CHAPTER 10

Insider Views on English Language Pathway Programmes to Australian Universities

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This chapter is a collaboration between three university students of refugee background and an Australian teacher-researcher who works with refugee students in Australia. It challenges educational discourses which locate deficits in refugee students rather than in the education systems that underserve them, and discusses the ways in which English as a second language programmes subject refugee background students to paternalistic practices. Such practices – damning students with low expectations, and refusing to recognise their expertise on their own learning – in turn create further barriers, as displaced students must fight for the right to meaningful education.

The idea for this chapter was sparked by an illustrative incident at an international conference on refugees. Two of the refugee-background students (Sawa and Dolmai) had just presented on their educational experiences in Australia, and an audience member (Wilson) commented that their stories correlated with systemic difficulties she had heard from her own students of refugee background. She added that such first-hand accounts were often dismissed or disbelieved by members of her educational community, echoing the arguments regarding mistrust of refugees referred to in the introduction of this volume. At this point, an insider in the educational hierarchy took control of the conversation. This gatekeeper asserted that adult English language students do not understand their learning needs, and it is up to educational providers to tell them which knowledge will serve them best. He concluded that his job mostly involved persuading refugee-background students to lower their ambitions to more obtainable (i.e. unskilled) careers, as their academic goals were unrealistic.

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The encounter described above encapsulates the experiences of all the co-authors. All four have had our voices silenced, suppressed and delegitimised, either as students of a refugee background (Babaei, Dolmai and Sawa) or as an educator and ally of refugee students working in the neoliberal higher education sector of Australia (Wilson). Therefore, a primary purpose of this chapter is to legitimise and promote the perspectives of refugee-background adult students regarding their learning experiences and academic capacities. We aim to achieve this by:

- positioning refugee-background students as co-authors, rather than simply as research objects;
- foregrounding the lived experience of the co-authors from refugee backgrounds about their educational experiences in Australia and the systemic barriers they faced; and
- contextualising and validating their perspectives by reference to current research literature.

We begin with first-person accounts of three of the co-authors' transitions to university, or in two of those cases, the transition *back* to university. These accounts challenge three popular distortions about refugee-background students in Australia:

1. that they are a monolithic group who, as a whole, do not have sufficient educational backgrounds for university, and therefore should lower their expectations for tertiary study;
2. that refugees largely seek tertiary education as a means to fulfil familial expectations and boost personal status; and
3. that the capacities of post-school-age refugees to learn English are limited by their own deficits or past misfortunes, rather than by systemic barriers faced by adult English education for refugees and migrants in Australia.

The narratives presented below also emphasise the crucial role that English language plays in the lives of refugee-background students as a means to exercise agency, participate in society, and to build meaningful careers that meet their aspirations and abilities.

Provision of English as a Second Language Education to Refugees in Australia

> Learning language is very important for everybody. It is the key to every locked door, especially for young people who were at university

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> before they arrived in Australia. English opens the doors to study at university and to find better work opportunities. This is what young motivated people want to do. Learning the language makes you a stable and strong person. No language means you are like a deaf, blind person. (Merna)

> If you want to survive, you have to learn English. (Homeira)

Voice, the silencing of voices, and who has the legitimacy to be heard, are both the key drivers and themes of this chapter. In an anglophone country such as Australia, voice is also inextricably linked to access to English. For newcomers, mastery of the English language is the key to education, employability, and to social and cultural capital. It is also required for integration and acceptance within the broader community, without which people of refugee backgrounds 'risk leading isolated, thwarted lives, while social cohesion and public support for migration risks being undermined' (Scanlon Institute for Applied Social Cohesion Research [SIASCR] 2019: 10). To deny meaningful English language education to refugees is to further silence their voices. However, achieving the required level of competency in English is also the largest challenge for students from refugee backgrounds (Harvey et al. 2018).

The Australian government provides free English tuition to post-school-age immigrants and refugees via the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP). This tuition is delivered by public and private vocational colleges, depending on the state. When AMEP was first established in 1948 – and for decades afterwards – its prime goal was settlement of immigrants and refugees (SIASCR 2019). At its peak, AMEP was considered a worldwide 'exemplar' in English language provision (Moore 2001).

However, with economic rationalism taking over the Australian political landscape in the 1990s, the focus of AMEP changed from settlement to employment (SIASCR 2019). Since 1997, AMEP contracts have been put out to tender, resulting in less stability and coherence, and lower quality as providers compete to provide the most cost-efficient programme (Baker, Due and Rose 2019; SIASCR 2019). Further, in recent years a succession of new business models for AMEP has been introduced, increasing audit and compliance requirements at the expense of pedagogy (Baker, Due and Rose 2019; SIASCR 2019). The result of these combined measures is that AMEP has become increasingly generic, class sizes have increased, less qualified teachers are employed and curriculum standards have been lowered (Michell 2016; SIASCR 2019). In addition, due to attempts to conflate AMEP with vo-

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cational training programmes, assessments are no longer tied to English language proficiency, but to an 'inappropriate', invalid and unreliable measurement of employment-focused 'core skills' (Australian Council of TESOL Associations [ACTA] 2018).

Until August 2020, when changes to hours and eligibility were announced, only refugees and immigrants 'with less than functional English' were eligible for the 510 free hours of English classes provided by AMEP (ACTA 2016: 3). This arbitrary number of hours has led to various problems. The specific calculation of 510 hours 'has *no* theoretical, research or administrative validity' and was determined because the '10 on the end sounded really quite scientific. 500 would have looked just a bit too neat' (ACTA 2019: 9). However, data indicates that for students who arrive in Australia with no English, AMEP does not equip them with functional English in 510 hours. In fact, 'a mere seven per cent of migrants and refugees who studied in the AMEP each year achieved functional English as a result, according to the latest available figures, from 2015' (SIASCR 2019: 10).

In August 2020, the Australian government announced that AMEP hours would be uncapped and that the programme would be extended to a vocational level (IELTS 5.5 or equivalent) (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs 2020). However, it is not clear whether these developments will resolve other problems within AMEP. After all, as the relevant government minister admitted, 'currently people only complete about 300 hours of the 510 available' (Tudge 2020: para. 8). This strongly suggests that the quality of the programme, not the number of hours, is its fundamental flaw.

Over the six years that she has been teaching refugee-background students, one of the authors has heard from hundreds of former AMEP students that they were just 'wasting time' while in the programme. They have repeatedly told of being treated like incapable children, not worthy of high expectations. In this respect, AMEP runs the risk of what has been called in the Canadian context 'compassionate repression', that is, treating refugees 'in dehumanizing or patronizing ways as "victims" and "helpless people" who just need "bare life" necessities to survive' (Shakya et al. 2010: 74).

> Unfortunately, studying the language wasn't very helpful for me, because I was placed in a lower language level, when I felt I should have been placed in a higher level. The language school didn't acknowledge my previous education, and made me feel like I wasn't capable. I was disappointed and felt like I was wasting my time. Some of the

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> teachers were very helpful, but I don't think the English classes prepared me for university life in Australia, so starting uni here has been very hard for me. (Merna)

> All of the students were together in one place, all of the different levels, and we had only one teacher. She couldn't teach us because we were a lot for one person. There were 25 to 30 from different levels. The teachers, I think, didn't have any choice because they just tell them to go and teach. But they couldn't control all of the people so sometimes they were just standing and looking at us.
>
> Every morning they just told us to sit in a circle and when we sat, they threw a ball to us and said 'now introduce yourself', every single day. When we started at 8:45, it went until 10:00, because there were so many people. We had to introduce ourselves and we had to wait for others to introduce themselves. Every day. It was really a funny thing because we didn't need to introduce ourselves every single morning. In the afternoon they took us outside and they gave us the ball and they said, 'You can play now. Go and play soccer'. Sometimes they just gave us a pencil and said, 'Draw whatever you want'. We did that maybe twice a week. In the afternoon they gave us 30 minutes and they said 'Read!' but I couldn't read English. I knew the alphabet but that's all. My experience was really terrible. At that time, if I want to be honest, my boyfriend was beside me [after class] and he knew English and he helped me a lot. (Homeira)

Despite dedicated teachers, AMEP fails to deliver. This is due to a system that is focused on compliance at the expense of quality, and an assessment framework that is wholly unsuited to the teaching of English as an additional language (ACTA 2019). Furthermore, 'class sizes and groupings are grossly dysfunctional for teaching English' (ACTA 2019: 7). Coupled with regulatory requirements for constant attendance monitoring and a 'fragmented' curriculum (5) in which 'content is irrelevant' (11), 'continuity and coherence in teaching is impossible' (7). In addition, students are 'continuously admitted to classes' throughout the term (7). As a result, AMEP teachers report that they are left with no alternative but to employ 'the holding pen method of teaching' (7).

Until changes were announced in August 2020, there was an added quandary for the 7 per cent of students who managed to acquire 'functional English' at AMEP or those who entered Australia with higher levels of English. They were considered to have too much English for AMEP, but not enough to enter the workforce or courses in further and higher education. So-called 'functional English is generally regarded as well below the level required in most workplaces and [vocational]

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courses', but a student with functional English had to leave AMEP (SIASCR 2019: 10).

Compounding the problem, most university-based English language programmes are limited to full fee-paying, international students; while most tertiary preparation programmes for domestic – including refugee-background – students are not specifically designed as English as a second language courses. Only a small number of Australian universities run government-funded English language pathway courses which accept domestic students. Even then, students must first complete their 510 hours of AMEP. At a public university where one of the authors worked, refugees were systematically refused entrance into English language courses because they were seen as a burden on the system compared to full fee-paying international students. Regardless of their English language proficiency, many prospective students, over the course of many years, were constantly told to do their AMEP hours first, and refused an English language placement test.

> I heard a lot of people say, 'You can learn English at university, and after that you can go to university [to do a degree]'. But they did not allow me to study English there. When I wanted to start, I came and applied many times and they said, 'No, you have to go back to [AMEP] and finish your hours'. And then I said, 'OK, I will finish my hours' and then I came back and they said, 'No, your English level is not good for university, and we cannot allow you to come to university'. But I didn't want to go straight to university, I wanted to study English. They said, 'We don't have a course at your level, we only have high level courses'. I later found out that this was not true.
>
> I applied about three or four times and each time they said 'No, you have to finish your hours [at AMEP]'. So I went back but I couldn't learn anything. Then I went back to university but again they told me to go back to [AMEP] and finish my hours. I said, 'OK, I will finish my hours' but when I finished my hours they said, 'No, you have to go back and finish your second lot of hours! Because the government has given you the hours, you have to finish them'. I said, 'No, I don't want to go back there, because I want to study here!' They didn't ask me why I didn't want to go back to [AMEP]. They just said, because the government has given you the hours, you have to finish the hours. (Homeira)

Now that AMEP's free hours have been uncapped and are potentially unlimited, university gatekeepers could use this as justification to never provide access to pre-degree English language programmes, as the free hours will never be finished. Regardless, Homeira's experience reflects

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a number of issues that illustrate the injustices and roadblocks faced by refugee-background students in Australia. First, she was confronted by the seemingly arbitrary changes in the goalposts ('Finish your second lot of hours'). In addition, she spent a significant amount of time and energy fighting for entry to a programme which was ostensibly open access. Both of these further delayed her access to meaningful education. Furthermore, she was stymied by individual administrators and managers who misused their power to arbitrarily deny entry to refugees (see also Cantat, this volume). Finally, the fact that 'they didn't ask me why I didn't want to go back' illustrates again the exclusion and silencing of refugee voices, and the assumption that they cannot be trusted to make adult decisions.

Educational Backgrounds of Refugee Students

> As soon as I arrived in Melbourne Airport, the first sentence that came to my mind was, 'Will I be taking too long to go back to uni?' Thinking about studying is the first thing you will think of once you arrive in Australia.

> Many newly arrived young people from refugee backgrounds (especially from Syria and Iraq) were on linear educational pathways prior to arriving in Australia, including commencing or completing tertiary studies, and many had professional careers. So, when we get reconnected as soon as possible to educational pathways, this will help us to adapt faster with all the changes that have happened in our lives. When you have an educational background, and once you get reconnected to the educational pathways, that actually means you have successfully passed most of all challenges as a newly arrived refugee.
>
> And once we reconnect, that will make us feel that we are serving this country, and feel we are a part of it. It will make us feel proud and loved and welcomed, which will contribute to make us feel happier in our new lives in Australia, even feeling like we belong here, and all of these things will give us an additional incentive to serve and defend this country and society. (Suhail)

> One challenge many young refugee people face is losing hope to pursue their career aspirations. Making sure that young people are able to pursue their dream careers is very important, especially for young people like me who had started university before in their country. Before I left Iraq, I was studying a Bachelor of Engineering at the University of Mosul, and it was my dream to work as a civil engineer. I came to Australia in 2016 with my whole family. When I came to Australia, I didn't have any networks at all. We all know that having a good net-

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> work is the key to find good employment opportunities. I would have had a good network through my dad (he is an engineer and used to work in a big company) if I had not left my country. (Merna)

> I did twelve years of school in Iran. I finished high school and I was ready to go to university. I really wanted to go. I was born in Iran, but I wasn't Iranian. I was a refugee, and refugees weren't allowed to study at university and to get a good job in Iran. Refugees were nothing there. (Homeira)

Many university graduates and students have been forced into sudden refugee status by events that disrupted their previously stable lives, and now find their qualifications and skills unrecognised after resettlement (Mackay 2019; see also Al Hussein and Mangeni, this volume). This experience is 'frustrating and humiliating' and adds to the difficulties of resettlement, as it 'impacts not only on their income generation and cost of living but is compounded when their parents' and caregivers' previous education is also not recognised. They would like a range of educational and training pathways made more accessible' (Mackay 2019: 41).

For young people in particular, a university education in Australia represents the opportunity to resume their previous trajectory (Stevenson and Baker 2018: 19; see also Al Hussein and Mangeni, this volume). Young refugee-background students often voice frustration that the refugee experience itself has already stolen time from them, delaying their education (Cassity and Gow 2006; Mackay 2019). Thus, a recurring theme among young refugees is a sense of urgency to resume study. Having already lost time due to displacement and discrimination, they are keen to resume the educational tracks that have been disrupted.

Despite having high levels of previous education, refugee-background students are often mischaracterised as holding notions of misplaced snobbery towards vocational colleges in Australia (Beadle 2014; Naidoo et al. 2018). This can be seen as yet another way to silence and delegitimise the voices of refugee students, as it implicitly assumes that they lack the self-knowledge and awareness of educational standards to choose the most suitable path. It also implies that refugee students are an undifferentiated mass, rather than individuals with varying educational backgrounds and skills.

Ultimately, for many refugee-background students, a university education is critical to secure a stable future and fulfilling work, to acquire the 'social and cultural capital' (Naidoo et al. 2018: 160) necessary for successful integration, and to build 'freedom and agency' (26). All

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of these aspects are also fundamental requirements for recovery from trauma (Harris and Fallot 2001; Silove 2013). In addition, a university education can be vital 'in terms of belonging and beginning to carve a new identity in a host nation' (Naidoo et al. 2018: 90; see also Al Hussein and Mangeni, this volume). Conversely, lack of belonging has been identified as the most significant challenge faced by refugee-background youth in Australia (Mackay 2019). A 'lack of meaningful opportunities can thread together to create a sense of disempowerment, isolation, and mental health issues for refugee young people in communities' (Mackay 2019: 7).

The number of refugee-background students attending university in Australia is largely unknown due to their classification as domestic students (Stevenson and Baker 2018). However, they are believed to be under-represented compared to other equity groups (Terry et al. 2016). As we will argue, this gap reflects neither the ambitions, aptitude nor prior educational experiences of many refugee-background students, but rather systemic barriers to participation.

However, the perceived obstacles to higher education for many former refugees serve to reinforce and orient the actual barriers, as the story of some gets retold as the story of *all*. Widely cited reasons for low rates of participation in higher education for refugees are limited and interrupted education, illiteracy in their first language, and trauma prior to resettlement (Beadle 2014; Molla 2019; Naidoo et al. 2018). Refugees in Australia have also perceived the tendency for others to assume that lack of English constitutes lack of intelligence (Mackay 2019). This deficit narrative has been further simplified in the Australian political discourse, with the then-Immigration Minister, Peter Dutton, claiming in 2016 that refugees were illiterate, innumerate, and both simultaneously unemployable and taking jobs from Australians (Doherty and Davidson 2016).

While some former refugees undoubtedly have experienced severely interrupted education, to categorise the 65.6 million displaced people worldwide as illiterate, damaged and unteachable is highly reductive, and puts the burden of adaptability on refugees (Rajaram, this volume) rather than on institutions. In addition, the formal education levels of refugee-background students in Australia are often underestimated. In reality, only 20 per cent of refugees in Australia arrive without the ability to read and write in their own language (Marshall 2015), although it is unclear whether this statistic accounts for languages that are oral only.

Moreover, while some 'commonalities of experience' exist among refugee-background students (Terry et al. 2016: 33), the significant differences that also exist must be 'accounted for in building their interac-

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tions with universities' and other educational providers (34). As with any students, those with more prior experience in education are more likely to succeed in further study (Naidoo et al. 2018: 8). However, even for those who have lived the majority of their lives as refugees or lived for prolonged periods in refugee camps, lack of formal education cannot be assumed. Three-quarters of refugees in Australia have at least a high school education when they enter the country (Australian Survey Research Group 2011). In any case, all refugees bring strengths and transferable skills, such as linguistic ability and intercultural knowledge, which can be a stepping stone to tertiary studies (Harvey et al. 2018; Naidoo et al. 2018; Stevenson and Baker 2018). In addition, refugees 'are, of course, already very competent language learners, as many speak other languages or dialects alongside their mother tongue, and they are highly motivated to learn' (Naidoo et al. 2018: 111).

Furthermore, their very experience of being refugees encapsulates their 'ability to survive adversity' and 'the strengths it has taken to get to where they currently are' (Rafferty et al. 2019: 33). A strengths-based approach does not mean that challenges and barriers are not recognised; rather, it entails building on the attributes and skills that refugees already have, and providing tailored, appropriate support instead of 'one-size-fits-all' approaches (Terry et al. 2016). Although not yet in practice on any large scale, 'the Australian higher education sector now has the ability to identify and engage communities through targeted and culturally-sensitive ways' (Terry et al. 2016: 35) and to respond to the varied specific needs of students from refugee backgrounds. However, the highly disparate educational needs of various refugee cohorts are often not considered in Australia's monolithic and inflexible system.

Conclusion

As discussed above, refugee-background students' voices are silenced when it comes to speaking out on the issue of English language education. Their perspectives on their experiences as adult English language learners in Australia are rarely heard, either in published research or in discussions that affect policy at a local level. The result has been a double silencing of refugee students, by blocking both their metaphorical voices (expression of informed opinion) and literal voices (the capacity to fully express themselves in English).

As an attempt to resist such silencing, this chapter has served two key purposes: to privilege the voices and lived experience of refugee

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students, and to attempt to subvert the traditional practices and power relations of academic authorship. In the academic milieu, refugees are often positioned as the researched rather than as researchers and writers. As such, their stories are often told by Western academics whose careers benefit as a result (Smith 2012; Stevenson and Baker 2018). Of the four co-authors of this chapter, one is a Western academic born in an anglophone country, using the privilege of linguistic and social capital to access an avenue to which her co-authors may not (yet) have entry. Conversely, the co-authors from refugee backgrounds lend the Western academic an authenticity and insider perspective that she would not otherwise have. There is some discomfort in this. However, it is hoped that by privileging the voices of refugee students and recognising them as co-authors rather than as mere data sources, some of the imbalance is redressed.

The lived-experience-led approach of this chapter reflects the critical research perspective that 'leadership needs to emanate from teachers, students, and community' rather than from only those who currently hold power (Smyth et al. 2014: 113). It has also sought 'to recognize and reposition students as authorities on and authors of their own educational experiences and representations of those experiences' (Cook-Sather 2007: 390). Privileging the voices of those who are usually excluded is 'an expression of individuality in the face of negative social stereotypes' (Campbell 2009: 116), and recognises that students are experts in their own learning and should be treated as such (Smyth 2011: 99). Most importantly, refugee voices are crucial for decision-making processes about issues which directly affect other refugees and in 'identifying where changes can be made to systems' (Rafferty et al. 2019: 26).

For significant change to occur, policy regarding English language education for refugee adults needs to be informed by the experience of refugee-background students themselves. Ultimately, refugee-background students want meaningful education that will open or reopen doors to careers that match their abilities and strengths. For them to have a voice in the community and agency over their lives and futures, they must have access to English education that is truly empowering and equips them to speak about the societies that they are now co-creating.

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immigrant students at the University of Southern Queensland in the Refugee Welcome Zone of Toowoomba. She has published and presented on trauma-informed English teaching, a research imperative motivated by her experience of teaching in Fukushima, Japan at the time of the 2011 disasters, as well as her student cohort at USQ.

Homeira Babaei is enrolled in a Bachelor of Human Services at the University of Southern Queensland, and a trainee interpreter. A third-generation refugee, she was born in Iran to parents who had also been displaced. She came to Australia in 2017 with her mother and siblings.

Merna Dolmai is a student at RMIT University in Melbourne. Before coming to Australia in 2016 with her family, she was completing a Bachelor of Engineering at the University of Mosul in Iraq. Mosul was under control of Daesh (the Islamic State terrorist group) from 2014 to 2017. It was later recaptured by the Iraqi government in the Battle of Mosul. Merna was a presenter at the 2nd Australian and New Zealand Refugee Trauma Recovery in Resettlement Conference in Brisbane in March 2019.

Suhail Sawa is studying an Advanced Diploma of Building Design at RMIT University in Melbourne. Born in Syria, he was displaced by the ongoing Syrian civil war. Suhail came to Australia in September 2016 and lives with his family in Melbourne, where he works part-time at a pharmacy. Suhail was a presenter at the 2nd Australian and New Zealand Refugee Trauma Recovery in Resettlement Conference in Brisbane in March 2019.

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