given time to read the provided documentation, and provide consent if they wish to proceed with their participation. Once the interview questions were covered, participants were debriefed and provided with a directory of psychological services that could be accessed following the interview if needed. Prior to analysis, all the transcribed data were uniquely sent to respective participants for their approval - all participants agreed to have their data included in the analyses.

Analysis

The transcribed interviews were entered into Nvivo11 (a qualitative analysis software) and we analyzed the data using the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We endorsed a combination of both inductive and deductive approaches to the theme identification. In doing so, we initially familiarized ourselves with the data by reading it several times. Then we first generated initial codes either because they already had been identified in the existing literature (e.g., language as a barrier), or because of the commonality among participants dialog (e.g., experiencing bullying). This process identified a total of 105 codes (available on the open science framework at <https://osf.io/k5e84/>). Next, we developed clusters of codes and subcodes based on similarity of experiences (although we also contrasted the quotes within themes when participants had different experiences). Finally, we revised these clusters into six meaningful themes and named them.

Results

We identified six themes: *relationships*, *emotional wellbeing*, *logistics*, *knowledge*, *instability*, and *financial hardship*. We paid particular attention into the participant's

²We note that all advertising and recruitment materials were in English – this was for convenience since we were advertising for participants who were enrolled in a post-secondary course where the education was provided in English, however we acknowledge the potential for this to bias the findings presented in this paper.

experiences of accessing tertiary education, and the ways in which having a refugee status has impacted education-relevant outcomes beyond challenges faced by non-refugee students. We were able to identify each theme in each participant's interview regardless of the diversity of their background. On the other hand, some themes seem to have overlapping content as will be demonstrated.

Relationships

The relational influences that people experienced (or lacked) was one of the most prominent topics we identified in the data. For example, participants described that their experience of being away from familiar people made them feel isolated in their educational journey. The distinction between having a diverse range of peers, compared to being the only one of their peers who was different (i.e., non-'Australian'), was evident in the degree of (dis)comfort participants felt when attempting to establish or maintain social connections:

"I was already different from everyone else, and the fact that I was shy as well made that worse as well because people zero-d in on me more because of that fact." – Participant #3

"...I don't really have much of support to be honest. Like I didn't find anyone to talk to." – Participant #9

"it was very hard for me because I was new, we were different. I wore hijab... something good was that it was very multicultural and I made a lot of friends and we were studying together so that was positive ..." – Participant #8

The quotes illustrate that participants first experienced social isolation based on their personality traits (e.g., being shy) or their differences (e.g., wearing a hijab). This disrupted their potential sense of inclusion, but also decreased their motivation for contact with others. However, over time, participants highlighted the importance of having friends to assist them in their education goals, including course completions, helping each other with homework, and having social support. They also reported that this was easiest with other young migrants. Despite this preference, almost all participants showed the initiative to actively engage in numerous extracurricular educational activities with the goal of meeting locals - people who were different to them and could help them integrate into the host culture:

"... what I do is make friends with people that I think are nice, so make friends with them, and then if I don't understand the questions... they explain me easy ways so I can go and research myself and do my assignments. Like, with the assignments I made friends with the people, and then that's how I do my assignments [sic]." – Participant #4

"I grew up playing that sport and it was um, it helped me a lot in breaking down the barriers of understanding other cultures ... I felt like it was like if I continue that I would be able to contribute positive to the community and understand culture... Australian culture [sic]." – Participant #5

Another prominent aspect of relationships theme was the family relationships particularly concerning balancing and maintaining expectations, including expectations related to family (and home culture) separation and expectations from family (including

family who remain in the country of origin). Balance constituted of working several hours a day to provide for the family (locally and internationally), which in turn resulted in educational disturbances and preventing access to educational opportunities. Some also felt responsibility for the up-keep of their family's status (as an educated family) merely by being enrolled in education in their new host country. They reported that this placed added pressure on their academic performance:

"when you come as a migrant, especially if you're a boy, you can't spend most of your time on studies [sic]." – Participant #2

"That's the view in my family. And my family is a very highly educated family, that another reason why I pursue education (laughs). If I didn't pursue education I won't have a place to sleep [sic]." – Participant #6

"Yeah... So, I'm the first person in our entire family from both my parents sides who went to uni[versity]... Yeah, I have a lot of cousins both here and overseas, none of them made it to uni[versity] or TAFE or that sort of high school for different reasons but I was the only one who made it to uni[versity]..." – Participant #8

All of these experiences reflect different aspects of pressure related to family relationships. Participant #2 alludes to his experience more from a financial perspective that he cannot allocate himself enough time for education due to working too much to relieve financial pressures. On the other hand, the other two participants talk about the pressure of getting education to either live up to the family standards or be the first one in family to attain this achievement. Regardless, these different sources still put enough pressure on the stressful lives of the participants.

There was also recognition that the quality and nature of relationships with education providers dictated how students felt about accessing education. Participants reported that having (or perceiving) more strict or disconnected educators was linked to them feeling less interested in their studies and less comfortable in the classroom. Specifically, participants reported evidence of the impact of the educator's physical, mental, and emotional presence on their education. Typically, participants reported a perception that education providers would not understand the point of view of a non-local student, and therefore were intimidated to approach them:

"I remember a lot of tutors didn't even know your name at week 12 and that really got to me.... I didn't think they would understand me and I didn't think like not a lot of people are exposed to refugees and asylum seekers so I don't think they fully understand it means or what it means to go through that process. So I think I was afraid of being misunderstood or pitied or whatever else." – Participant #10

"... teachers always leave something with me. I really can get affect really badly like... I can either do really good or really bad and that's really depend on the teacher [sic].)" – Participant #9

Prejudice from peers, education providers, and individuals in the community created feelings of inferiority and uncertainty of their own abilities for our participants. This included victimization reports of being bullied or of being ostracized:

"Some teachers were a little bit ignorant some were... just in the way that they're really condescending like, I don't know like the way that they spoke to me they'd be surprised like

... they assumed things from me just because I looked different you know what I mean, oh I'm so surprised that you were able to write this essay ... [sic]." – Participant #3

"... they hear all this news in the media about refugees but they don't see the other side, they don't know our culture ..." – Participant #2

"Yeah having an extra pressure dealing with all these challenges that come with being a refugee people kind of making fun of you, bullying and ostracizing you and stuff like that. Those two things combined I was like 'I think I need to change uni[versities][sic]." – Participant #8

Although above examples imply that the lack of engagement from the education providers and prejudice by peers, education providers and other community members can be detrimental for participants' engagement and achievement in education, other arguments also showed the positive influence of the education provider whenever they could dedicate time and attention to students for extra help:

"[at the university in Australia] if you skip a class they straight-away notice ... or if you skip two classes, they'll notice so I think it's really important, for me it's really important to have an emotional connection with the uni[versity] ... [sic]." – Participant #10

"My last year... that coordinator of that unit was very supportive like among all the teachers that I had come across and the lecturers and everyone I would say he was someone who was most supportive [sic]." – Participant #8

"He was really helpful because he helped me too - he knows we are from a humanitarian visa, humanitarian background [sic]." – Participant #4

Overall, it is clear that the positive relationships with peers, family, education providers can mostly be beneficial for participants (except in the case of family putting pressure for educational achievements), whereas negative or lack of relationships hinder positive educational experiences.

Emotional wellbeing

Participants voiced their unprecedented experience of mental health issues that appeared during their tertiary education experience, which they attributed to different streams of pressure including internal processes such as high expectations of themselves and external environments including cultural differences or community:

"Umm ... well when I went to uni[versity] that was my mental health stuff started surfacing for the first time ... a lot of it ... and I had to seek professional help [sic]." – Participant #10

"I did go through some problems and - I was going through mental health. I had some help from a counsellor - It took a long time - ages till I found one that I think understood me, and, you know ... what has happened to me ... [sic]." – Participant #6

Participants reported mental health issues including clinical diagnoses of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and self-reported anxiety and stress about safety and family responsibilities. These were linked to an interference with the ability to fully commit to their course. Traumatic experiences recalled in relation to mental health issues were often associated with being involved in war-related situations and its

impact on previous education, the migration journey to Australia, and first encounters in Australia:

“... just trying to stay focused at uni[versity] when I have other things going on, because my family’s safety isn’t very secure even though we have our citizenship so it’s a kind of constant fear, there’s a constant fear, so that kind of obviously distracts when you’re trying to sit down and do lectures ... [sic].” – Participant #10

“Second thing was I started suffering from a bad stress mainly because I was in the news like videos and whatever interviews. When I was watching them they would affect me badly when I was continue watching them like because I think that hearing my story over and over again really kind of made me sad. So that one yeah... So that made me feel slack off and at some time after my fourth week I started losing my will going to university. No one and nothing could help [sic].” – Participant #9

At least two things continuously affected participants’ emotional wellbeing - worry about family safety and stress caused by constant reminder of events from the news. These not only disrupted their daily functioning, but also participants expressed a reluctance to seek help to understand the cause or to ameliorate symptoms of these issues. Indeed, mental health was identified as a taboo topic that neither students nor parents knew how to address:

“I’m like ‘Yeah, I have this problem, I don’t know what to do, you know? So lazy, I’m not motivated.’ He’s like ‘You have depression’ - Depression? I’ve never heard of it. I didn’t take excuses, like what the hell. What’s depression? I didn’t take it seriously [sic].” – Participant #2”

“Let’s be honest the whole concept of struggling is non-existing in our culture, it’s not supported to go and seek help and all of that so ... parents did not know where to go - they did not know I was struggling and they would not know where to go [sic].” – Participant #8

Although participants were able to express their struggles, their immediate social circles failed to acknowledge them and offer support. Therefore, in most cases, these issues remained unsolved. Besides mental health, participants mentioned a range of other emotions related to accessing education. Being exposed to a new education system resulted in reports of uncertainty and an excessive amount of adjustment for these participants who had previously experienced a different kind of education system. Participants were also dealing with disappointment from being refused either assistance with educational aspects or failing a component of education:

“...because you know, when you come from a refugee background, when you come to university – university is a whole new - new environment... completely different. It was nothing like what I was used to or what I expected.” – Participant #2

“when I got rejected I didn’t know why, then I started to go from one university to other and started to ask them why did you reject me and they would say ‘we don’t know’ and it was like how ... ‘how you don’t know?’ [sic].” – Participant #6

Participants not only experienced challenges and difficulties, but in spite of trying to make sense of these difficulties (e.g., being refused), they were not afforded with satisfactory answers. Through these experiences, some participants demonstrated resilience and confidence that allowed them to continue pursuing education:

“... because I didn’t get offers so I didn’t want to waste my half year, so I just quickly join [the university] to do my Cert IV in allied health because they said if we do Cert IV or Cert III, you’ll get it into nursing like, you don’t need to do the test into nursing ... [sic].” – Participant #4

“If I have a second option, I’ll go if I don’t get the first one, I’ll do the second one. then it’s a choice and not like a dream [sic].” – Participant #1

Participants recognized the importance that education played in their development. Therefore, regardless of the various challenges reported, all participants shared further education and career aspirations. Overall, although some emotional experiences had negative influences on their motivation and perseverance, their struggles and experiences built up and strengthened their resilience to pursue education.

Logistics

Students who had attempted to access education while having a refugee status, or based on retrospective accounts of their asylum-seeking status, expressed feelings of frustration with the complications that accompanied administrative tasks prior to gaining education. This relayed into a deferred entry into education programs therefore widening the education gap which many had experienced prior of their arrival in Australia and were spoken about with the essence of violation of human rights:

“there were a lot of processes you have to go through as well to access these services or have that type of academic support. Having the necessary documentation or all the kind of stuff that puts you off I guess if need be getting that type of support.” – Participant #3

“And when she asked me for the papers, I said I don’t have [them] - she said, sarcastically, ‘that is a little bit of a problem...’. They had been burnt by soldiers.” – Participant #7

“I tried to enroll in school here but I was rejected because of my English which couple of weeks ago I discovered that it’s illegal. It’s illegal to reject a student from school for this [sic].” – Participant #9

“but we still didn’t get study rights until for a while so it was not until maybe 6 months that we were able to go to school [sic].” – Participant #10

As can be seen from examples, logistic problems were mostly excuses by the authorities or people working in institutions to deny their access to education. Such problems also contributed to the emotional burden discussed earlier. Participants felt frustrated because there was nothing they could do in some instances (such as not having documents due to them being burnt by the soldier in where they escaped) or they were not told was missing in their applications and what was indeed necessary.

Most participants were often redirected to enroll into compulsory English language classes before being granted tertiary education access. One student expressed this as an unnecessary extended pathway, contributing to the education gap:

“Whenever the teacher gave me paper, I used to get 95 - 100% correct in 5 minutes, and the rest of the students complete that some quick some late till the end of the class ... so I know English, I can read, I can write, I can speak, I can listen and understand so what more they want, I don’t want to be a professor of English language so that’s fine for me [sic].” – Participant #7

“I was rejected because of that they told study English, but like I didn’t like it because I knew that is not want I wanted because I don’t want to study with you know my dad next to me so yeah [sic].” – Participant #9

Difficulty in accessing services also extended beyond administrative tasks to counseling or academic support:

“I think a lot of the services and help they have at different institutions and schools and stuff like that are kind of set up to help you when you’ve already reached your worst point so... I also think that they have a lot of boxes that you have to tick like... just like a person that’s like experiencing something in their life at the moment they’ll be like... you’re not depressed enough or have you been to a psychologist [sic].” – Participant #3

This participant’s experience clearly highlights that these students reported needing help, but was denied to them because it was not recognized early enough by the authorities. This implies that the authorities did not try to resolve the issue at first, but rather they delayed it to the latest possible occasion which caused trouble for participants.

Geographical location also seemed to play a role in being actively involved in tertiary education, both academically and socially. For most participants, educational institutes in their country of origin were walking distance away. In Australia, participants traveled longer distances when accessing education:

“Yeah, uni[versity] and just travelling and stuff because we were living far from the city at the time – I had to find out about the public transport and it was very hard now that I think back I can’t believe I did that for a whole year because there are no direct trains... I couldn’t have a license, and we couldn’t afford to live near transport. That was a big struggle and I believe that it did effect my studies. The travel. By the time I would get to uni[versity] and then was there for half a day and then get back home, I was too tired to do anything else but study more... it did take a bit of toll on me [sic].” – Participant #8

“I live so far away so that my family can afford the rent. So... it just... it would... I would never go. It was too much of a hassle. I wanted to, I actually signed up to one or two societies but I just never rocked up to any events. Couldn’t be bothered travelling hours...” – Participant #3

“I wanted to wait around... to be social at the campus – to make friends and practice my English and have people to study with, but I knew I had to get home to help. Also, my parents worry a lot if I’m late.” – Participant #6

Participants reiterated their daily travel journey for classes which typically relied on multiple forms of transport as well as large amounts of walking, and significantly affected motivation levels. Some participants also reported that the long distance from their residency to the university resulted in unwillingness to engage socially on campus with other students. Some reported that this often was not financially or logistically viable, resulting in missed classes and impacting academic engagement.

Overall, logistic issues in relation to proper paper-work being processed or requested, being provided help at the right time, and the distance of universities had detrimental effects on participants’ motivation and access to education.

Knowledge

Participants identified differences in teaching methodologies which directly influenced their learning abilities. This put added pressure to their education because they had to learn the taught material as well as learning about the new system and adjusting themselves to it:

“Over there we have questions with answers - answers you can memorize it. So you get questions in exams or tests or... I don't know, they are same [similar] questions to that. You just need to know the answer. Here you don't give the answer by the teacher - they make you figure it out - but how you can know if you are right [sic]?” – Participant #1

“I wasn't familiar with the academic structure they use here. They give us the assessment brief and I'm like what is this they give us a two-page brief? I'm like 'How am I supposed to do this, this is so hard!' But ... you can be creative with your answer - actually, they expect it.” – Participant #2

“I was like I always like that relationship between the student and the teacher I like that so much... It didn't really exist here [Australia] you know even if they say stay after and ask the lecturer even though he just rushing he not answer. You don't need the answer sometimes. You just talking and make the relationship but he just it's not just I found that affect me negatively at uni[versity] [sic].” – Participant #9

As can be seen, most stated that they were accustomed to ROTE learning (i.e., learning through memorization techniques) and were caught off guard by the different style practiced in the Australian education system, where students are encouraged to communicate critically and encouraged to learn in an interactive fashion. Additionally, the education provider's content delivery was also described as foreign compared to education providers from overseas. Given that academic structure and expectations are different, students were required to learn new systems relatively quickly to avoid falling behind. Participants also spoke about assignment differences, being required to use online learning platforms, and adjusting to teaching styles. Most participants had previously spent large amount of time with teaching staff during and after class time, where they would get individual direction and assistance. Conversely, they described the distance between education providers and students as commercial.

Another noteworthy difference was that technology formed an integral part of education in Australia. For some participants, this was their first exposure to technological devices such as calculators or computers and online learning platforms:

“I asked my teacher “How do we do this?” because she showed us how to do it on a calculator, how do we do it with the hand, we don't - she was like “This is Australia, we don't do that with hand.” I was so surprised, I'm like “In my country we do this by hand, there is no calculator.” – Participant #2

“the obstacles were knowing how to study with more technology than papers like everything was online blackboard, lectures online, assignments to submit online, doing the reports [sic].” – Participant #6

“2013 was the first time I touched a computer physically.” – Participant #7

Apart from disadvantages in educational knowledge attributed to teaching differences, lack of technological competence, and a slight mention of the language barrier,

participants also expressed disappointment in having little to no guidance about the educational system, or to any alternatives or solutions to their challenges. Often being the first from their family to go to an educational institute in Australia, neither did their families have knowledge about ways to navigate the system. They also identified a lack of exposure to the variety of study options available:

“There’s a problem with being refugee background, migrant background, they need a little help. Could be with assignments, could be with explaining them more about the course work, sometimes they don’t understand their assignment fully... just stuff like that [sic].” – Participant #2

“we were new to the country we had no idea, literally no idea what to do where to go and I was the first... So my family had no idea of how things work... now when I look back at it I don’t think so I got you know they could have helped us more like you know choosing the right course like at that time I wasn’t even aware that there were courses of social work and psychology [sic].” – Participant #8

Overall, lack of knowledge into how the system works, inexperience in technology, and lack of support from the family (due to their own background) made it difficult for participants to engage in education and disrupted their adaptation. Here, they also offered some insights into how these issues could be resolved in terms of extra care by the education providers and understanding.

Instability

Participants reported that the instability of constantly moving, and not knowing how permanent any transitions were to be, and this played an important role in approaching education. On average (median), participants had transitioned through five countries in their plight for safety creating educational gaps or disruption within their educational journey:

“The waiting process took us about 4 years and more and yeah cause I think looking back when we launched our application in 2011 and coming to Australia in 2015, there was like a massive gap in between, we taught ourselves what we could, but you know... others are less lucky [sic].” – Participant #5

“All the other schools were destroyed so yeah, I wasn’t the only one was not able to go to school at that time. I missed both year 9 and year 10 in Syria... so yeah in Egypt I didn’t really go to school just that couple of days and it was horrible right but yeah my I didn’t really study in Egypt much just like I think because first [we had to be] safe... Even though being home school just random study is not actually as productive as actually having you know classes and syllabus and you know something that you going somewhere with it. I missed three years that means I should have be doing year 12 when I arrived [sic].” – Participant #9

Having to move across places/countries or waiting for relocation brought the challenges together for education. Every time, the systems would change and the participants would have to start again and wait.

Additionally, they had mentioned moving through multiple educational institutes and parts of Australia (i.e., regional and metropolitan) because of their refugee status. Every time a relocation happened, participants emphasized that the first thing to establish was

safety. Then they would start seeking out opportunities for education. One participant described the ways in which uncertainty about the safety and stability of their future meant that they refrained from accessing education.

“There was a huge gap between that, umm, and just trying to stay focused at uni[versity] when I have other things going on because my family’s safety isn’t very secure... it’s a kind of constant fear there’s a constant fear so that kind of obviously distracts when you’re trying to sit down and do lectures.” – Participant #10

Overall, together with the challenges mentioned in the logistics, the instability costed participants many years in transition when they were supposed to be in education.

Financial hardship

Participants reported that financial aid was typically unavailable. When approaching services to receive financial help, they were rejected on the basis of their humanitarian status without further explanation or provision of options. They suggested that this was one of the main causes of stress, and had a significant negative influence on their ability to participate in education:

“You know, your family relies on you, you got to work as well so you are kind of the only source of income as well - I have to work a lot while studying [sic].” – Participant #2

“Being a humanitarian, we definitely have a financial problem because, we moved and our parents are not working so - when we moved here, I got offer... then we have to pay \$400 to accept the offer... Yeah, it’s quite challenging because you have to pay the money straight away - then every fortnight I have to pay \$1800 like, \$1600... to make \$5000 something... before May. You have to help your families and you have to pay for your fees. And if I’m not working, I cannot take this course [sic].” – Participant #4

“you know because of financial issues I couldn’t continue with my studies, so I stopped.” – Participant #5

“and the fees was so expensive and I had not that much money because I was new arrival here so my boss also didn’t pay me for four months so that’s why I don’t had money no money to pay rent I took money from my friends to pay the rent (sic).” – Participant #7

Participants felt as if they were placed in a position to make choices about attending a tertiary institute while supporting their family. One participant described an ordeal where they would need to work overnight shifts to accommodate for family expenses and then navigate public transport early in the morning but would end up arriving late to an early morning class, thus jeopardizing their relationship with the education providers. This not only affected the relationship with the education provider but also the student’s ability to concentrate in class:

“Unfortunately, that was early in the morning 8 o clock, but I finish work at 6 in the morning, I have to change my clothes at home, I have to come from home to uni[versity] and I all the time arrived to class 30 minute last and she all the time told me “out” ... [sic]” – Participant #7

As can be seen in the example, financial hardship did not necessarily directly lower the motivation of participants. However, the education providers were not empathetic

to their situation, and participants' efforts were not appreciated. The next example shows that they were not eager to help them out by adapting participants' schedule so that they could both attend education and work:

"I email the coordinator saying that, you know, can you put me in different group, like different groups, so that I can able to pay my fees because I don't want to withdraw my job from that shift, and they offer me a class which is starting Monday straight away... that's why I didn't put much effort [sic]." – Participant #4

Finally, a few other participants expressed resentment regarding their financial burden because other students did not have to work. This might have also affected how included they felt by their peers:

"I was working two jobs and but my friends weren't working. They had their parents who gave them with financial support so it was for me that was the culture shock – me being worried about finances, while other kids weren't worried about finances [sic]." – Participant #10

Overall, financial hardship forced participants to work (and in some occasions support their family) and be absent from education. This negative situation was further exacerbated by the lack of interest for help by the education providers to accommodate the needs of these students.

Discussion

The focus of this study was to explore the tertiary education experiences of refugees studying in Australia, with a focus on barrier and facilitators of *access* to education. Interviews with refugee students who had been, or still were, engaged in tertiary education, revealed six themes. These were: (1) *relationships* - the positive and negative impact of people in immediate contact with the refugees including their family, community, peers, and education providers; (2) *emotional wellbeing* - the prevalence of mental health issues and the experience of other emotions that were caused by or impacted their educational experiences; (3) *logistics* - the obstacles to successfully accessing or pursuing their education (e.g., paperwork, extended pathways, physical distance from educational institutes, etc.); (4) *knowledge* - lack of information about (or even the existence of) education-relevant processes, ways to access content, and differences in styles and expectations of learning and teaching (including exposure to technology); (5) *instability* - the disruptive impact of constant movement through countries, cities, regions, and educational institutions leading to educational gaps, and; (6) *financial hardship* - struggles with financial stability and its negative impact on the student's education.

Some themes identified in this study have been explored in previous studies that have examined barriers, needs, and challenging experiences. For instance, Harris and Marlowe (2011) and Joyce and colleagues (2010) found that transport was a key factor in the students' engagement in their education. In Australia, educational institutes are often found in central parts of the city; however, staying further away was seen as a necessity rather than a choice, given that suburbs are more affordable places to live. This was confounded by issues with finances - because students needed to financially support their families both locally and those still in their country of origin, they needed

to save money wherever possible including accommodation. Hirsch and Maylea (2016) also reported the impact of financial issues was a barrier to simply accessing education, beyond the impact of financial strain on their educational experience. All of these narratives were also reported by participants in this study. One possible solution for this could be that financial schemes may be provided by universities or refugee support centers to assist refugee students for their transport expenses for their education. This will increase their attendance in classes, participation in campus activities, and facilitate making friends from their academic environment. This might also contribute with how much they may identify with the university, and increase their likelihood of belonging to new groups. In turn, this will support their health and well-being (e.g., Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009), because the financial obstacles they face to reach the campus and engage in social activities would be reduced.

Teaching differences meant that students found it challenging to keep up in classroom and with assignments that could possibly lead to failures in subjects. Failures are in turn not taken lightly since students often carry a significant social pride in their communities with having the privilege to access education (Joyce et al., 2010). Harris & Marlowe (2011) reported that students felt immense pressure from their parents (and the wider community) to achieve, which is similar to what the current study found. Pressures also extended from families in origin countries leading to stresses and possibilities of mental health issues to an already at-risk population that frequently live with trauma. Therefore, students should receive special introductory classes teaching them educational differences in the system, and the expectations should be made clear to them. This may decrease their anxiety and fear of failure, and in turn contribute to their engagement and success.

The stigma and intimidation from accessing services (e.g., Kanno & Varghese, 2010) mean students refrain from seeking help and instead avoid education to deal with the issues, whether that is in the form of formal services or approaching education providers. Students also feel disconnected from education providers and have a fear of being misunderstood by figures of authority (i.e., lecturers and tutors) – each of which acted as a barrier to their education and access to support. This finding alluded to the possible lack of awareness that teaching staff have of the refugee students' journeys, cultures, and way of life. Participants' positive responses to studying in a culturally diverse environment is similar to the findings of Joyce and colleagues (2010) suggesting that this may be a factor that assists with overcoming challenges and makes the student feel more comfortable in their educational space.

Given geographical movement and resettlement, refugees and asylum seekers are a population that already face educational disruption (Bennett & Adriel, 2014). However, they reported being denied access to education after arriving in Australia widens the education gap being experienced, which are in line with the findings of Hirsch and Maylea (2016). Previous research in this area has made little mention of the impact of extended pathways and complex administration has had on educational experiences and the ripple effects of being uninformed about processes. In this study, we found that some participants felt frustrated at the continual denial of access to education without being given reasons and they mentioned the complex and confusing administrative processes. Others felt that they were forced to take an extended pathway to attain their desired educational goals. Despite diverse hardships and challenges, aspirations and goals overall were shared among participants in this study. Therefore, especially those

refugees who want to continue their education should be supported. For example, clear step-by-step guidelines could be provided for their applications into institutions to make it easier and encouraging, while providing them with all the options and opportunities they have. In this way, their concerns about the lack of information about what is possible for them in terms of education will reduce.

Having no access to education has already been shown to influence acculturation strategies of refugees and asylum seekers (Berry, 1997). It could lead to separation (sole identification to one's home culture) or marginalization (de-identification with one's home culture and the mainstream culture). Therefore, being able to recognize barriers in refugee students' experiences can also add to acculturation research, in that awareness of how to improve the experience of refugees in an educational space will help facilitate their integration into the new culture.

Moreover, inferring from these themes, it is evident that refugee students face a unique set of challenges, particularly when compared to local or international students (Joyce et al., 2010). Refugee students are casualties of constant movement, integration challenges, balancing responsibilities, and lack of specialized support. Although, international students experience culture shock and isolation too when exposed to a new culture (Anderson, Guan, & Koc, 2016; Rajab, Rahman, Panatik, & Mansor, 2014), they are often supported by the specialized international centers at university campuses that dedicate their services to international students (Arthur, 2017). Furthermore, there is a higher likelihood of domestic students receiving financial assistance from the government or institutes in the form of loans and scholarships, and hence different to the financial experience of refugees and asylum seekers. Finally, domestic students and international students usually receive advice from career Counselors at school or education agents, respectively when applying for tertiary institutes therefore having the awareness of correct logistics to assure a smoother and quicker process. Similar opportunities should be explicitly made available to refugee students.

These findings emphasize the need to address these with changes to policy and practice by identifying ways in which barriers can be overcome, either taken from recommendations that participants gave or through implication. One of these could be the establishment of departments that are solely concerned with the issues relating to culturally and linguistically diverse students and providing culture-specific assistance and staff that students can relate to since there was a sense of comfort with familiarity felt during the conversations. Reference to the influence that authority figures have on refugee students who come from largely collectivist cultures suggests that there is a need to train teaching staff about their engagement and create awareness regarding the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. While we acknowledge that these suggestions come with a financial cost to the institution, it is also worth considering that attempts to overcoming these barriers would also benefit other students, particularly those who are student sojourners (non-forced), who are migrants, or who are local-born students who have parents that have migrated.

Limitations and future research

When interpreting the findings of this study, several limitations warrant consideration. These typically pertain to the idea of a sampling selection bias – there are several

features of our sample that might mean that the education experiences of the refugee students in our study may not be representative of the experiences of refugee students in general. First, the participants were sourced from the metropolitan region of Melbourne - refugee students studying in non-city universities will be living in less multicultural areas and be more likely to encounter prejudice and discrimination than their city-based peers. Moreover, they will be sharing learning environments with students and staff who are also less likely to have previously encountered refugees, and thus might not be equipped to assist with the unique barriers that refugee students face. Second, when recruiting, we did not consider the temporal stage of the education of our participants. That is, experiences of students who have just started their course are likely to be different to those who are towards the end of their course. On a related note, because of the nature of our research question being about access to tertiary education, our data do not address issues of access to primary or secondary education. Third, although participants were offered interpreters, none of them used the service, suggesting a high standard in their English language proficiency - a correlate of academic and cultural adjustment (e.g., Anderson & Guan, 2017). Although participants were required to have English language skills at the level required for tertiary education, it is worth noting the sampling bias that might have occurred as a result of advertising and conducting the interviews in English. Fourth, the participants were all highly engaged in their community as evidenced by their volunteering and commitment to university (including volunteering to participate in this research). Finally, all participants in this study had successfully accessed education - we could not recruit any participants who had tried but were unable to access education. In summary, the participants of the current study may not represent the experience of the refugee students who are struggling the most, and thus we might be under-reporting the negative experiences of the students as they access and participate in education in Australia. However, it also implies that these negative experiences might potentially be stronger in other cases; and implications from this study would be more pronounced and highly relevant for other refugees having difficulties accessing education.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we present some preliminary research addressing an important yet largely deficient literature. As countries try to deal with the global refugee crisis, finding ways to facilitate the integration of refugees and asylum seekers into their new home is of utmost importance. In a series of qualitative interviews, we documented the educational experiences of refugees who have accessed, and are currently enrolled in, the Australian tertiary system and found six main themes (*relationships, emotional wellbeing, logistics, knowledge, instability and financial hardship*) that emerged as factors that (typically negatively) impact the educational experiences of this group. As higher educational qualifications, especially having a university degree, are robustly associated with a diverse range of outcomes such as higher trust and political interest, better health and well-being, and less negative intergroup attitudes (Easterbrook et al., 2016), this research will help educational institutes to provide high quality learning environments whereby students can thrive, acculturate, and build sustainable futures as other students do. We

also hope that this research will provide an evidence base for those arguing that students with refugee backgrounds face very unique education barriers, and thus need unique representation in education-based policies, funding, and practices.

The findings presented in this paper have important implications for universities about the services they provide. Specifically, the evidence shows that refugee students benefit from participating in education, and education providers are increasingly facilitating this participation. However, as research continues to understand and overcome barriers to accessing education, then education providers will need to implement policies to provide support around this service, particularly based on the factors identified in this paper. Some of these support-factors would be similar to those provided to any international student, however others will need to be specific to refugee students – particularly around those relating to logistics and instability. It would also be beneficial for university staff to have access to support and training to facilitate their provision of education to students with refugee backgrounds.

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