

13. EMBRACING SOCIAL INCLUSION?

*The Asylum Seeker Experience of Applying for Admission
to Tertiary Education in Australia*

INTRODUCTION

Whilst the world is still attempting to evaluate the overall effect of the current global refugee situation, for many nations developing responses to the recent growth in the numbers of people seeking asylum is a highly sensitive issue.

In light of this global phenomenon, universities around the world are considering their social equity obligations and offering specific student scholarships and bursaries for those seeking asylum in the host country. For example, in the UK a recent social movement to expand access to university education for refugees and people seeking asylum (RPSA) has drawn on the concept of the right to education (United Nations, 1948) adopting the name ‘Article 26’¹ to highlight the movement’s purpose in advocating the ‘right to an education’ for people who are regarded as outside the responsibility of a nation state. In considering this issue, a critical race lens (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) is employed to discuss findings from an empirical case study that explored the institutional processes and experiences of applicants from RPSA backgrounds to one Australian university. The following two questions are addressed:

1. What processes and procedures do Australian universities have in place for admitting RPSA?
2. Whether, and if so, how, university admissions’ processes may operate as mechanisms of power to exclude and/or marginalize RPSA applicants?

At the time of writing the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA, [2017a]) estimated there were in excess of 30,000 people living in the Australian community without permanent protection² and without state support to pursue higher education. Current Australian Federal Government policy notes, that even if those seeking asylum have their refugee status determined, they will still not be eligible for permanent residency and will instead be granted either Temporary Protection Visas (TPV)³ or Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEV)⁴ (Refugee Council of Australian [RCOA], 2015).

Yet over the last decade the Australian higher education sector has been committed to widening access and participation (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) and has achieved some progress in relation to one of the target equity groups, namely,

those from low socio-economic status (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). However, RPSA are not included in this strategy as it is limited to domestic students, i.e., those with permanent residency or citizenship (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2017). Instead RPSA applicants are categorized as international students and are required to pay full international tuition fees. For the vast majority, this fee is unaffordable. As a result, their employment prospects are considerably diminished and they are further marginalized, socially and economically.

In recognition of this policy problem, a handful of universities are providing scholarships to cover tuition costs and in some instances a small living allowance. Of the 43 universities in Australia, the Refugee Council of Australia (2018) listed 19 offering fee waivers and/or financial bursaries to RPSA in 2018. In addressing the two preceding research questions through an analysis of case studies of RPSA seeking university access, the chapter aims to explore the implications of this recent policy move to extend university equity policies and practices and contribute to a better understanding of how universities may develop more inclusive equity policies in relation to this marginalized group.

CONTEXT AND BARRIERS

Over recent years scholars in Australia have devoted significant attention to addressing the employment and education needs of immigrants (Webb, 2015) and refugees (Naidoo, Wilkinson, Adoniou, & Langat, 2018). The consensus from these studies is that migrants, especially RPSA face a number of ongoing difficulties accessing employment and higher education. Similarly, research in Canada and Europe has identified that not only do migrants experience difficulties accessing education, training and employment because of their status and lack of familiarity with the local contexts (Hynes, 2011), but also because of the institutional barriers they encounter (Chadderton & Edmonds, 2015; Guo, 2015b).

In order to inform the analysis of the institutional barriers facing migrants, researchers have turned to the framework and insights provided by critical race theory (CRT). CRT originating in the USA sought to understand how white privilege and racial power were maintained over time (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Turning their attention to how education helps to sustain social inequalities, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) applied CRT to explain the continued racial disadvantages experienced by African American students in the US. Similarly, in Europe and Canada, CRT has been employed to account for inequalities in the participation and outcomes of refugees and immigrants of color (Chadderton & Edmonds, 2015), including the assessment of immigrants' skills (Guo, 2015b).

Although more than 25 per cent of Australia's population was born in countries other than Australia, we consider CRT a relevant theory to analyze university admissions because it explains how systems of structural discrimination maintain the dominance of groups that historically have been constructed as 'white', rather than referring to skin color or ethnicity. In exploring the issue of RPSA access

to tertiary education, therefore, CRT provides a number of useful concepts when considering the implementation of equity policies, e.g., the permanence of racism in white majority nations; the role of 'white' power in only permitting changes that sustain white privilege; attention to how race intersects with other identities and experiences; and the role of ideologies such as meritocracy in sustaining color-blind, apparently neutral institutional decision making.

A central tenet of CRT is the use of research methods, such as narrative inquiry, to provide counteracting stories of inequality. Critical analyses of institutions that examine everyday practices of organizations through people's experiences have the potential to give voice to vulnerable groups and minorities. Stories are an opportunity to reveal experiences and name discriminations. Once discrimination has been named it can be contested. Hence, powerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of contestation in our systems.

METHODOLOGY

Our case study drew on the experiences of RPSA applying to one university in Australia where scholarships to support the access and participation of RPSA had recently been introduced. In order to understand the practices of the institution in awarding scholarships, narrative data was collected from those responsible for developing and implementing its policies, as well as from a purposefully selected sample of three prospective students⁵ who failed to secure an offer or funding. Narrative inquiry enabled a focus on the perceptions and experiences of RPSA in relation to the university application and scholarship award processes, policies and procedures. Consequently, this purposive selection of three cases of failure to gain university scholarships, can reveal much about the processes of the admissions and awarding system from below (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant and recorded and transcribed. The interviews explored participants' backgrounds, how they went about applying for a place at university; and their reflections on their experiences of university student admission and scholarship application process and procedures. The participants were also encouraged to reflect on what it would mean to them if they were awarded a place at university. The interviews were coded and analyzed by the authors with particular attention paid to recurring themes. The participants were aged between 19 and 43 and all had arrived in Australia in the past 3 years. In addition, each participant shared with the researchers all email correspondence between themselves and the university.

The research team were very mindful of ethical considerations in research with RPSA concerning vulnerability, power, and the relationship between research and advocacy (Block, Riggs, & Haslam, 2013). Voluntary participation was stressed with all participants and they had the right to withdraw at any time.

Following the interviews with student applicants, interviews were also conducted with four professional staff involved in student admissions, the award of scholarships,

and the implementation of the social equity strategy. The interviews included questions about university process and procedures, as well as the university's social equity strategy, and the implications of this strategy for staff training and awareness.

THE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

In 2015 the university in the case study revised its strategic plan and equity structure, and established an office to deal with issues of social inclusion, including access to education for disadvantaged groups. From this initiative came the idea for two full fee scholarships and bursaries for students seeking asylum. The application process required the potential student to apply online submitting a 500 word essay, stating why they felt they should be awarded the scholarship. However, in order to be considered eligible for the scholarship, the applicant needed to apply and be accepted to the university through the standard student admission channels providing all relevant documentation (including original documents for certification) as well as evidence of their English language testing score. It is important to note, that at the student admission stage there was no mechanism by which the applicant was flagged as a person awaiting the outcome of their refugee application (that is, residing in Australia with an eligible visa⁶).

In total the university had 59 applications for the two scholarships and bursaries. However, after the selection process the university increased its provision and offered eleven full tuition scholarships (including a \$3000 bursary for each student).

FINDINGS

This study found that there were tensions and ambiguities inherent in the operation of the social inclusion initiatives in this case study university because existing university policies and procedures to assess student eligibility for admission did not align well with the new policy. Interview analysis highlighted three key themes about the experiences of RPSA applicants: homogenization of equity in processes and procedures; assessing legitimacy; and insecurity, powerlessness and mistrust.

The narratives of the three RPSA failed application cases describe feelings of alienation, discomfort and anxiety when encountering university staff who appear to view them with suspicion for not having the correct documents.

Theme 1: Homogenizing of Equity in Processes and Procedures

Exploring how the RPSA awards were allocated revealed that professional staff were aware of the tension between the aims of the university's social inclusion policies and the constraints that they had to work within by offering only two scholarships. As Amy who was in charge of procedures to award the scholarships said, "Asylum

seekers is such a sensitive topic that everyone wants to support”. Therefore, in recognition of the problem of assessing applicants’ English language skills and meeting the standardized university’s entry requirements, Amy proposed developing new pathway routes through the local English language college for otherwise well-qualified RPSA applicants. In order to fund this new pathway, Amy approached the faculties for extra funding. She noted:

It wasn’t something we initially planned on doing or anything like that. I just decided let’s just give this a go and see and I didn’t think they would get that much. I thought maybe one per faculty but everyone was very enthused by it so as faculties were coming on board I have confidence to be able to keep going and to other faculties and it’s quite unbelievable. (Amy – Head of Scholarships)

Change seemed to rely on the efforts of individual staff such as Amy using her knowledge and networks to gain additional funding from faculties. This drew on the general consensus amongst professional staff about the right to education for RPSA. Annie from the equity office described the decision-making process for the asylum seeker scholarship initiative:

We had a number of discussions with the Vice Chancellor about how scholarships should be targeted [...] we identified there were asylum seekers in need. (Annie – Social Equity Manager)

However, despite these good intentions, little consideration was given in relation to more fundamental changes in the university policy, practices and procedures that might be required. As Annie remarked:

We’ve got just a template with all the details of things that need to be decided on that exist for every scholarship [...]. There are procedures in place at a policy level – policies and procedures at a university level for scholarships and developing them, so it was done in line with all those. (Annie – Social Equity Manager)

Robby, an RPSA applicant concurred in regard to the template that

the people who ... answering the phone, they have some ... chart in front of them and you know they say if the applicant, [...] talks to you and says this, the answer is this, but if the answer, the question is this, the answer is this. It’s something like FAQ. (Robby – RPSA applicant)

There was an unexamined assumption that standard policies and practices in relation to admissions would be relevant to those from RPSA backgrounds. However, since these RPSA applicants were regarded as international, not domestic students by the admissions policies, tensions emerged in the admissions process because of this homogenization of students as either domestic (where specific equity support was available) and international (where equity policies were not considered applicable).

Theme 2: Assessing Legitimacy

Being treated as international students meant that many of the encounters between RPSA and the university staff involved assessing the legitimacy of their applications. For two of the applicants, the lack of recognition of their overseas work experience, and the university staff's insistence on applicants providing original documentation of their previous higher education qualifications was distressing and perceived as structural discrimination. The university staff made it clear that the admissions process had rules, regulations and a template they had to follow in order to approve an application. However, the RPSA experienced this process as one to deny them access. For instance, Elliot commented:

I felt embarrassed because then I was talking about like asylum seeker visa, I was – I felt embarrassed, because I felt like I am putting them in such a pain, because she had to go through all the like website and stuff, [stating], “Oh, there's not such a thing as asylum seeker scholarship”. (Elliot – RPSA applicant)

According to the Head of Admissions, there is a clear template setting out entry requirements and procedures for evaluating applications and validating documents in order to avoid fraud by international applicants. Hence, the procedures that applied to RPSA required the verification of qualifications, certified translations, as well as the sighting of original documents and certificates. If RPSA are unable to produce original documentation the university would not consider their application. In addition, there is no system-based mechanism available to the admissions or front-line service staff to identify RPSA as potential applicants, so they are treated like any ‘standard international applicant’. For example, proficiency in English language is one criterion used in the admissions process for international students and for ease of evaluation of this skill, a particular grade in the international language test IELTS is often used as the performance indicator. Not surprisingly, Lucy, who speaks several languages had no prior knowledge of the IELTS system, made this comment about the process of completing the admissions form:

I've been completely confused about that [University] email because they ask me there is an IELTS and the lack of documents on things like this, so it was really, really confusing. (Lucy – RPSA applicant)

Despite recognition that the implementation of social equity policies requires staff training to increase knowledge and understanding and improve practice, staff working in the Social Equity Unit observed that their resources were concentrated on academic staff and the work of faculties, rather than on professional and administrative staff. For example, the equity manager, Annie, when speaking about the professional staff groups stated, “that's left up to them to work out how they train their staff and educate them”.

However, the professional staff all identified the need for ongoing information and training for all management, frontline and support staff as the following comment highlights:

We're not used to dealing with this [RPSA] ... we need to and want to help but it's sounding to the student applicant very much like we, we don't want to help and we're actually putting a barrier in the way. [...] I think we need to explore options for better training and better processes to deal with those students. (John – Head of Admissions).

On the surface, the university processes appeared to be fair and treat applicants similarly. However, despite the commitment to equity by the professional staff, the three university applicants experienced the university processes as inappropriate and unfair. From the perspective of the applicants, the process of recognizing previous qualifications and readiness to study at university by applying templates designed for international students did not acknowledge the circumstances that had forced the migration of these RPSA. Consequently, the applicants had to re-live the trauma of their migration and because they were unable to provide documentation that met the requirements of the template, their previous qualifications were rendered illegitimate. Thus, these classification processes, were experienced by RPSA as arbitrary mechanisms, which naturalize and perpetuate the domination of stable Western-centric education pathways (Bourdieu, 1989).

Theme 3: Insecurity, Powerlessness and Mistrust

One consequence of this exercise in assessing legitimacy manifested itself in the symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1989) experienced by the applicants deemed illegitimate and resulted in feelings of insecurity, powerlessness and mistrust. The application process both “produces and protects dominant interests” (e.g., applicants who are deemed ‘legitimate’ because they fit the criteria) and “inflicts ... suffering and misery” (e.g., upon unsuccessful applicants; Schubert, 2014, p. 180). The nature of the suffering of the three unsuccessful applicants includes reports of feeling unsafe and lacking the ‘power’ to confront frontline staff in relation to the submission of documents. For example, when asked to describe her experiences during the application process and her dealings with the university frontline student services staff, Lucy noted that it made her feel “Unsafe, I feel unsafe”.

Lucy also described feeling powerless in relation to the authority of the university to question her:

I had to answer that question and every time I have to explain to them I came by boat and I couldn't bring my documents [...] it was distressing because I remember all those moments. (Lucy – RPSA applicant)

The insistence on providing the correct documents according to the ‘template’ frustrated the applicants. It reinforced their suffering and perceptions that the

university had no appreciation of the insecure situation of the students and their families often in their countries of origin:

It was really bad and frustrating and I was really sad then they said to me we cannot accept you because of that original document, it was really bad feeling. I cannot ask my family back to Iran to send all the documents to me, it's so hard to send all documents in Australia. Security is a concern absolutely; I'm really scared to ask them to send this document because then they can know where am I [...] I don't want to be in trouble. (Lucy – RPSA applicant).

These applicants were very aware of the power imbalance of the dominated and dominant, e.g., between themselves as applicants and the university staff implementing university policies:

Well it was me, an 19 years old student, trying to apply. And at the other side it was the whole University team [...] it doesn't matter how much I applied and how much I went there, I received the email stating I was not eligible [...] I went back to the university, it didn't matter how much I tried again and how much I talk – she was like, “You are not eligible”. So, I didn't have the *power* to argue for my right. (Elliot – RPSA applicant)

When we asked Robby if he would challenge the decision of the university to turn down his application, he responded:

So I'm not going to, I'm not going to complain about or I'm not going to question them [...] because we are guest in this country and sometimes we think that we impose some troubles, I don't know, some costs, some extra things for this country, and we should not, I mean we should not be something like, what's it called in accounting? Creditor, every time we say you to be in debt to us, nobody is in debt to us. (Robby – RPSA applicant)

Rendered as applicants who are not legitimate, these RPSA did not feel able to challenge the admissions policies and procedures, which by default did not recognize their non-stable and insecure pathways to higher education.

DISCUSSION

The preceding themes indicate tensions between the aims of the university's social equity policies and the admissions' processes that categorize RPSA applicants as international students and do not identify them as a separate equity group with specific needs and circumstances. Narratives from these three applicants show the workings of symbolic violence through these apparently neutral admissions processes. This finding is similar to the Guo's findings about recent immigrants to Canada (2015a), which revealed that the main issue for migrants (humanitarian or voluntary) lay in gaining entry to an organizational space. For applicants from RPSA backgrounds, the admissions process formed the barrier to the university space. The

processes and procedures reproduce systems of classification that reinforce relations of domination and subordination, i.e., those who are constructed as ‘legitimate’ RPSA applicants versus those who are ‘illegitimate’. The subsequent suffering of the unsuccessful applicants is manifested in their feelings of insecurity, powerless and distrust. The staff participants recognized and acknowledged this suffering at some level. All showed understanding and acknowledgement of the inappropriateness of the admissions and scholarship templates they were required to use. Whilst their accounts reinforced the applicants’ narratives of a homogenized approach to the processing of admissions of refugees and people seeking asylum, the practices of staff in seeking out alternative pathways and funding sources for RPSA applicants indicates that the structural discrimination displayed in this case study institution may be open to change although this seemed to rely on the goodwill and capacity of individual staff to use their insider knowledge and networks rather than systemic change at institutional level.

The participants’ narratives highlight the urgent need for awareness-raising and ongoing professional development for general and academic staff and management in relation to the issues that refugee background students face and the strengths and resilience they bring to the learning environment. Yet just as Naidoo et al. (2018) highlighted, staff reported feeling ill-prepared and equipped to understand and meet the complex needs of refugee students. Staff need to be carefully trained in regard to the multiple and complicated issues which RPSA face, particularly in relation to issues such as documentation and paperwork. Moreover, admission policies need to be rethought for what may be seen as neutral and fair from one perspective would appear to be at best, risking re-traumatizing potential applicants, and in some cases, putting their lives in danger. This highlights the need for critical analysis and reform of the institutional systems and processes of higher education admissions to recognize the educational pathways followed by RPSA.

CONCLUSION

Universities internationally and in Australia face new challenges and inequities when it comes to catering for students from a refugee or asylum seeking background. They are to be congratulated on taking positive steps to embrace this precarious group of students. However, our case study has documented the complexities of equity and inclusion for such students. If the Australian universities wish to embrace an inclusive approach to higher education then they must consider what systematic changes are needed to ensure they become responsive to those adults who are living precariously. They must consider as a matter of urgency, ongoing awareness-raising and training for frontline staff in how to deal with students who have arrived in Australia in recent times seeking asylum. These actions are not an optional extra, but are part of a fundamental demand for human rights and recognition that acknowledges the highly complex needs of this newest group of students.

NOTES

- ¹ Article 26 states ‘Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit’ (The United Nations, 1948).
- ² A permanent protection visa entitles the holder to live and work in Australia as a permanent resident, and eligibility to apply for citizenship (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, n.d.a).
- ³ A Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) is one of two types of temporary protection visas available to those claiming asylum who come by boat. The TPV visa provides protection for three years (Refugee Council of Australia, 2017b).
- ⁴ A Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) is one of two types of temporary protection visas available to those claiming asylum who come by boat. This visa provides protection for five years. Its main feature is that people who hold it must intend to work or study in a part of ‘regional Australia’ (Refugee Council of Australia, 2017b).
- ⁵ We allocated university staff pseudonyms whilst the students selected their own ‘assumed names’ to safeguard anonymity.
- ⁶ Eligible visa include: A TPV, a SHEV, a Bridging Visa E (BVE) which lets the holder stay in Australia while making arrangements to leave or awaiting an immigration decision and a Bridging Visa A (BVA), a temporary visa allowing stay in Australia while the applicant’s substantive visa application is being processed (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, n.d.b).

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