Building cultural and linguistic bridges: Reflections on a program designed to support adult students from refugee backgrounds' transitions into university

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Although many students struggle with the complexities of moving into and through higher education, these transitions can be particularly challenging for students from refugee backgrounds (SfRBs). While federal government resettlement initiatives provide English language education opportunities for new refugee arrivals up to a 'functional' level, there is little in place to support the educational, linguistic and cultural challenges encountered by SfRBs who wish to enter and progress through higher education. This paper presents reflections on the design, delivery and evaluation of a program developed to facilitate SfRBs' transitions into an enabling education course at a regional university. A primary goal of this program was to purposefully and explicitly unpack the cultural expectations and linguistic requirements of higher education study. Underpinned by a curriculum which is both flexible and responsive to cultural, educational and funding contexts, this program was first mapped to the outcomes of the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)—delivered at a TAFE institution—and then redesigned as a pre-semester university-based 'bridging program'. Reflections from the practitioners who designed and delivered the program shed light on the challenges of working with a responsive curriculum in real-time to attempt to fill the multiple gaps created by institutional assumptions and misrecognitions about who is in the higher education classroom.

Key Words: adult students from refugee backgrounds; transitions; cultural and linguistic norms; higher education; TAFE to university.

1. Introduction

Transition to higher education is generally understood to be one of the most challenging aspects of studying at university, and it has long attracted significant empirical attention (see Gale & Parker, 2014 for an overview). The literature strongly attests to the challenges that academic culture and language can provide to all students. However, for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse

(CALD) students—and students from refugee backgrounds[1] (SfRBs) in particular—transitioning into university study can be particularly challenging because of possible issues related to re/settlement, trauma, health and fragmented schooling. These transitions are arguably more complex for adult SfRBs who have not experienced schooling in the country of settlement, meaning that basic understandings of education (in terms of the system and its conventions and values) cannot be assumed.

There is a growing body of scholarship that explores SfRBs' experiences of participating in higher education, much of which predominantly focuses on the barriers and challenges experienced once students have gained entry to their undergraduate programs (Joyce et al., 2010; Lawson, 2014; Naidoo, 2015; Baker et al., 2018). Although government resettlement initiatives provide English language education opportunities for new refugee arrivals up to a 'functional' level (DET, 2017a), there is little in place to support the educational, linguistic and cultural challenges encountered by SfRBs who wish to enter and progress through the "culturally alienating place" of higher education (Joyce et al., 2010: 169). In addition, universities often struggle to provide adequate resources to fully support SfRBs, and often overlook the rich and diverse range of languages, cultures, knowledges and practices that SfRBs bring to their studies (Cocks & Stokes, 2012; Lenette, 2016). Moreover, while it is arguably the case that other students share many of the challenges experienced by SfRBs, their educational needs have been misrecognised, and "historically subsumed under general programs for underachieving groups" (Stevenson & Willott, 2007, p. 672). Indeed, many have argued that SfRBs have a distinct suite of needs, which require tailored supports (Ramsay et al., 2016). It is therefore necessary to develop ways of explicating the cultural and linguistic norms and expectations of higher education before students enter, so as to offer the best possible start to their studies.

This paper describes and critiques a program that was designed to facilitate the transitions of domestic CALD students, and SfRBs specifically, as they moved from an adult education context (TAFE) into higher education by explicating elements of academic culture and language known to be difficult for learners. As will be discussed in more detail, this program—and the broader research study that we built around this intervention—was developed because of the concerns of two of the authors (Sally and Evonne). Our apprehension was born out of our practice as English language teachers straddling both the TAFE and university contexts and working with a cohort of SfRBs who wanted to progress into university study. This paper thus seeks to reflect on the complexities of transition for both the students making the move between educational levels, and for the staff working at the intersections of these educational spaces.

2. Context

2.1. Students from Refugee Backgrounds in higher education

Until relatively recently, there has been very little attention paid to the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds (SfRBs) in the higher education contexts of their countries of settlement, and even less that has looked at higher education in contexts of protracted displacement situations, such as in refugee camps. This is despite education being recognised as a fundamental human right, and as being essential to successful resettlement. In settlement contexts, higher education is known to lead to better employment prospects and health outcomes (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Joyce et al., 2010; Willott & Stevenson, 2013; Gately, 2014); enhances engagement with new communities (El Jack, 2010); and facilitates a sense of connection and belonging (Atkinson, 2013; Morrice, 2013; Lawson, 2014; Vickers, McCarthy, & Zammit, 2017).

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[1] Although we use the label 'students from refugee backgrounds' throughout, we fully acknowledge that SfRBs are not a homogenous group and the data presented in this paper are in no way representative of the diversity and individual stories of other people from refugee backgrounds

However, despite the obvious benefits of higher education, the scant literature on students from refugee backgrounds speaks to the structural challenges that SfRBs—and to a lesser extent their teachers—face. There appear to be three persistent issues that hinder the development of better understandings of how SfRBs experience their studies in higher education. Firstly, there are issues with the systematic collection of enrolment data that records refugee or refugee-like status. As Terry et al. (2016: 19) note, in Australia these data have not been "subject to rigorous scrutiny" with many incomplete or incorrect records found in their study. Despite this, a rare example of a broad snapshot of SfRBs is offered in Terry et al.'s analysis of demographic data. Their analysis suggests that there were over 3500 SfRBs enrolled in Australian higher education institutions in 2016, with significant patterns in terms of gender (predominantly male), age (predominantly 'mature age'), country of origin (most SfRBs coming from 20 countries), level of study (mostly undergraduate students), and disciplinary location (mostly enrolled in Society & Culture, Health, and Management & Commerce degree programs).

Secondly, although Terry et al.'s (2016) study offers some insight into the 'SfRB' cohort in Australian higher education, the limited (and unreliable) information that is collected by institutions about these students can result in the idea that SfRB numbers (in terms of 'density' in the student body) are insufficient to warrant further funding or support. Indeed, Creagh (2014) warns against the unhelpful collapsing of cultural and linguistic diversity into broad labels, such as 'Non-English Speaking Background students' as this can conceal the need for more responsive and sensitive pedagogies, curricula, and support. Creagh argues that SfRBs are "in greatest need of policy support, to ensure that they too, benefit from the rationale of equity underpinning education reforms" (2014, p. 23). Sidhu and Taylor (2007) make a similar point, arguing that "[t]he tendency to conflate refugees with migrants, 'new arrivals' or 'ESL learners', means that language needs are recognized in policy, while the more complex educational needs of refugee students, such as limited literacy skills in their first language, are not acknowledged in policy funding frameworks" (p. 294). Although both Creagh (2014) and Sidhu and Taylor (2007) were speaking from the perspective of school education, there is relevance for higher education here. Higher education's commitment to equity is inscribed in policy and supported by specific funding, however, limitations in the collection of enrolment data, and the collapsing of difference into umbrella labels means that SfRBs are relatively invisible in the system. This has led researchers from the UK (Stevenson & Willott, 2007, 2010); New Zealand (O'Rourke, 2011); and Australia (Sladek & King, 2016) to argue that SfRBs should be a targeted 'equity group' in their own right.

The third persistent issue is the exclusionary dominance of western paradigms in higher education (Harris, Marlowe & Nyuon, 2015; Rowntree, Zufferey & King, 2015). The epistemological hegemony of the academy serves to ignore, if not negate, the cultural knowledges, experiences, histories, and practices of SfRBs. As Harris, Marlowe, & Nyuon (2015) argue, the 'liberatory' framing of western education positions non-dominant knowledge as inferior, which is not only reproduced in, for and by higher education, but also forms part of the educational narratives taken on by refugees. The lack of acknowledgement of other ways of knowing, being and doing can result in patterns of further marginalisation. Furthermore, unquestioned assumptions about shared understandings of western-centric education systems result in widely held and problematic expectations of SfRB/ CALD students. This has been noted both in terms of understanding and navigating the system (Earnest et al., 2010), and participating in the system. Further, as Rowntree, Zufferey, and King (2015) argue, notions of what counts as 'success' are largely based on assimilationist understandings. Clearly, the absence of both recognition and validation of other paradigms (or 'bicultural identities' (Brooker & Lawrence, 2012) has the capacity to further disadvantage some of our most educationally disadvantaged students.

2.2. Transition

2.2.1. Transition and 'Pathways'

There is a broad and established body of literature that speaks to the complex dynamics of students' movements between educational levels, often instantiating the umbrella term of 'transition'. A dominant discourse within studies of university transition is that of 'pathways'. As Gale & Parker (2014) note in their conceptual typology of transition studies, the idea of pathways connotes with their classification of 'transition as induction', which they argue "is conceived as a linear progression through a number of 'phases'" (p. 739), which are often customary, and connected to particular movements, such as school to university. Pallas' (2003) work also speaks to the ritualised nature of pathways, arguing that they are "well-traveled sequences of transitions that are shaped by cultural and structural forces" (p. 168), often relating to particular careers. Pallas' argument that school systems are sorting systems (connected to status attainment), which open and close particular pathways to particular people, holds true with our own practitioner observations of SfRBs seeking to enter, move through and depart university study. 'Pathways' is, therefore, a discourse with temporal and spatial limitations; however, these constraints are concealed by the dominance of this terminology in higher education policy, practice and research. Indeed, the project on which this paper reports was crafted around the idea of 'pathways', thus resulting in a need to engage in some linguistic reflexivity, so as to recognise our own complicity and contribution to the pathways discourse, and its power to perpetuate reductive understandings of transition. Rather than using the word pathways, we will use the word *trajectory*, following Pallas' (2003) argument that a trajectory is an "attribute of an individual, while a pathway is an attribute of a social system" (p. 168), although we also agree with Pallas' contention that considering both individual agency and social structure together will lead to "more complete accounting[s]" of students' experiences (p. 168). We will use the term 'routes' to describe the established transitional links between educational levels.

2.2.2. VET (TAFE) as a route into higher education

Of particular interest to this paper is the well-travelled route that many students take from Vocational Education and Training (VET) to university. Although VET and higher education constitute the 'tertiary education' sector in Australia—as mandated in the Bradley Review of higher education (2008)—this route is understood to offer challenges for many students, as they move between two vastly different educational systems, structures, epistemologies, assessment strategies, pedagogies and views of how to support students (for example, Griffin, 2014; Delly, 2016; Tett, Cree & Christie, 2017). The literature suggests that a significant proportion of adult students from refugee backgrounds and other CALD students use the TAFE to university articulation route (10% according to Terry et al., 2016), particularly for professional programs such as Social Work (see for example, Onsando & Billet, 2009; Wache & Zufferey, 2013). Moving from TAFE to university provides challenges for students whose language and cultural backgrounds do not match that of the settlement country, particularly with regard to the differences in the sociocultural environments of the two educational spaces, and the tacit expectations and practices that constitute each level. As Onsando and Billet (2009) argue, this dissonance can be, and should be, addressed through transformative pedagogies that recognise SfRBs as assets in the class, and that work to expose assumptions about what it means to study in Australian tertiary education. Similarly, Wache and Zufferey (2013) argue that expectations of what is required at university transition need to be explicitly articulated, so as to prevent what Naidoo (2015) describes as the "isolating and complicated" experience of transitioning into higher education for SfRBs.

The program described in this paper is therefore an attempt to articulate the cultural, language, expectations-based (for both students and institutions), and epistemological gaps between TAFE and university within the supportive pedagogical environment of a language classroom. In what follows, we will briefly describe the broader project of which this intervention was a part, and offer some insights from both students and teachers as to its perceived usefulness.

3. Study design

This paper reports on part of a qualitative, longitudinal, multi-institution and multi-sited project that encompasses three different routes that students from refugee backgrounds (SfRBs) take in order to commence higher education studies for two broad groups of SfRBs: adults moving from TAFE to enabling education to degree study; and younger students moving from school to degree study or Intensive English Centres[2] (IECs) to further study. Each of the three partner universities focused on one route, and several phases of data collection have been undertaken, including repeat interviews with the same students over a period of three years, with multiple cohorts of students, a national audit of the supports and routes into higher education for SfRBs, and the development of two teaching interventions: one focused on TAFE, and the other a school-based university mentoring program.

Five members of the team that has explored adult SfRBs' transitions from TAFE to enabling education (and beyond) have contributed to this paper. The authoring team is composed of the two practitioner-researchers (Sally and Evonne), a community advisor-researcher (Homa), a university-based English language teacher (Simone), and a TAFE teacher-researcher (Julia). Our collective crafting of this paper is reflective of the democratic and multi-positional approach taken to course design, delivery, data collection, and analysis in this project.

This article presents a reflexive account of our collective practice (as program designers, teachers and researcher-evaluators), based on our Participatory Action Research (PAR) evaluation of the transition program designed to support adult students' transitions into higher education study (for example, Thomas, 2000; Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Schneider & Daddow, 2016). Participatory research works to understand 'real world' issues (such as troublesome transitions into higher education), drawing on the knowledge of people experiencing this issue and disrupting the normative empirical (etic) gaze of the outsider looking in, "in order to fundamentally question and rethink established interpretations of situations and strategies" (Bergold & Thomas, 2012, p. 2). As Liz Thomas (2000) notes in her article on evaluating widening participation activities in the UK, PAR "enables the development of socially and culturally appropriate solutions" (p. 100) to sociocultural and educational 'problems', such as supporting the transitions of CALD students into enabling and/or undergraduate education. To this end, we draw on semi-structured focus group interviews that sought to understand students' experiences of participating in the first two iterations of the program, and we also draw on data collected from an interview that took place between Simone and Julia. One of the affordances of taking a PAR approach to evaluating an intervention such as the one described in this paper is that it seeks to offer local solutions to local problems by acknowledging the specificities of the local context. In this case, the students who participated in the first iteration were predominantly Afghan males who had worked as linguists for the Australian Defence Forces in Afghanistan. As such, they do not represent the 'classic' refugee experience[3] and any readings of our article (and the program design) need to take this into account.

In what follows, we draw on three sources to critically describe the design, development and delivery of the program, starting with our rationale for the development of the program based on the literature and our practitioner observations, an overview of the program and its three iterations, and the data collected from evaluations conducted on these iterations. As such, we seek to discuss, problematise and advance an idea of how we can better support our SfRBs' transitions and trajectories into higher education study.

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[2] Intensive English Centres provide English language, settlement and welfare programs for newly arrived high school aged CALD students. They are funded and administered by state departments of education.

[3] We fully recognise that there is no such thing as a 'standard' refugee experience; however, we note that most refugees offered settlement to Australia arrive via a site of displacement such as a camp in a secondary/transit country.

4. Case study: 'Preparation for Further Study' for CALD students

The impetus for the development of the program of study described in this paper originated from practitioner concern (Sally and Evonne) for a group of recently arrived Afghan SfRBs who were studying in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) in a TAFE in regional NSW in 2014, and who expressed their desire to pursue higher education within six months of arriving in Australia. Entry to higher education for these students involved commencing studies in a fully open access[4] enabling program at the local university. Although it was not rare for SfRBs to seek to travel the TAFE–university route, the numbers of students from this 2014 cohort were particularly high and their desired timeframe particularly short. At that time, Sally was working as an AMEP teacher in the regional TAFE as well as sharing an English language support teacher role with Evonne (who had previously worked as an AMEP teacher) in the enabling course at the local university. This meant that both Sally and Evonne had sufficient practitioner experience as language teachers, and extensive navigational knowledge of the two systems, to predict the kinds of issues that the SfRBs would face when seeking to move from TAFE to university. These concerns were also shared by the Head of Languages at the local TAFE and the Director of Studies of the enabling program; however, it was strongly believed that any student who wanted to try higher education should have that opportunity, therefore no conditions were enacted to preclude their entry on the basis of their language proficiency or relative lack of familiarity with Australian education. As such, it was agreed that an intervention that could proactively unpack some of the language and cultural expectations and conventions prior to arriving in the enabling program had merit. Moreover, it was strongly argued that this program needed to be funded by stable funding sources, as opposed to seeking short-term, one-year cycle equity funding like that offered under the Higher Education Participation Program (HEPP; DET, 2017b) so as to secure sustainability and longevity of the intervention.

The program described here began through AMEP funding, meeting the requirements for federal Settlement Language Pathways to Employment and Training (SLPET). The original program was a 20-week course that ran over three days (15 hours) per week, and included English language—mapped to the Certificate of Spoken and Written English Level III (CSWEIII), IT, and Science and Maths provision. In particular, the language content and assessment for CSWEIII was built around texts and tasks specifically related to higher education and transition, such as language activities built from articles on transition to higher education sourced from The Conversation and using the local university's own promotional materials and online resources, as well as more traditional language activities from English for Academic Purposes (EAP) textbooks. In addition to the formal classroom learning, the students visited the university four times during the semester for English language classes and presentations from relevant university personnel working in student-facing support roles. Overall, the course borrowed from several sources, but in particular, the Learning Interactively For Engagement (Life) project—developed by Silburn et al. (2010)—was central to the development of the curriculum, as it was designed to support the pedagogical needs of SfRBs as they commenced their first year of higher education studies. The Life project offered an academic program for 'meeting the pedagogical needs of students from refugee backgrounds', offering eight modules for higher education teachers to borrow from in their own curriculum design and teaching practice. These materials were influential on the design of the program described and discussed in this article; however, because the Preparation for Further Study program is focused at the pre-transition stage, it was adapted to sit outside of undergraduate study.

The Preparation for Further Study program has also been adapted to fit in with a suite of 'bridging programs'—typically 12–15 hour courses that run pre-semester to 'top-up' students' disciplinary knowledge or academic practices. This was the first time the university had offered a CALD-

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[4] Open access means that students need not demonstrate any prior educational qualifications or language competency before enrolling (see Baker and Irwin, 2016).

specific program. In this case, Simone condensed the original curriculum developed by Sally, and drew on the feedback offered by the students who took the SLPET. This iteration of the program was also evaluated. This program has further been re-crafted as a series of week-long modules to fit within the English for Further Studies program, which was funded through the government-supported State English and Employment (SEE) program. In this case, Julia worked with the original curriculum to develop two week-long modules of study and associated materials. Each of these three iterations (see Table 1) sit within existing sustainable funding streams, albeit the AMEP and SEE programs have recently undergone federal review, and now look significantly different from when we initiated this project in 2014. The implications of this review are as yet untested.

The next section examines closely the first two iterations of the program.

4.1. Iteration 1: TAFE-based study embedded within the AMEP

Focusing firstly on the original iteration, 16 students enrolled and completed the semester-long course. At two points across the semester, Evonne conducted focus groups with the students to probe their perceptions and experiences of the course. The first focus group took place in August 2014, four weeks after the course had started; the second was conducted in November 2014, four weeks before the end of the program. In what follows, we draw on the interview data collected through these focus groups, as well as from interview data collected with these same students as we tracked their educational trajectories over the following three years. We have deliberately decided not to 'clean up' the disfluencies in the participants' talk, so as to protect the authenticity of their voices (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006) and to acknowledge the developing English of our participants.

Table 1. An overview of the three iterations of the Preparation for Further Studies course.

Iteration	Name	Funding Source	Location	Duration
1	Preparation for Further Study	Settlement Language Pathways to Employment and Training (SLPET)/ Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) Australian Government	Local TAFE	150 hours
2	English and academic culture for university study: a course for students from a language background other than English	University Internal Bridging Course Funding	Local university	36 hours
3	Preparation for Further Study (block study)	Skills for Education and Employment (SEE)/ English for Further Studies (EFS) Australian Government	Local TAFE	30 hours

4.2. TAFE students' positive feedback and perceptions of the course

Initially, the students were highly complementary about the course. This high degree of positivity is likely to have been related to a perception that their desires and needs were being recognised

by TAFE. One student succinctly captured this relatively novel aspect of the program in the first focus group, saying it was "very fresh for me, that's why it is this is first thing that come up for me and I learn so it is new and it is productive for me". The student-participants' positive perceptions have been arranged according to three themes that emerged from our reading of the data: *Refreshing knowledge*, *Improvements in language*, and *Becoming familiar with the university*.

4.2.1. Refreshing knowledge

There was consensus from the participants that the content of the course—Maths and Science in particular—offered them important opportunities to revisit knowledge that they had previously encountered in their education. They spoke notably of the value of returning to foundational concepts, particularly in the context of the dangerous conditions in which they had worked and lived, which had impeded their capacity to continue learning:

> We have been out for 5 to 6 years since high school and everything was gone because we were in a war zone over there in Afghanistan and it is when we came here [*the teacher*] start from zero and [*the knowledge*] is coming back and we are getting ready for uni. (Student, Focus Group 2)

> I used to be going to course during the Taliban regime which is about 10 years ago and I forgot all those grammars and it remind me. (Student, Focus Group 2)

Most of the students were able to see how returning to subjects and concepts they had previously studied was useful for their future studies, even if just for learning the English terminology such as the word 'calculator' or names of particular scientific equipment. Given that many of the cohort described here were (at that time) aspiring to enter a science-based program (engineering or nursing), the data suggests the students were also achieving more affective and psychological benefits, such as reminding them of the journey they had already taken in their learning, and that they did not need to 'start from scratch':

> I think it has been very effective, because remind some things like about maths and science that we studied ages ago, and how by attending this class it reminds us what was that, and like, you know, it is not now very difficult to re-do all these things that we have done, like in the past. (Student, Focus Group 2)

4.2.2. Improvements in language

The most significant take-away for the students was the development in their English language, and in (academic) writing in particular. The students would likely have made improvements in their English if they had stayed in a regular AMEP class (as some of the participants in the broader study did). However, the focus on language-in-use in/for further education, as opposed to the more generalist topics taught in the AMEP, was clearly appreciated by the students:

> [The course] has been useful. Firstly I'd like to mention the writing, the essay writing, report writing. We've been taught by [*teacher*] to write a report, how to reference and how to write an essay and how to paraphrase and all that so the grammar, the vocabulary, the academic words and all that. So right now, I can tell that it was really useful, those class is. (Student, Focus Group 2)

The students all mentioned essay writing as something they had learnt through studying in the program. The essays that the students wrote were qualitatively different from the kind of writing they would have to do in their enabling or undergraduate studies, and a nuanced understanding of writing—as guided by disciplinary conventions, different teacher subjectivities and expectations, assessment literacies—was advanced, albeit with understandably little comprehension from the students. Certainly, when they started writing for their discipline-based enabling courses, they found the writing significantly different, to the point of an impassable hurdle for some. However, the intention was more to open a conversation about writing, and—critically—where and how to seek help, and this appeared to be understood by many of the students. Moreover, the focused

attention on academic language—from a micro level focus on presentation and accuracy, to a meso-focus on vocabulary development and grammar, to a macro focus on the role of writing for knowledge production, and the opportunities and constraints placed on writers and teachers by assessment and disciplinary conventions—helped the students to develop much-needed confidence to move forward and try higher education:

> I've learnt a new thing … like how to write an essay. It was something was difficult for me but for now I am confident enough but I now understand how to write an essay and some new words and vocabularies and how to use them. It was really a good course cause I've benefited on it. (Student, Focus Group 2)

4.2.3. Becoming familiar with the university

The opportunity to visit the physical environment of the university campus offered a meaningful benefit to all of the student-participants. The experiential learning that took place through the campus visits was both opportune and highly significant, from the frustrations of trying to get a car parking space after 9am, to developing navigational knowledge of the campus and its layout, to knowing where the prayer room or the good coffee could be found; all of this learning was considered to be highly useful:

> The good part of this course was visiting from university was very good, so we can get familiar with university. So that was the good part, yeah… Like we know about the culture of university, culture of Australia and what we do in university if we got a problem, in university where we go, like everything we know. (Student, Focus Group 2)

> … it prepares and is a wakeup call for us, how the uni looks like and how the environment will be, lectures, classmates will be and how you will deal with that kind of stuff, people, behaviours, your values… It prepared us about how the uni looked like and what we need to be and how we need to be prepared for further study. (Student, Focus Group 2)

The experience of visiting the campus, and being introduced to some of the services offered by the university—such as the library, careers counselling, student liaison, and English language support—helped also to ease some of the anxiety the students had developed about the idea of university, which had been fuelled by hearsay and community rumours:

> …before that I had a like kind of fear about the university, how it's going to be, or how difficult it is going to be, but when we study in here, some of the subjects the same, they say the same things that we're going to do at university. So it help us with the concept. It help us a lot to get used to that and in my idea it's really effective for us. (Student, Focus Group 2)

In addition, the students had the opportunity to sit in on a lecture and to seek course guidance. The lecture in particular gave the students much 'food for thought', and it challenged them to imagine themselves studying at the university in the following year. However, as will be discussed in the following section, it also challenged their sense of language self-efficacy, illustrating to some that their English was perhaps not as strong as their time in TAFE had suggested.

4.3. TAFE students' critical feedback and perceptions of the course

4.3.1. Insufficient time

While the students were predominantly positive about the course, they also offered useful critique. Firstly, there was consensus that there was insufficient time to cover their desired breadth and depth of content, knowledge, practices and experiences. Some of the students recognised this was a product of the system, which could not support the course to extend beyond the semester; others acknowledged that their own time frames (and intention to commence the enabling course the

following semester) offered significant temporal constraints. One of the most significant challenges with regard to time was the effort (albeit well-intentioned) to support the students to finish their CSWEIII within the course. In retrospect, and from the teachers' and Head teacher's perspective, this was wildly optimistic and ultimately benefitted none of the students. Before the course started and throughout the course, the students were reminded regularly that it would be in their best interests to remain in the AMEP, which offers eligible students 510 hours of free English language instruction. However, in general, the students' sense of not wanting to 'waste time' drove their decisions.

In response to this issue, one student made the suggestion that such a program should be embedded within the enabling program, so that the students' efforts and learning is then recognised by the university:

> I think it would be better in the future, like if this class have some credit in [*enabling program name*] or in university, because … this six months studying here will not give any value or credit to students. If we have something like this would be great. (Student, Focus Group 2)

Our earlier work (Baker & Irwin, 2016) suggests that there are university enabling programs that do offer this kind of targeted language support for CALD and/or refugee background students; however, these kinds of credit-bearing modules appear to be relatively rare (see Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011 for a similar observation).

4.3.2. Lack of responsiveness to individual students' needs

The main criticism that the students had of the course in its first iteration was the lack of customisation to the students' individual needs, particularly with regard to IT. The range of proficiency with IT was vast in the class, with some students very new to computers, and others being much more confident and experienced. This both posed significant challenges for the teacher and resulted in widespread frustration among the students. Furthermore, the course—which was designed with little consultation or preparation time—was not able to accommodate the variety of subjects that the students intended to pursue, and it was difficult to design tasks and texts that spoke to those disciplinary orientations. As one student asked, "For example, if I'm going to study in the future Engineering, why should I do Biology Lab?" The lack of differentiation was particularly challenging in Maths, especially for the students who were looking towards Engineering. One student voiced his disappointment at 'wasting his time' because his specific learning needs were not met:

> So I made my decision to come to this class, but the expectation that I had from this class is not getting that much, because that's what I wanted to know most was in the maths and physics, stuff that I wanted to - but there is none. (Student, Focus Group 2)

While we recognise that it is not possible to please everyone, we assume full responsibility for the disappointments and frustrations that the students felt. We acknowledge that there is strong consensus in the literature that argues that teaching that is individualised and personally relevant is considered to be the most successful (for example, Pearce & Down, 2011; Gale & Mills, 2013). We feel it is important to take these comments as learning opportunities, and we drew from these lessons when designing the next iteration, which is discussed in the following section.

4.4. Iteration 2: University-based study embedded within a university bridging program

The second iteration of the 'Preparation for Further Study' course was made possible due to a further source of long-term, sustainable funding: university bridging programs. In the local university in which this second iteration was trialled, bridging programs typically consist of 12–15 hours and are timetabled over three weeks in the period immediately prior to semester starting.

Our course was funded to run for 36 hours over the three-week period. The repackaging of the 'Preparation for Further Study' program into a university bridging course was undertaken by Simone, drawing on the curriculum and materials designed by Sally for the first (TAFE/ SLPET) version. An evaluation of this second iteration was conducted by Julia.

A key point of difference between the first and second iterations of the course—aside from the difference in duration and location—was the diversity of the student cohort. In the first (TAFE) iteration, the students were almost exclusively monocultural (from Afghanistan) and spoke the same two languages (Dari and Pashto) in addition to learning English. This meant that the students were largely able to share understandings of their home educational experiences and culture, and they could also share linguistic knowledge (such as translations of vocabulary). In contrast, the group of students in the university bridging course came from a diverse range of countries—such as South Korea, Thailand, Russia, Afghanistan, the DRC, the Philippines and Peru– and in addition to having various educational experiences, the minority of these students were from refugee or refugee-like backgrounds. This more linguistically and ethnically heterogeneous group necessitated different content, tasks and pedagogies to be more reflective of this diversity, although as Freidrich (2006) notes, this is not without its challenges; as he argues "The more multicultural the university classroom becomes, the more interesting and complex the teaching gets" (p. 32).

The evaluation of this program was based on information collected from interviews (individual and focus groups) with the students (n=11), the class teacher (Simone) and the coordinator of the bridging programs. All the interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed. In what follows, selected vignettes taken from the interviews with the teacher and students will be used to illustrate the experiences and values ascribed to the program from both perspectives.

4.4.1. Students' perspectives

The students were overwhelmingly positive about the course and what it offered them. In terms of its logistics, the students gave positive feedback regarding the duration and scheduling of the class, with the arrangement of the hours over three days per week seen as enabling consolidation of learning, as well as meeting family commitments, although for some students, arranging their studies around their school-age children presented barriers to arriving on time or staying for the full day, and these difficulties were exacerbated by parking shortages for those arriving on campus after 9am. Overall, the students reported that the time 'flew by' because of the active and 'dynamic' teaching and learning style. There was vehement opposition to the suggestion that the course could be offered online as an alternative delivery mode; the students spoke strongly in favour of face-to-face delivery, citing timely feedback, information and assistance, and the benefits of peer support networks both in the short- and longer terms, as well as motivation, as advantages not offered online.

The course was designed in part to give a practical orientation to the university, and participants expressed strong appreciation of this element. They cited activities such as a 'campus quest', a library tour, booking a study room online, the setting up of email accounts, and Blackboard sessions as very useful. Far beyond the immediate practical outcomes, students noted the benefits of such activities and support for increasing confidence. This was particularly reported in the context of feeling at a disadvantage to native speakers in the first week of mainstream classes, when familiarity with what the lecturer was saying about Blackboard compensated for anxiety about language. The students perceived a sustained and explicit approach to teaching and learning both written and spoken academic language. In their interviews, the students mentioned language at every level, from academic word lists, through the grammar of formal language and language at sentence and paragraph level, to the structure of whole written and spoken academic texts such as essays, reports, presentations and lectures and tutorial participation. Daily writing tasks were marked with feedback, which students found helpful.

Orientation to academic culture was another key element of the course. All the students agreed that they had developed a far better measure of what will be involved by being at university, and they expressed high levels of appreciation for the opportunity. Some contrasted the requirement of self-management at university to high school; others contrasted the need for reflection, discussion and critical thinking with the more 'reproductive' educational styles of the other cultures and earlier part of their lives. Others again reported that they had developed an understanding that the language of university culture is different to that of their everyday lives, which functioned as a 'reality check'.

4.4.2. The teacher's perspective

The class teacher (Simone) observed that the benefits of the course extended beyond those of the in-class learning and activities themselves, to the socio-affective dimension of meeting people and creating a sense of inclusion; as she said, "One of the biggest benefits … is actually getting to meet each other". She noted the close link between feeling connected—as a part of a network in this new context—and students' learning: "they were visibly relaxed and really happy and keen to get to know one another and what they were studying". Indeed, many scholars have noted the benefits to learning that feeling connected brings (Keevers & Abuodha, 2012; Morrice, 2013; Lawson, 2014; Vickers, McCarthy & Zammit, 2017). Another benefit for some students was the realisation that their functional language proficiency in everyday contexts may not be adequate in the academic context, and that they would need to develop their grammatical range and accuracy as well as context-specific language. Simone noted that the students "had false ideas of where their English was … they realised on the first day … they were quite shocked … and [the grammar diagnostic screen on the first day was] a bit of an eye-opener". A third benefit was that the course offered awareness and actual rehearsal of the demands on students' time and family commitments: "… they realised how much time they're going to spend studying … that their lives will be quite challenging".

In terms of the content of the course, Simone reflected that the activities that worked best were those that were authentic to the university context, and those that were learner-focused. Some of these 'hands on' activities included the physical orientation to campus and procedures-focused tasks, such as a 'campus quest', a Library tour and booking a Library study room, and setting up a Blackboard account. Others considered useful guided rehearsals of university activity-types, such as group presentations, participating in mock tutorials, and attending practice lectures designed specifically for CALD students. Other university-specific activities were study skills such as making weekly planners and study planners. The teacher also used the Blackboard session to "make sure they know that's something they've got to use on a daily basis", and to introduce the advantages of using it to pre-read or follow-up lectures. Among the other activities, a daily twenty-minute 'free-writing' activity was singled out for comment, which was informed by Northedge's (2003) argument "to practise 'little and often'" (p. 178). This constituted practice to develop familiarity with writing (rather than to practise academic genres), with some grammatical focus at times, and the fact that the teacher marked it at sentence level and that students expressed a desire for continued feedback on their writing practice after the course, suggest that the learner-focus is a key factor in its usefulness. Integral to such learner-centredness is the need for flexibility in programming. Simone warned of the need to cap class sizes at around 18 to make such an intensive workload sustainable.

The barriers and challenges to the success of the course were perceived to be mostly located externally to the program. Administration and enrolment issues were said to have wasted class time, as class time was spent answering questions related to student enrolment. The diversity of the class (in terms of educational experience, English proficiency and disciplinary orientation) also posed issues. Simone worried that program content was not relevant to the students' individual needs; however, she also noted that, "they kept coming back", and as a preparatory course, it does need "to be open to all".

Overall, the students were unanimous in their opinion that the course should be repeated. The students were supportive because of the practical and affective support they obtained with their orientation to academic culture; as was the teacher, in seeing how the learners benefitted, and with the caveat that the class size needs to be capped if the course is to continue to offer tailored access support to university courses. This positivity was echoed by the coordinator, in view of the course's success in meeting the university's values and goals of access and equity in their recent strategic plan (University of Newcastle, 2016).

5. Discussion

This paper has offered a critical account of the development, design and delivery of two iterations of a program that explicitly sought to support the transitions of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students, and specifically Students from Refugee Backgrounds (SfRBs) with their transitions into and through higher education. It has explored the experiences of two cohorts of students who studied in two different iterations of this course—taught in different locations (TAFE and university), by different teachers, over different durations—as well as reflexively drawing on our own reflections of being involved in the creation, teaching and evaluation of the programs (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). By explicitly unpacking potentially problematic aspects of moving into higher education related to the linguistic requirements and expectations, and tacit cultural elements of western education systems, and higher education more specifically, we have sought to scaffold and support CALD students and SfRBs with their transitions.

As can be seen from the critical description offered in this paper, the program predictably had elements that were both successful and challenging. Certainly, the offering of the program—in any guise—was well-received by the students, as its provision demonstrated that both sites (TAFE and the university) cared about their transitions, and recognised that additional support is needed pre-entry to university study. The aspects that both cohorts found useful included the orientation to the physical and digital environment of university study (although the TAFE iteration was only able to offer limited access to the university's online platform), the explicit attention to English language (such as academic vocabulary and grammatical/ compositional aspects of formal writing), and clear articulation of expectations. Some of the reported downsides included the limited opportunities to individualise the program, no offering of a disciplinary-specific program, and a perception of insufficient time given.

However, in addition to the students' feedback and insights, this paper has also considered our own reflections as designers, teachers and evaluators of this program. In some senses, the views of teachers—particularly in tertiary education—are absent from the literature, with little literature empirically engaging with VET or higher education teachers. A notable exception is the 2011 paper by Harris and Marlowe, which reports that university staff continually repeated in interviews that they were, 'setting them up to fail' (p. 189). Harris and Marlowe argue that the staff-participants in their study were particularly concerned that their university accepts students who may not be sufficiently prepared with 'academic skills'; this sentiment is also echoed in Cocks and Stokes' (2012) account of staff in an enabling program at the University of South Australia. Both papers consider it necessary for teaching staff—many of whom are casual and not trained educators—to receive bespoke training to support them with teaching CALD students and SfRBs. In no way does the program described in this paper replace the need for specific training for tertiary educators working with these student groups or specific English language support; however, it does speak to the need for better preparation for further study by unpacking and articulating expectations and assumptions that can act as critical barriers to educational success.

Furthermore, by explicitly guiding students to institutional support services and particular 'trusted people' (see Baker et al., 2018), the program has sought to respond to concerns that CALD students, and SfRBs, do not make use of the support services offered by tertiary education providers. As Earnest et al. argued back in 2010, "While there are existing services available for all students,

including teaching and learning centres, life skills, counselling and employment services, these services remain underused and often students are unaware of them" (p.169). More recently, research in a regional university has found that undergraduate SfRBs regularly eschew 'formal' sources of support, saying the services are perceived as 'not for us'. As Sally, Evonne and Evonne have held formally identified positions in both spaces as language support teachers, our involvement has facilitated this brokerage between the students and the institutions and we have observed higher than average levels of engagement between CALD students and the support services. However, as we note in Baker et al. (2018), this mediatory role is not without its difficulties, and it is an ongoing challenge to balance support needs with developing independence. The emotional labour of supporting students can be wearing, and it is important that we collectively develop ways to share this load.

Moreover, by explicating the expectations of academic study, this program also responds in part to the concerns raised by McWilliams and Bonet (2016), who argue that assumptions about what tertiary education will offer can result in an "ubiquitous tension in the lives of refugee students looking to both realize the humanitarian promise of the 'good life' secured through educational attainment" (p.14). Although talking about young SfRBs leaving schools, McWilliams and Bonet's argument resonates with the experiences of adult SfRBs—perhaps more so because of their age—because the 'promise' of higher education can so often be compromised by linguistic and cultural missteps and mismatches, complicated further by what they call "the reality of narrowed pathways through which those opportunities are realized" (p.14).

6. Conclusion

Despite a growing body of literature both nationally and internationally, there is still much to be learned about the experiences of SfRBs as they navigate their educational trajectories in their countries of settlement. Systemic misrecognitions at the level of administration and policy render the unique experiences of SfRBs difficult to capture for researchers and practitioners. More importantly, these misrecognitions cast SfRBs as predominantly invisible within large educational systems.

This paper specifically attends to the educational trajectories and routes of SfRBs in a regional Australian context, and has reported on two iterations of a program designed to prepare students for some of the tacit linguistic and cultural norms of higher education. Drawing on student-participant and practitioner-participant accounts, we highlight the value of context-responsive, flexible, learner-centred programs in facilitating the educational routes of SfRBs—and CALD students more broadly—into higher education. However—and despite our best efforts to situate these programs within sustainable funding models—programs such as these can fall victim to government tender processes and policy shifts which move funding away from established institutions and programs. For this reason, we stress that the programs outlined in this paper and others like them cannot provide an 'easy fix'. Instead, we need to think long-term and for flexible, creative and collaborative endeavours so that we can navigate the policy and funding landscape while supporting our students with their own navigations.

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