

Submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

African Australians: A report on human rights and social inclusion - July 2009

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**Executive Summary**

This submission was prepared by students and staff at Australian Catholic University and the Catholic Education Office, Sydney as a response to Section 2 questions relevant to tertiary education. It explains key barriers to access faced by African students and makes suggestions about institutional arrangements which will support students to achieve educational success. While the focus of this submission is on a group of Sudanese students, there are important general conclusions which are relevant not just to Africans in Australia but more widely to recently arrived Australian citizens with a refugee background or Humanitarian Visa holders.

The following table summarises the key points made in the submission:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Issues Related to Educational Success | Recommendations for Institutional Responses |
| * difficulty of finding useful information about employment, career paths and educational opportunities | * orientation to education and professional careers as part of settlement services * capacity-building in emerging communities |
| * financial constraints which result in significant poverty:   + Austudy payments inadequate   + difficulty of finding part-time work   + mature age students with family responsibilities   + need to send money home to support relatives in Africa | * provision of text books and course materials * support in finding part-time work * short courses in Security, Hospitality * flexible timetables and programs of study * access to emergency financial support |
| * special educational needs   + English for academic purposes   + problem-based learning   + computer and library skills | * system for identifying and tracking student needs and monitoring progress * special English classes * orientation to tertiary study * increased access to academic skills support |
| * welfare and social inclusion   + acculturation and settlement stresses   + psychological effects of past trauma | * training for academic and administrative staff * the refugee experience * cultural background of students * long-term mentoring programs |

It is quite clear from this submission that students from a refugee background require special consideration if they are to access and succeed in tertiary education. Principles of equity and social justice demand that institutions respond differently to these students by recognising their gifts, as well as their particular needs for language and learning support and pastoral care. Their individual circumstances within the settlement process must also be acknowledged.

This submission relates to tertiary level students studying degree programs in the Faculties of Education and Arts and Sciences at Australian Catholic University (ACU), Sydney campuses. It provides two sets of answers to relevant questions: the first is a report of students’ responses. These are reproduced in bold text. The second set of answers is provided by Maya Cranitch, ACU and Mark Rix, Catholic Education Office Sydney (CEO) coordinators of The *Community Futures Australia* project.

**Section 2: Education**

**Context**

***When I finish my studies . . . I hope to be in a position to help others in need, just as I have been helped by the Community Futures Australia project.*** (Bachelor of Nursing student)

*Community Futures Australia* (CFA) is an innovative tertiarystudies programdelivered through partnerships between Australian Catholic University (ACU) and the Catholic Education Offices (CEOs) of Sydney and Parramatta. It also receives sponsorship from a variety of community groups as well as a private foundation.

The purpose of CFA is to facilitate access to university for refugees, specifically members of the Sudanese community. CFA offers students special entry provisions, a modified program of study, mentoring and financial support in the form of textbooks, computers and printers, travel subsidies, ‘special purpose grants’ and on-campus administrative support Further, the project facilitates integration, acceptance and understanding within the wider community by promoting positive role models and building social capital. Between 2004 and 2007, 35 students began studies at ACU in Teacher Education, Nursing and Business as part of the CFA project. At the end of 2009, it is expected that at least 5 students will have completed their degree programs.

Students in CFA were selected by a process of interview and a test which assessed their prior educational experience, competence in English and readiness for tertiary study. Approximately 120 applicants were interviewed between 2004 and 2006. Those unsuccessful in gaining a place at ACU have received career guidance. Those accepted were offered Commonwealth-supported places together at university with a modified program to cater for individual English language and learning needs. For example, in 2006 and 2007, Nursing students were placed with international students for Nursing English, and Education students in 2005 were offered a special unit in Information Technology Studies. In 2008 and 2009, special tutoring was arranged for several students. Other support included additional library orientation and study skills sessions, individual mentoring to cater for pastoral care needs and study skills programs.

In 2007, CFA On-campus Co-ordinator, Maya Cranitch received a Carrick Citation (Australian Learning and Teaching Council *[for] creating pathways to productive citizenship for recently arrived refugees through access to higher education with a supportive learning environment.*

To ensure that sufficient finds are held for the ongoing support to current students in the program, it was decided that 2007 would be the last current intake of new students. However, the CFA project has provided a model of support with important features which should be replicated in Tertiary Education contexts in the future. Also, should new funding sources be found in the future, more opportunities would be offered to refugee students in future years.

**Data Collection**

Students’ responses to relevant questions were collected through meetings and conversations. The text in bold is a sample of responses quoted verbatim. The draft submission was circulated to all respondents for comment, and permission was granted to acknowledge contributions.

**Access to Education**

2.1 How do African Australians find out about education services available to them? (Answers are recorded verbatim)

***Most information comes from informal contacts. I came and asked my friend he said: “You need to buy the booklet of TAFE and find a course”. I found out about this program in church.***

***You are just there - nobody to tell you the system.***

***I didn’t have a settlement worker and my sponsor was in Melbourne.***

***I came from Kampala – I didn’t have any cultural orientation before coming here. Then my English was too good so I couldn’t go to English classes.***

Interviews with recently arrived members of the Sudanese community between 2004- 2007 provided the following information:

* There was very little understanding of possible career paths, employment opportunities or means of accessing tertiary education. Many had not attended any formal English classes because they were assessed as proficient English speakers. This meant that they also missed essential cultural and social orientation.
* Settlement services at that time did not provide useful educational advice to those refugees who already had some tertiary educational experience or qualifications.
* There was significant frustration about the lack of respect for and recognition of existing skills and prior learning.

2.2 What barriers do African Australians face in accessing education opportunities?

***Financial barriers:***

***Austudy not enough to live on.***

***I worried about getting a job at the end. The issue of my age – they want young people making me to lose confidence.***

***Some students don’t have textbooks.***

***Sending money home is a big problem - especially if a relative is sick. That’s difficult. You’re always paying. You can ignore not having anything to eat.***

***We have family back home and they need our help. They cannot get money. They ring me and I say no- I am a student. Here in Australia everyone is for himself but there everyone is community.***

Completion of university degree requires a significant financial outlay that cannot be deferred like HECS. Among a host of other things, money is needed for:

* text books
* equipment such as stationary, computers, printers etc
* travel to field placements
* off-campus access to internet – use of internet cafes when libraries are unavailable
* on campus printing of web-based materials and library texts which are often required for participation in lectures and tutorials
* Course-specific resources
* Uniforms (eg, Nursing)

African Australian students from a refugee background face significant **poverty** which affects health and welfare.

* Austudy payments are insufficient in themselves, and all students have faced great difficulties finding part-time employment because of lack of local experience. Many students are ‘mature-aged’ with families, many with five or six children. Some are also the appointed (or informal) guardians for the children of relatives who have been killed during the civil war in Sudan.
* Financial constraints have meant interruptions to study or part-time attendance which creates further difficulties in the form of less coherent sequences of units.
* Many students have continual health problems due either to existing ailments or the result of poor diet, usually resulting from general poverty or poor nutrition.
* Some students have lingering issues arising out of deep-seated emotional trauma.
* Even for students who are, by comparison, financially self-sufficient, the need (and desire) to send money home to Sudan to support family members living in poverty or oppression means that few are ever able to ‘get ahead’. Also, the needs of members of their local Sudanese community are often so great that that even those who are able to ‘make ends meet’ are called upon to provide significant support to others.
* Many students have families they have support, and being able to get the ‘balance’ between work and study is not easy. Also, those who are working are often poorly paid.
* Rental accommodation has increased significantly in the past two years. The quality of budget accommodation is generally very poor and there is a general lack of understanding and empathy from landlords and estate agents.
* Many fall victim to what appear to be very tempting finance offers from retailing outlets

2.3 What specific education opportunities would be most helpful to newly arrived African Australians?

***In future, the government should organise cultural orientation again in Australia – like the medical check-up with a section on Education.***

***Better orientation programs to assess those who have come to Australia. You have qualifications from overseas – now you have to start from zero.***

***People from your own background to do orientation.***

***There should be evening classes for pronunciation.***

Newly-arrived African Humanitarian Visa holders could be supported by providing:

* Orientation programs for those not attending English classes.
* Initial advice regarding employment options, career pathways and educational institutions which respected individual aspirations while supporting realistic outcomes.
* Mentoring programs which extended beyond the initial settlement phase
* Support in the process of recognition of prior learning.
* Capacity-building in emerging communities to provide stronger community support systems.

**Education Experiences**

2.4 What are the experiences of young African Australians in educational institutions?

***Everything was new.***

***I went to school back home but I had no idea about computers. This was really challenging.***

***Computer is most important. I used it before only to check emails.***

***We didn’t know the system: how assignments are to be written especially referencing.***

***Learning style is a bit different. In Africa lecturers write on the blackboard.***

***Some lecturers – you can’t hear what they are saying. The Australian accent was a little bit quick and a little bit different in the beginning.***

***It is important to have colleagues studying with you. Its helps to feel comfortable and feel not left out.***

**Language and Learning Needs:**

Students for the CFA were selected on the basis of demonstrated English language proficiency – but still, each required support with English for academic purposes. This was mostly in the area of reading, and writing. Even though most students had finished high school education partly in English, and some had studied at a tertiary level, their expectations and learning styles were vastly different from those of mainstream Australian students. In Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and Egypt, teaching and learning tended to be transmission-style with limited print-based resources and often no access to technology. **Students found problem-based learning very alien and struggled with the demands of independent learning**, as well as the sophisticated technological skills assumed in even first-year courses.

While there are some similarities between African students from a refugee background and international students in the areas of language and learning needs, there are also important differences:

* Refugee students enter University as either permanent visa-holders or Australian citizens, and therefore are subsumed under the category of mainstream Australian students. Language and learning needs can be overlooked so that there is no recognition of the need for special provisions such as orientation or mentoring programs.
* Refugee students come with a history of displacement and trauma, either with family members in the same situation or isolated individuals with little emotional support. In particular, refugees from emerging communities such as the Sudanese have few social support structures. Therefore, they have special pastoral needs which may require special arrangements in both administrative and academic matters: for example, when requesting special consideration for assessment, timetabling etc.
* Refugee students have no financial support or backing, as many oversees students often do.

**Educational Needs for African Australian Students**

2.5. What programs and services can provide additional support to African Australian students during their education?

***Special courses were really useful - showed how to present topics – different ways you could write- referencing.***

***In the beginning we always come to see our mentor - so now we don’t need that anymore because we know what to do.***

The following arrangements would provide additional support:

* Orientation to teaching and learning in an Australian tertiary context which includes English for Academic Purposes, study skills, computing
* Increased and special access to Academic Skills advisers throughout courses
* Recognition of special pastoral care needs in institutional arrangements
* Flexible part-time study programs.

Institutions could also facilitate the following:

* Training courses in hospitality, security services etc
* Support networks to help students find part-time work.

2.5 How can Australian education institutions meet and support the specific cultural needs of African Australian students, especially those who arrive as refugees or asylum seekers?

***One lecturer explained to the class what students would be feeling – acknowledging the struggle*** *–* [I] ***really felt that somebody knew.***

[Lecturers] ***need to include what I knew – eg. colonialism. The lecturer asked me –*** [this shows] ***respect.***

***Sometimes you feel embarrassed to ask* [lecturers] *when they answer “you should know how to do this”.***

Educational institutions have a special role in acculturation which often requires complex responses. Equal treatment of all students does not always produce equal outcomes and can often exacerbate disadvantage and social exclusion.

**Inclusive education requires acknowledging and valuing cultural difference so that different backgrounds become a resource for new learning rather than just a deficit.**

At the same time:

* Current conventions to protect individual privacy often make identification of students with special needs difficult or even impossible for lecturers, academic advisers and support staff. Many refugee students are either unaware of what help is available or are reluctant to ask for it. Therefore, support needs to be offered proactively in a manner which allows access while still respecting and fostering autonomy and adult-learning principles.
* Identification of students from refugee backgrounds would not only allow for special provisions but tracking and monitoring progress through mentoring would provide indicators for on-going support.

2.6 What training and support should be put in place to assist educators to better understand complex refugee situations?

***Lecturers should read something about students from other cultures so they understand that everything is new for them so they can explain.***

***Lecturers may assume that all students are equal because they just come to uni, but they come from different places - Education is different.***

Existing training programs for staff working with international students needs to be augmented.

* Academic staff need training to understand the refugee experience and settlement issues, understand the key processes of English language and literacy learning, develop cultural awareness and acquire strategies in intercultural communication. They also need ways of identifying and supporting the gifts and talents of African Australians so that they can participate and enrich the learning community.
* Academic skills staff need training in particular strategies to support learners with disrupted education and/or literacy needs that result from lack of access to print or web-based resources.

2.7 Can you provide examples of how African Australians are treated differently in the

Education sector?

[Experiences in university tutorials]

***I want to do my assignment alone. When you ask*** [other students] ***they say the group is completed. This is every semester.***

***I am doing a group presentation by myself.***

***I didn’t have any difficulties like that.***

[Experiences as a student-teacher during teaching practicum]

***I was asked by someone: “Do you think our children will allow you to teach them?”***

***Skin colour is the barrier. Children have a fear because of the past. The colour black represents evil in this culture.***

***But after the first two weeks then children get used to you.***

***A student said we can’t hear you because of your accent.***

2.8 What is the impact of this discrimination?

***I may not see colour as a barrier. There may be a gap between us and students because they don’t know you. It’s hard to build trust.***

***Discrimination is inward – you think maybe you’ll be the last person to get that job.***

As is evident from quotes, responses to this question varied. Individuals reported different experiences from denial of racism to discomfort and a sense of exclusion. The fact that Africans are recent arrivals in Australia and are highly visible because of their colour, may signal ‘otherness’ until their presence becomes as commonplace as it has with other races in multicultural Australia.

**Recommendations**

While the focus of this submission is on a group of Sudanese students, there are important general principles which are relevant not just to African Australians in tertiary institutions but more widely to recently arrived Australian citizens with a refugee background or Humanitarian Visa holders.

**There is a clear distinction to be made between** **equality and equity** **in institutional arrangements for students.** Treating all students the same way does not result in equal outcomes and may in fact produce a climate in which inequality simply grows. A just and equitable treatment of refugee students requires that institutions have to respond differently by recognising their particular needs for language and learning support, pastoral care as well as their individual circumstances within the settlement process.

It is quite clear from this submission that students from a refugee background characterised by experiences of trauma, poor health and limited access to education require special consideration if they are to access and succeed in tertiary education. ACU National and the CFA Project have attempted to address many of the barriers by instituting special programs and providing limited financial support. These academic and administrative provisions have exposed the gaps in existing institutional arrangements which are generally designed around two categories: international and mainstream students. Refugee students then remain an anonymous group with no recognition of their special needs competing with other students on an unequal playing-field.

African Australians belong to generations of immigrants who have contributed to Australian society. Social inclusion requires respectful recognition of the gifts and talents as well as the special needs of all individuals who make up what is the widely diverse student population of any tertiary institution.