Enhancing Aspirations and Pathways to Higher Education for Low SES Migrant and Refugee Communities

Findings Report

Prepared for the Office for Student Advancement
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<td>CDC</td>
<td>Career Development Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>HEPP</td>
<td>Higher Education Participation Program</td>
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<td>LAS</td>
<td>Learning and Academic Skills Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>LSES</td>
<td>Low Socio-economic Status</td>
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<tr>
<td>NESB</td>
<td>Non-English-speaking Background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUT</td>
<td>Swinburne University of Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
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</table>
Project Summary

The Higher Education Participation Program (HEPP) provides funding to universities to undertake activities and implement strategies that improve access to undergraduate courses for people with special needs. The target group in this project is domestic students from low socio-economic status (LSES) and non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), those who have lived in Australia for 10 years or less, and those who are studying at Swinburne University of Technology (SUT).

The objectives of this project are to raise aspirations within the targeted migrant and refugee groups to undertake a higher degree qualification relevant to their employment requirements and career aspirations. Through the gathering of data, the project seeks to improve the services provided to migrant students currently studying within the HE sector at SUT. The findings will contribute to the development of an action plan for the review of services to migrant students at SUT, which can also be offered to other universities looking to support their migrant students.

This research project constitutes a follow-up to a project completed in 2014 that established links with migrant communities in the outer east of Melbourne, and sought to identify successful migrant students’ stories for use as motivational material to assist programs supporting migrants aiming to study at university.

This report presents the findings from:

- Focus group discussions with 17 HE migrant students.
- Individual in-depth interviews with nine Swinburne staff.
- An online survey of 40 former vocational education and training migrant students.
In addition, follow-up interviews with seven migrant students who were studying vocational education and training qualifications in 2014 were conducted. The purpose was to establish further barriers to study faced by migrants and refugees as they progress in their studies.

**Literature Review**

**Introduction**

The aim of this literature review is to provide a summary of Australian and international research on raising aspirations and enhancing pathways to HE for low SES migrant and refugee communities. It begins by defining the concept of ‘aspiration’ before relating that to factors that shape migrants’ aspirations to pursue HE. Next, challenges and barriers experienced by migrants and refugees to attain HE, and to achieve academic success once there, are examined. The focus will then be on recommendations made in previous studies to overcome such barriers.

**Understanding Aspirations**

Aspirations are personal and vary from individual to individual. The Oxford English Dictionary (2009) has defined the concept as “actions of aspiring, a steadfast desire for something above one”. According to this definition, the notion is linked to humans’ personal ambitions and goals – a strong desire to achieve something considered worthwhile. Contained in this explicit meaning are the determinations and attitudes that the individual undertakes (Haller & Miller, 1971; Lewin 1936) to achieve what is dreamed of and/or planned. Aspiration, therefore, is not a thing that one has or does; it is a process relating to the mind that shapes ideas, goals or desires of individuals, and in turn, those goals direct one’s behaviour and actions towards the attainment of what is wished for (Bandura 1989). Table 1
shows examples of aspiration definitions from different perspectives in the existing literature:

**Table 1: Differences in definitions of aspiration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Aspiration Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Markus and Nurius (1986)</td>
<td>One’s ideas and hopes of “possible selves”; i.e., what a person would like to and would not like to become or achieve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewell et al. (1969)</td>
<td>One’s social mobility and its determinants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danziger and Eden (2006)</td>
<td>The authors believe there are two types of aspirations: first, “idealist aspirations” are one’s desired goals, ideal education and occupation; in other words – the best possible life outcome – and second, “realistic aspirations”, which refers to one’s expectations depending on available sources.</td>
</tr>
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Although there is little uniformity in the ways in which the terms aspiration and expectation are used in the current literature and in relation to education, for the sake of simplicity, two principal meanings for the term “educational aspiration” are assumed in this paper: first, “educational plans” (Sewell et al. 1969), which refers to pre-migration hopes and dreams that have shaped students’ decisions and choices, and second, the levels of academic ability and education an individual would like to attain (Rojewski 2005), referring to changes in aspiration post-migration.

**Factors Impacting Migrant Students’ Aspirations**

Previous studies have established that migrant students generally aspire to social status, financial freedom and a secure lifestyle. Upon their arrival at their destination, their
expectations include earning a foreign degree, increased potential earning capacity and experiencing a new cultural landscape (Bankston 2004; Collins 2008). Factors that shape migrant students’ aspirations to study overseas are referred to in the literature as “push and pull factors”. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) summarised some of the push and pull factors that encourage migrant students to study abroad. In their observations, they identified key push factors in country of origin as: a) Foreign degree better than local one; b) Students’ inability to gain entry to local programs; c) Better understanding of the Western culture; d) Intention to migrate. The key pull factors in the country of destination were identified as: a) Reputation/profile of the country; b) Better knowledge/awareness of the country; c) Family decision/alumni network; d) Geographical proximity; e) Cost of HE.

Focusing on Indian and Chinese students in Australia, Azmat et al. (2013) argue that aspiration and expectations are inter-related, and that both need to be considered within diverse contexts and individual perspectives in order to obtain a cross-cultural understanding of the aspirations and expectations of migrant students. Azmat et al. (2013) added that both aspirations and expectations of migrant students are influenced by push and pull factors. However, expectations are the main concern of many Western countries within the sphere of influence and focus of the HE sector in the country of destination. Azmat et al. (2013) therefore suggest more focus on individualised collaborations in understanding key push and pull factors that lead to educational aspirations. According to the authors, this would strengthen the capacity of the HE sector to establish more clearly-defined elements of aspirations, and refine programs accordingly.

To clarify, Azmat et al. (2013) extend the push and pull factors specified by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002). Azmat et al. (2013) identified additional push factors such as socio-economic status in country of origin, and that aspirations are generally considered to be lacking among LSES groups, who do not have access to adequate financial resources. Other additional
elements of aspiration found in Azmat et al. (2013) study include educational opportunities and technological advancement, educational standards, family influence and demographic factors. The study also added additional pull factors, including staff quality, social networks and permanent residency.

In fact, Azmat et al. (2013) argue that a lack of adequate educational opportunities in the home country contributes to the increasing numbers of Chinese and Indian migrant students choosing Australia as their education destination of choice. The authors explain this via the example that Bangladesh has a growing middle-class population, and the youth are eager to undertake HE, but the system in that country is inadequate to provide access to all students. Other studies similar to that of Azmat et al. (2013) also highlight the role of socio-economic status in the country of origin as an important factor shaping migrants’ educational aspirations. For instance, Riak Akuei (2005) emphasised the fact that for some migrants, the need to earn money extends beyond living a better life in a Western country, because many refugees also have a strong commitment to financially supporting their families and communities back home. Indeed, African refugees, for example, have been referred to as “global breadwinners” (Stoll & Johnson 2007). Such responsibilities and challenges in getting into the labour market in a new country may significantly contribute to a decision to undertake tertiary study. Findings by Harris and Marlowe (2011) advocate this argument by revealing that in spite of minimal previous educational experience and language barriers, for African refugees in Australia, obtaining an Australian tertiary degree represents a pathway of hope towards resolving structural obstacles to employment, income and recognition.

Research in Australia has revealed similar results among the Vietnamese migrant community in Sydney. Ninnes (1997) showed that within this community, there is substantial tension between education as a means for upward social mobility and education as a potential and actual source of values. According to the author, this is due to the Vietnamese diaspora, and
the fact that many of these families have experienced downward social mobility in their past lives (Ninnes 1997). Other studies also illustrate the influence of family as another key factor in students’ aspirations and decisions to undertake tertiary education. These studies add that because of English language barriers, many of the parents in migrant families cannot pursue further education or recover their previous social position; therefore, they transfer their hopes and dreams to their children (Arthur 2004; Buchman & Dalton 2002; Nguyen Xuân Thu 1986; Van & Holton, 1991).

It can therefore be argued that individuals’ aspirations and decision-making are influenced by their different cultures and diverse contexts that have formed individual cultural identities. Azmat et al. (2013) point out that in many Asian countries, for example, participation in HE and attaining intellectual skills are highly valued. Hence, what may influence aspirations and expectations of migrant students are the evolved mechanisms, which are used to attain social recognition and greater status in society (Azmat et al. 2013).

The findings of this review suggest that migrants to developed countries from developing and underdeveloped countries bring with them their historically-, socially- and culturally-developed purposes for undertaking education. Their perspectives of education and aspirations are derived prior to their migration from personal experiences (social, cultural and educational) in their home country. Studies focusing on HE aspirations among newcomer refugees in Western countries reveal that pre-migration educational disruptions can seriously impact post-migration educational experiences. Political factors such as war, violence, acute poverty and repressive policies against refugees that prevented them from gaining access to quality education prior to their migration are linked to the ways these students perceive the value and benefits associated with education in the new context (Stevenson & Willott 2007; Shakya et al. 2010).
Accordingly, there is the potential that aspirations and expectations among migrants vary from student to student depending on previous life experiences and their cultural background. It is difficult, therefore, to clearly identify educational aspirations within an international context and to manage them in the destination country. This also shows that these students may have different needs and resources to reach tertiary education, and to succeed once there. In other words, the obstacles these students encounter once they enter a new education system, whether it be VET or HE, are not unique to particular migrant student groups such as Vietnamese, Chinese or Sudanese. Even though a thorough comparison is beyond the scope of this study, the following section draws on literature focusing on migrants’ transitions to tertiary education and the barriers they encounter.

**Transition to Tertiary Study and Educational Challenges**

Previous literature has paid much attention to migrants’ and refugees’ experiences as children and young adults in primary and secondary education (e.g. Hatoss et al. 2012; Kirk & Cassidy 2007; McBrien 2005; Russell 2005). In Australia, the bulk of research has concerned Indigenous Australian educational experiences, both prior to and at tertiary level (e.g. Bandias et al. 2013; Day et al. 2014; De Plevitz 2007; Patten & Ryan 2001). Nevertheless, it needs to be acknowledged that migrant and refugee students have had different lives and educational experiences than most Australian and even Indigenous students. Because of this, they may follow a very different educational pathway from most other students. As mentioned earlier, this current study addresses the need to better understand experiences of such groups of students, in order to contribute to better tertiary educational practice. This is particularly important, because the voices of refugees and migrant students are largely absent in the current literature about tertiary educational experiences.

Previous studies confirm significant barriers that refugees experience gaining access to HE
(e.g. Houghton & Morrice 2008; Morrice 2009; Waddington 2005). A recent study in Australia (Griffin 2014) for example, highlights the role of socio-economic status in tertiary education experiences. Griffin’s (2014) findings show that motivations and aspirations to pursue HE among low SES learners are not high, and the participation of this group of learners remains low in HE programs. According to this study, one of the problems in transitional pathways from VET education to HE among low SES students is that disadvantaged learners usually tend to be overrepresented in lower-level VET qualifications and underrepresented in higher-level VET and HE. Transition from VET to HE is a viable pathway for some disadvantaged learners, but this pathway is not used as widely as it could be. According to the author, one of the reasons for this is that an educational shift from VET level to HE is more likely to happen for students who are enrolled in higher levels of VET, but as mentioned earlier, disadvantaged learners tend to be enrolled in lower-level VET courses (Griffin 2014). Given that transition from VET to further education appears difficult, particularly for disadvantaged learners. Aird et al. (2010) refer to a bridging course to tertiary study offered by many Queensland TAFE institutions, which was established to achieve equity in access to university for people considered to be disadvantaged (from any background). While this course was shown to be effective in providing a pathway from vocational education and training to university, it is aimed at students who are already aspiring to study at university before they commence.

Although obstacles in gaining access to HE are confirmed by previous studies, a very small number of studies focus on refugees’ experiences within university and tertiary education. This might relate to the assumption that once these students successfully gain admission into HE, they face the same challenges as students from non-refugee backgrounds. This assumption could be related to the fact that HE institutions do not recognise refugee students as a social group, and therefore universities do not collect these students’ demographic
information or track their academic progress (Morrice 2013).

Those studies that have focused on refugee and/or migrant students’ experiences in Australian universities have paid a great deal of attention to the improvement of support services in order to better manage their university’s culture and academic system. This particular application is mainly related to the belief that an increase in migrant students’ enrolment in Australian universities has led to the increase in diversity within the culture of Australian universities. This has raised the concern that such diversity in students’ backgrounds – with their different needs and expectations – can pose new challenges for universities in respect to student engagement (Krause et al. 2005).

While some of these studies have concentrated on language barriers and challenges in English language learning (e.g. Cassity & Gow 2005; Dunworth 2009; Murray 2010; Olliff & Couch 2005), other studies such as that by Joyce et al. (2010) have centred their attention on deeper levels of migrant student needs rather than just language skills. Joyce et al.’s study (2010) reveals that despite all the difficulties that may be experienced by low SES and migrant and or/refugee students, they are highly motivated to complete their studies and to begin a professional career. However, the authors suggest that there is a need for improvement in university support programs for refugee and/or migrant students, particularly in relation to their sense of belonging to the new culture. The study shows that students who are not prepared for university studies, and are unfamiliar with the sorts of challenges faced in HE, cannot be active members of a learning community. The authors stress their concern, particularly with those refugee students who have no previous educational experience in Australia. They suggest that those who have undertaken some sort of education in the Australian education system prior to university education have some experience and awareness about assignment and essay assessment tasks, and therefore showed more sense of belonging to the university culture (Joyce et al. 2010). Bridging classes for refugee students
were recommended, as well as English language preparation programs similar to those available for international students, as Humanitarian English programs are not adequate for university-level education. The study also advises universities to act as a bridge and take a more active role by promoting their courses through church groups, civil society and relevant communities (Joyce et al. 2010).

In line with this, other Australian studies also call for educational institutions to play a more active role, and recommend that researchers and educators need to consider new and varied dimensions of diversity emerging from socio-economic status. Students from low SES and migrant backgrounds are not a homogenous group; therefore their experiences and needs are related to a wide range of different demographic characteristics, including cultural background, gender, age, race, disability and geographic origins (Ramburuth & Hartel 2010). As such, Ramburuth and Hartel (2010) argue that while it remains important to provide more access and engagement in university education for students from low SES backgrounds, emphasis should be placed on providing a more nuanced understanding of socio-economic disadvantage, so as to achieve a more holistic understanding of its connection to learning opportunities and educational equity (Ramburuth & Hartel 2010).

Using a qualitative methodology, Harris and Marlowe (2011) interviewed a small number of academic staff and HE students from African backgrounds at a South Australian university to better understand individual experiences and expectations in achieving academic success. They identified two key themes: life on campus and life beyond university. The study by Harris and Marlowe (2011) shows that many HE students have active roles in their communities, and for many of them their success at university means that their community has high expectations of them. Yet pressures and obligations of family and community can limit their success at university (Harries & Marlowe 2011).
Findings from Harris and Marlowe’s research (2011) illustrate that many African students have strong commitments to their communities during weekends, and it is difficult to find time to focus on their study. External pressures from families back home were also mentioned as another challenge to achieving academic success. For many of the students in the Harris and Marlowe study (2011), a lot of family members (if not all) were still living in Africa. Pressures on students listed in relation to this issue include missing the family, feeling guilty for living safely in Australia, and pressures to financially support their family back home. Limited public transport in Adelaide was also highlighted, combined with the fact that many of these low SES students live in crowded households and unaffordable accommodation, which is often at some distance from the university. For many of the students in the Harris and Marlowe study (2011), transportation to university could take up to two hours for each trip. Returning to the university library was almost impossible if the home situation was unbearable.

Other Australian studies have concentrated on first-year university students’ experiences and strategies early on to ensure students’ success through the journey of university (e.g. Earnest et al. 2010; Krause et al. 2005; Kift 2009; Silburn et al. 2010). Some of these studies have not differentiated students’ social groups; therefore the recommended strategies generally target first-year university students from multiple backgrounds (local, international and migrant). These recommendations stress the need for a more active role for students, and not only institutions and academic staff. For example, Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010) argue that attention should be paid within the formal and/or academic curriculum to students’ engagement as “primary learners” if they are to have a successful university experience. The authors point out that while an informal curriculum, community interaction and providing support for students’ external needs such as work and family are important, students need to take personal responsibility for finding their places and working towards their chosen goals.
As a second strategy, the study acknowledges that students commencing university study have special needs. First-year students experience a transition, both social and academic transition. University is a transition from being dependent to independent, and a journey towards becoming “self-directed learners”. This significant transition and the attendant multiple needs must be acknowledged to ensure students’ success (Kift, Nelson & Clarke 2010). The following table summarises the findings of some Australian studies.

### Table 2: Migrant and refugee students’ educational experiences in Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author and Year</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bowden and Doughney (2009)</td>
<td>Online Survey. The project surveyed secondary schools in the Western region of Melbourne from 2006-2007</td>
<td>A total of 2189 students from years 9 to 12 responded to the survey.</td>
<td>Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to aspire to attend university. The same can be said for students who do not speak English at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earnest et al. 2010</td>
<td>Mixed approach. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion.</td>
<td>10 in-depth interviews with students of Middle Eastern and African backgrounds, and a total of 14 participants for a focus group discussion.</td>
<td>Development of cross-cultural awareness and avenues for communications so students better understand the academic expectations and standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hatoss and Huijser (2010)</td>
<td>Qualitative study; semi-structured interviews.</td>
<td>14 Sudanese-background men and women were interviewed.</td>
<td>Whilst equitable educational pathways are integrated into educational policy discourses in Australia, there are significant gendered barriers to educational participation among</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on data from the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). The LSAY survey collects information on aspirations at age 15 years via questions on intentions to complete Year 12 and post-school study plans.

Interactions between educational aspirations and student background characteristics do not seem particularly important, suggesting that aspirations have a similar impact on educational outcomes, regardless of socioeconomic status.

Homel and Ryan (2014)

Quantitative method

Evaluating Australian universities response to NESB English language needs.

All NESB and ESB students should receive tuition in academic literacy and professional communication skills within the curriculum (Migrants, international and local students). Those NESB students deemed to be at risk due to weak English should receive tuition in proficiency. Universities should respond to language needs of both local and migrant students and should identify those at risk by language assessment of the newly-enrolled students.

Murray 2010

Sudanese refugees.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Findings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ramburth and Hartel 2010</td>
<td>Quantitative method</td>
<td>The authors draw on the literature on social inclusion, social exclusion, social identity and education, and link key aspects to the access, participation and learning success of students from LSES backgrounds in HE.</td>
<td>Provide a learning environment that fosters inclusivity, provides ongoing support for the learning of students in this cohort (LSES), trains its staff (academic, administrative and support) to understand the dimensions of socioeconomic disadvantage and the impact on learner identity and learning capabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watkins et al. 2012</td>
<td>Ethnographic observation and interviews</td>
<td>67 Karen refugee women in Sydney.</td>
<td>Education programs must find ways to understand and sensitively negotiate cultural customs and take into account the effect of culture, gender and context on student learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On an international scale, and among the few studies that focus on access by refugees to HE, Stevenson and Willott (2007) sought to investigate the aspirations of young refugees to access HE in the UK, and whether these aspirations (if any) were being supported. The study’s aim was to identify the barriers to accessing HE experienced by these young people, and to examine whether it was sufficient to homogenise their support needs within those provided for other minority ethnic groups. They found that despite recognition that young refugees and asylum seekers are an educationally-diverse sub-group with specific support...
needs (DfES\(^1\) 2004a) young refugee students do not receive adequate support to access HE. The findings of the study reveal that these young refugee people have more significant and special needs than other ethnic minority groups, and these needs are often not met by educational providers in the UK. The range of issues identified by the authors as additional support needs for refugee young people include the following: emotional support needs, funding and financial support, providing clear information and knowledge about the UK educational system, and clear advice and guidelines to accessing further or HE and to sustaining their study once there. Stevenson and Willott (2007) argued that the continuing failure to meet such support needs leads to the perpetuation of under-achievement and under-representation of refugees and asylum seekers in HE in the UK. According to the authors, this is despite the fact that these refugees have a high level of aspiration to pursue further education at tertiary level (Stevenson & Willott 2007). In a similar vein, other studies in Canada (and Australia) show that while motivations and aspirations to attain HE remain high among refugees, they face barriers, including inadequate information, advice and support (e.g. Hannah 1999; Irizarry & Marlowe 2010; Stermac et al. 2006; Taylor 2004).

Those international studies that focused on migrant students’ challenges in HE (after commencing university) report on subjective experiences of refugees and highlight the importance of biography and the past experiences of refugees in HE (e.g. Heisserer & Parette 2002; Van der Schee 2007). In the UK, for instance, Morrice (2013) claims that there is a link between the lack of engagement and the lack of a sense of self-respect and dignity among migrant HE students. The study claims that the societal stigmas attached to refugees affect their engagement with HE, and this has remained unacknowledged in policy and practice (Morrice 2013).

Similarly, Xiong and Lam (2013) explored barriers and success factors among Hmong

\(^1\) Department for Education and Skills
students from refugee backgrounds in American colleges. The study shows that these students look to family members to develop a sense of belonging and navigate the HE system, and when this support is not available, they feel lost and left on their own. The study therefore suggests that to break this sense of isolation among refugee students, communities are needed in HE institutions that provide “family-like qualities of relationship”. According to the findings, for best outcomes, such communities should be mixed groups of mentors from various ethnic backgrounds. The study also criticises counselling methods that simply tell students what to do. A replacement method should develop students’ skills in decision-making and problem-solving, meaning that students learn how to find information rather simply being given it (Xiong & Lam 2013).

The following table summarises some of the international studies findings:

Table 3: Migrant and refugee students’ educational experiences (international studies)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author and Year</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Key Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kanno and Varghese (2010)</td>
<td>Mixed approach – quantitative and qualitative</td>
<td>In-depth qualitative interviews with 33 ESL students and 7 institutional personnel at a major public university in the United States.</td>
<td>The authors highlighted the way that privileging the linguistic capital of native English speakers disadvantaged refugees who spoke English as a Second Language (ESL). Their research called for a more holistic policy approach which addressed not only linguistic factors, but also the structural and economic factors that inhibited the participation and success of refugees and ESL students in HE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Findings</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morrice 2013</td>
<td>Qualitative – individual interviews</td>
<td>A total of 40 participants Over a two-year period.</td>
<td>The importance of individual biography and past experiences in order to begin to understand the experience of refugees in HE should be at the forefront of support strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiong and Lam 2013</td>
<td>Qualitative study – semi-structured interviews.</td>
<td>5 graduate Hmong students were interviewed: 3 male and 2 females.</td>
<td>Firstly, a mixed group of peer mentors from both Hmong and other ethnic groups with diversity proficiencies could provide a safety net for Hmong students by receiving support in a relatively heterogeneous setting. Secondly, college orientation meetings for Hmong college students and their families could be held throughout the college years, addressing academic needs in each successive year and introducing campus resources that help them to meet those needs. Thirdly, more active promotion of academic advisory services and visibility of academic counsellors on campus could help Hmong students to see the relevance of academic counsellors as a part of their support system.</td>
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**Locating Support and Overcoming Barriers**

Previous literature divides the barriers in transition from VET educational programs to HE into two categories. The first is structural, including institutional policies and operations, teaching quality, financial difficulties and course content. The second relates to personal issues such as self-confidence, motivation, family issues and educational aspirations (Aird et al. 2010).

Many studies about support services that assist the transition from VET to HE suggest providing more programs that prepare students prior to their commencement at university and supporting them once they have commenced study. They focus on support services such as providing time management programs, critical-thinking skills and academic literacy (Spencer cited in Aird et al. 2010). While advocating this model of support services, other studies also recommend a focus on developing personal qualities such as motivation, educational aspirations, respect and understanding cultural differences or family commitments. Support to assist overcoming such barriers can include providing timely and useful information, or it can be more complex, requiring multi-service intervention (Coates & Ransom 2011). These individually-centred support services also include financial support for those who have financial barriers to attending university. This model can offer financial incentives such as scholarships, bursaries and allowances (Brown & North 2010).

In Australia, those studies that focus on academic success at tertiary level among refugee students (e.g. Harris & Marlowe 2011; Kift 2009; Kift et al. 2010; Krause et al. 2005) claim that in order to achieve the best educational results in contemporary Australian tertiary education, where we are witnessing ever-increasing global and diverse bodies of students, we need to move beyond a model focused on intensive orientation. This current model, according to these scholars, places pressure mainly on achieving a stronger and ongoing relational dynamic between staff and students and academic support centres. These studies
suggest, however, that to enhance a student’s academic success, there needs to be an awareness (an appreciation) of cultural differences and their associated issues among both administration and academic staff. To clarify, existing literature demonstrates that while universities often express concern regarding English language (e.g. Cassity & Gow 2005; Dunworth 2009; Murray 2010; Olliff & Couch 2005) being a major hurdle in migrant student success, they fail to understand and acknowledge the obstacles faced by these students beyond English language skills and challenges in their personal lives.

Previous studies, therefore, emphasise the need to understand social and cultural differences among migrant students in overcoming educational transition challenges and academic success at university. It has been found that there is a tendency among migrant students to minimise or conceal problems so as not to trouble or burden teaching staff. This has been shown to be a very common practice among migrant students because of a variety of significant cultural constructions in relation to help-seeking behaviour (Moore & Constantine 2005). For some students from diverse cultural backgrounds, not asking questions is showing respect to the educator. Such results, therefore, offer “overcoming forbearance” as a necessary support model in educational transition, and in particular for academic success once students enter the tertiary level (Moore & Constantine 2005). According to this view, because many students from diverse cultural backgrounds have a strong commitment to their communities and may be reluctant to seek academic help, educational providers should offer extra (not compulsory) tutorials when possible to overcome the issue of forbearance (Moore & Constantine 2005).

Other suggestions include locating support and managing student and staff workloads. This view unveils the fact that the ever-increasing number of diverse and global students places significant demands on academic staff. According to these studies, these extra demands have become an “invisible” burden added to the already hectic workloads of academic staff. These
extra workloads relate particularly to writing and language comprehension skills (Harris & Marlowe 2011). Thus, ongoing and extra support for students who struggle with English language is needed (Harris & Marlowe 2011). Yet the same study reveals that many of the support services already available to migrant (and international) students are not taken up – for example, the Student Learning Centre. Even though the low attendance was acknowledged by these support centres, it was not understood that this might be due to the reluctance to use these facilities. For example, the Harris and Marlowe study (2011) showed that whereas African students tend not to ask for help, Chinese students are very active in seeking help because of their pride. Harris and Marlowe (2011 p.193) continue on to say that “it needs to be recognised that the simple provision of services will not guarantee improvements in student outcomes or experiences. Services must recognise both needs and competing demands on staff and students in order to be relevant and useful”.

More recent studies, however, argue that most of the literature focuses on pre- and post-university support programs, and how disadvantaged students can commence university and succeed once there. Yet more attention needs to be given to “true transition” programs (Griffin 2014). As Wheelahan (2009) argues, VET pathways play a modest role in increasing the effectiveness of tertiary education in Australia, but they have a long way to go before they meet equity and social justice objectives. Following this line of thought, Griffin (2014) investigated the ways in which VET pathways can work more effectively in future. She argues that one of the key dilemmas faced in current Australian VET education is a lack of resources. The author highlights the continuous tension between providing tailored individual support – shown to result in the best outcomes for disadvantaged students – and broader system-wide support measures, which are more economical, and can be made available to a broader cross-section of students. Griffin (2014) suggests that instead of focusing on helping low SES students to enter HE from low-level VET qualifications, it would be more effective
to provide support for the transition from lower-level to higher-level VET programs. This in turn, according to Griffin (2014), would lead to employment outcomes or transition to HE. In addition, Griffin (2014) emphasises the absence of student voices in the current literature. The National VET Equity Advisory Council also emphasises the importance of listening to the voice of the learner if the VET system is to be further improved (NVEAC 2011).

Therefore, the study suggests that more attention should be paid to the student perspective on transitioning through tertiary education, as it is largely absent from the current literature. This attention should be given particularly to students who are disadvantaged or have special needs. This should be considered in the future planning of, and research into, transitions in the tertiary sector (Griffin 2014).

**Summary**

The findings from the literature review indicate some useful directions for research. The review has demonstrated the usefulness of the qualitative method that asks open-ended questions, and allows individuals to share their stories and everyday life experiences, both on and off campus. Further qualitative studies are therefore recommended, including more research on migrant students in Australia from diverse cultural backgrounds, and not only on those from specific ethnic backgrounds such as the Sudanese. This review is important, because it shows that migrants are not a homogenous group, and therefore their experiences are diverse and complex. This study corroborates previous research showing that more support services centred on individuals are required (e.g. Brown & North 2010; Coates & Ransom 2011). Yet, contrary to what is recommended in the literature, this study does not suggest that the necessary individual-centered services should focus on financial support or the provision of more language programs. Rather it advocates for more emotional/personal support and more effective methods for the delivery of information. There is a gap in the
literature regarding the understanding of individuals’ everyday educational experiences post migration, and their specific needs. This study provides rich information about migrant students from low SES backgrounds by giving this targeted group the opportunity to voice their feelings about the process of adjusting to a new life and a new education system. It recommends providing more support that aims to understand the feelings of these students, with specific attention on quieter students and their special needs. Such needs include understanding hybrid identity, isolation and the discrimination experiences of migrant students. Past studies have not adequately addressed such experiences. While previous research shows a low attendance of disadvantaged students at support centres (e.g., Griffin 2014; Harris & Marlowe 2011), they fail to understand the reasons behind this choice. Exploring such information is crucial to the future development of models for more effective support services.

Research Design and Data Collection

This project employed a mixed method approach to the research. Qualitative data was obtained from four face-to-face focus group discussions with 17 migrant students currently studying at SUT (see Appendix A), and from individual face-to-face and phone interviews with nine SUT staff (see Appendix B). Quantitative data was obtained from an online survey with migrant students studying at Swinburne University (see Appendix C). In addition, follow-up phone interviews were conducted with seven student participants from the 2014 study (see Appendix D).

Questions related to the online survey and follow-up interviews with the 2014 participants were primarily concerned with educational changes and courses undertaken in the past 12 months, as well as the effectiveness and usefulness of SUT’s support services. The online survey consisted of 11 questions in multiple choice and short answer
formats. The 2014 participants were asked 10 questions in short answer format. All questions were written in simple, plain English language so that they were easy to understand.

Individual interviews conducted with SUT staff included six staff from the Office of Student Advancement, such as the LAS Centre and the CDC, and three academic staff (lecturers and convenors) across SUT’s various disciplines and faculties. Questions for the staff working for the Office of Student Advancement focused on ‘services they provide’, ‘perceptions of the effectiveness of current support programs to meet migrant students’ needs’ and ‘additional support services needed’. Academic staff interviews explored similar questions, but also included questions relating to teachers’ knowledge about the backgrounds of migrant students, teachers’ perceptions of the most common challenges for migrant students, the abilities of these students and the methods academic teachers had used to support these students. Appropriate staff were identified and listed by the SUT Student Advancement Pro-Vice Chancellor, and the researcher contacted them thereafter. The inclusion criteria sought staff according to their key roles and experience in relation to supporting migrant students. Staff were recruited according to their willingness to participate.

The focus group interviews posed open-ended questions that covered three areas: ‘engagement questions’, ‘exploration questions’ and ‘focused questions’. Questions were not seen beforehand by participants, but they were given a few minutes before the interview to read the questions, which were expressed in simple, clear language to facilitate understanding. The questions were worded in such a way that they could not be answered with simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ responses; rather ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions were used. This allowed free-flowing discussion, which meant that participant comments stimulated and influenced others’ thinking and sharing. Some students even found themselves changing their
thoughts and opinions during the session. The length of their responses was left up to them, so that they could express themselves in a way they felt comfortable. All interviews were conducted in English, and all participants possessed moderate to good levels of understanding and communication in English.

Engagement questions were designed to enable participants to feel comfortable with the discussion topic and to share their general feelings about being a university student. The exploration questions asked participants about their future plans and the possible challenges that might prevent them from achieving their goals. The focused questions required students to describe their educational experiences at SUT, with a particular focus on what they thought of SUT’s support services. The focused questions were also designed to check whether anything had been missed in the discussion.

Email advertisements, flyers and invitations through workshops (Strategies to Success) were used to recruit participants. The research team from the Office of Student Advancement provided email contacts for potential participants according to the selection criteria. Ten participants were recruited through this method. The sample then snowballed, which means that subjects already recruited suggested other potential participants. The researcher collects data from the participants he/she has been able to locate, and then asks those individuals for referrals to other potential participants (Babbie 2013). This procedure is appropriate when members of special populations are difficult to locate; this applied to migrant students, as refusals occurred or students contacted were not eligible to participate in the study. This method helped to accumulate a list of seven more students who showed interest in participating in this study. To acknowledge the interviewees’ participation, participants were informed that their names would go into a draw for free movie tickets.
All the data in this study was collected between August to September 2015. Interviews with focus group participants and staff took place at SUT’s Hawthorn campus. The interview time was scheduled for around 45 minutes to one hour according to the participants’ preference as to date and time. However, there was no specific limit to the interview time, allowing participants the possibility to expand on particular questions if they wished to do so. All information provided by participants and staff was recorded with their permission using a digital recorder. For the online survey, a period of three weeks was given to participants to complete their response.

Participants

The 17 focus group participants approached were SUT migrant HE students. Appendix E provides a breakdown of the total numbers of migrant HE students at SUT. None of the focus group participants knew each other beforehand, but they felt comfortable with each other.

All four groups were of mixed gender. While the demographics of the interview participants were touched on briefly during the engagement questions, no particular demographic data was collected from participants except their student identification (ID). Only the researcher and the project manager have access to student IDs in case there was a need to collect demographic information. The 17 student participants in the focus group interviews were enrolled in a mix of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs. Some of these students had progressed through VET pathways, and had previously completed a number of VET courses at Certificate II, III and IV levels, but this was not the case for everyone. The majority of participants were studying full-time, and came from various ethnic backgrounds, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Burma and Sudan. One of the 17 participants was studying towards a Master’s degree, while the others were at undergraduate level, and were studying
towards bachelor degrees in disciplines such as community health and psychology. Most students had been living in Australia for between one and eight years, and two had migrated just over 10 years ago.

A summary of the characteristics of the participants involved in the focus group interview is provided in the following table.

Table 4: Summary of focus group discussion participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group Number &amp; Campus</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Hawthorn</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Hawthorn</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-Hawthorn</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- Hawthorn</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Forty migrant students were also approached to complete the online survey, and six completed it.

Seven participants originally interviewed in 2014 were re-contacted and interviewed over the phone. A summary of the characteristics of the 2014 participants is provided in the following table.

Table 5: Summary of 2014 participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majid</td>
<td>Karen – Burma</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liana</td>
<td>Haka-Chin – Burma</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farid</td>
<td>Zo Chin – Burma</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narges</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amir</td>
<td>Ivory Coast</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiva</td>
<td>Tibet (India)</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>Hazara – Afghanistan</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Names in the above table have been changed to protect identities.)
The following table provides summary of SUT staff.

Table 6: Summary of academic staff interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position/Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Faculty/Campus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career Advisor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hawthorn Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Advisor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hawthorn Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hawthorn Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hawthorn Campus-FSET</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Leader, VET</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hawthorn Campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hawthorn Campus-FHAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Lecturer and convenor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hawthorn Campus-FHAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer and convenor</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hawthorn Campus-FHAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Lecturer and convenor</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hawthorn Campus-FHAD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethics

An application has been submitted to the Swinburne Human Research Ethics Committee based on the decision to publish some of the findings in external publications. The application is pending approval. Initially this research was carried out solely for internal purposes to inform SUT’s practices. It was anticipated that no participant would become distressed by the content of the questions, as the plain language statements stated in some detail the nature of the questions to be asked. However, it was made clear to each participant that if they should feel distressed in any way, they could stop the interview, and would then be asked whether they wished to continue. Participants were advised that confidentiality would be carefully protected.
Data Analysis

After the interviews were completed and transcribed, thematic data analysis was undertaken. Thematic analysis searches across a data set to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke 2006). Unlike other methods such as narrative analysis and grounded theory, thematic analysis is not related to any pre-existing theoretical framework; thus it can be used across different theoretical frameworks (although not all), and can also be employed to do different things within them (Braun & Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis can both reflect reality and unpick or unravel the surface of reality (Braun & Clarke 2006). To make the theoretical position of the thematic analysis explicit, themes and patterns in this study were identified inductively (for example Frith & Gleeson 2004). In this approach, the themes were not necessarily related to the questions posed to the participants; neither were they driven by the researchers’ theoretical interest in the area or topic (Braun & Clarke 2006). Instead, this study’s data were coded without trying to fit them with the researcher’s analytic preconceptions. The analysis was therefore data driven.

Interviews were transcribed word for word using Express Scribe software, and hard copies were used for thematic analysis. All survey information and interview transcriptions were used only for the purposes of this project, and will be kept in both hard and soft copy formats for up to five years. It is important to point out that in order to maintain the accuracy of the data, grammatical errors in the direct quotes were not corrected, but were transcribed exactly as they were expressed. The emphasis in the analysis of the data was on “what is said” as opposed to “how” or “for what purpose” (Riessman 2008 pp. 53-54).
Findings

The presentation of findings begins with a qualitative data analysis followed by quantitative findings. Finally, the follow-up interview findings with 2014 participants are outlined. The qualitative findings are presented in two sections: firstly, those related to focus group discussions, and secondly those from individual staff interviews.

Focus Group Interviews

Five major themes were highlighted from the focus group interviews. These are detailed below.

*Students’ main motivation to participate in HE is to find employment*

Although the employment status of students was unknown and they were studying various degree programs, work-related requirements and finding a secure job in future were the reasons most commonly cited for undertaking HE study. Finding a secure career as well as past life experiences were the main reasons that impacted on students’ choice of degree programs. As the following comment indicates, financial difficulties were identified as a common problem among students that motivated them to pursue HE:

“Myself and my wife are both currently unemployed and we have two children all living with Centrelink income and struggle financially. So I hope after finishing my degree this year I can find a job”.

*Students lacked sufficient knowledge about university environment and academic expectations*

Those participants who undertook VET education prior to university study found the experience positive. The positive outcomes included increased self-confidence and self-esteem, and improvement in English language skills. Many students also expressed
satisfaction with teachers’ and tutors’ support, and with the opportunity to interact with teachers and other students in small classrooms. However, the majority of the students were unsure whether VET studies prepared them for HE. Students indicated struggles with university workload, difficulties in finding work-life balance, language barriers, and challenges with computer skills. Financial pressures were also cited as a constraint. Those students who had had university experience back in their home countries found their experience in Australia different and much more difficult. All students referred to a lack of knowledge about expectations of studying at university level and university life in general.

As one student commented:

“In TAFE level of expectations is not as high. Classes are small and more support is available. There is a lot more individual connection between students and the teacher whereas this opportunity is not available at uni level”.

The more extensive physical environment and more crowded classrooms in university were mentioned by many of the students as a concern, providing a challenge to making friends. Some students felt isolated, and found interacting with other students very difficult, particularly with Australians, which was due to their lack of confidence in their language abilities. Other worries were related to assessments at university level. Students had varying levels of education before commencing university. Some were the first in their families to study towards university degrees, which provided them with a great sense of pride. Having little or no familiarity in essay writing prior to starting university study was emphasised by all students:

“I never had experience in assignment writing in this format and therefore find it very challenging specially in referencing […] I had to search a lot for help and to find out how to find help. Teachers in university unlike TAFE seem to never have time to help”.

Other students also referred to a shortage of teachers, and said that the lack of availability of staff after hours was a big challenge that differed from their VET experience. Other students
expressed concern about the lack of clarity during their first-year university experience regarding degree planning and future relevant careers. Some received mix messages and lacked a sense of direction:

“The HQ never gives you a clear answer. They just pass you from one person to another and eventually you get no answer”

Some students also articulated that using computers and the Internet were new skills for them to learn, and presented a significant challenge in their first year of study:

“It would be helpful to have some tutorials and support for how to use Blackboard […] this is a challenge for us coming from developing countries. We have never studied in this way”

Cost and family pressures are biggest hurdles in completing and pursuing HE

Participants endured a large number of external pressures, responsibilities and commitments, affecting their studying and future plans. Financial stresses were cited as one of the biggest challenges to completing their studies. This was followed by family responsibilities and travel time to and from university, as they lived a distance away, and relied mainly on public transport. As for financial obstacles, the cost of books was mentioned by many of the participants:

“It would be good if there was second hand books in the book shop […] we can’t afford buying the books”

Cultural pressures, especially for married female students, were also reported as a big hurdle in completing their degrees or pursuing further education:

“I do not think I would have my husband’s full support on the journey but rather his opposition as stated a few months back when I suggested that I might go even further after finishing my UG degree”.

“My husband has a heavy say in all the family decisions […] the only reason I am allowed to study now is that he expects me to earn money upon my graduation (laughing)”.
Language support is the most important need

All participants shared concern about language abilities. They expressed that English language skills hindered them from participating in tutorial discussions or university activities, making friends and generally performing well academically. Students said that they tend to remain quiet in tutorials or lectures unless asked directly to participate. They tend not to participate in group activities due to their lack of confidence in English communication abilities. They reported that this made it difficult to make Australian friends.

“If there is a tutorial group activity I feel Australian students don’t want us to be in their group because they are high distinction students and we are just pass or credit students so we may impact on their grades […]. They always withdraw before submission of the group work.”

Students studying in technical or social sciences fields noted that understanding technical terms related to their major is the biggest language challenge for them:

“My biggest challenge is to understand the books and articles specially the technical terms used in those books”

“Sometimes lecturers speak too fast […] I can’t get it”

Students are aware of available support services but do not make use of them

Although most students were aware of available campus support services such as health, career advice, teaching and learning support, they used some services but not all. Some used the services a few times and stopped later because they felt staff did not allow adequate time to talk effectively and clarify their needs and queries in relation to their assignments. Most students expected LAS to read their whole assignment and to proof-read for them, but LAS aims rather to build resilience by correcting only one or two paragraphs so students can learn from this and do this themselves. Comments given by students included:

“My draft was never read […] the staff member just talk to me about the assignment but never looked at my work […] how am I supposed to ask my questions then?”
“Times are too short in appointment and you never get the chance to ask all your questions […] getting appointments take too long sometimes over two weeks […] they don’t have enough staff […] what we really need is someone to read our full draft and edit it for us so we can learn not just talk or look at introduction only”

“Sometimes in HQ you just waste your time in the queue and you have to leave without getting a chance to ask your question”

Students’ general comments on issues that SUT needs to take into consideration to improve their support services were:

- Employ staff who are willing to do the job and are patient (more friendly and understanding staff needed).
- Staff from migrant backgrounds might be helpful.
- Increasing the number of staff, particularly in HQ and language support services.
- Providing individual counselors – someone just to listen to you and be your mentor and or/role model.
- Providing programs that are specifically designed for migrant students who are new in the country.
- Providing interpreters/translators.
- More English conversation classes.
- Support for cultural learning. Ask migrant students who have lived here longer to volunteer to help the new ones become familiar with Australian culture.
- Facilitate more interaction between students from different backgrounds. Activities like cooking or sport competitions were suggested.

Staff Interviews

The Office of Student Advancement staff and academic staff both expressed that they do not ask about and/or collect particular information/data about the background of students, and thus do not know what proportion of their users/students are migrants. Being cautious not to differentiate students and to treat them all equally was the main reason given for not collecting biographical information from migrant students. However, staff reported that having access to such information is important so they can better understand and help migrant students. Seven major themes were highlighted through staff interviews.
Providing intensive English courses and improving language-related support services

The majority of staff commented that most challenges that migrant students experience are related to language barriers. Staff working in LAS and CDC in particular emphasised language issues as one of the biggest hurdles for migrant students. Despite not collecting information about students’ backgrounds, these two groups believed that a large proportion of their users are migrants. They raised concerns about whether some migrant students had a sufficient level of English to complete HE degrees. CDC staff commented: “We have met hundreds of cases that they hold certificate or diploma but their English level does not match with their level of qualification […] Students expect that their qualification is pathway to find work but their communication level is not good enough and this is a big problem.”

Similarly, academic staff highlighted language issues and difficulties students have in assignment writing and understanding theories and concepts, particularly in social sciences fields, where quite sophisticated language is used. According to some academic staff, students with lower grades tend to have foreign names. Increasing staff numbers in language support services and simplifying the language in teaching and particularly in guidelines for assessments were suggested as improvements to language support services.

“In exams and particularly in multiple choice questions removing needless complexity in language is important […] we need to make sure that wording is clear therefore I think routine analysis of exam questions is important”.

Providing support tailored to individual pathways

One of the key points highlighted by many of the staff as an influential factor in providing more effective support for migrant students was being able to identify students’ particular needs.

Team Leader: “Needs are different for those who have just arrived and those who have migrated with their parents many years ago. We need to consider different issues they are dealing with depending on their situation.”
Career advice staff: “We need to know who’ve been already professional and had professional work experience and professional work application compared to those who have no work experience and no qualification […]. We really need to individualise the pathways […] different departments give students different information and students can get lost among too many information from too many people not knowing what bridging course they need to take to be able to continue their profession. Pathways are not clear to students.”

Academic advisor: “Students’ progress needs to be much more coordinated […] students come here with five different pieces of papers and it is not clear what is the main thing that student is at risk for. We don’t want to tick boxes. You want “change” to happen […] we are sometimes over communicating or we are not communicating effectively. There is lack of coordination”.

Management of expectations

Transition issues and not knowing what to expect from HE was mentioned by many staff as one of the biggest challenges for migrant students. Some commented that some migrant students’ decisions to do HE are entirely driven by parental desires that encourage them towards certain occupations. Health-related fields and technical fields were mentioned as two of the most popular choices among migrant students. Having students understand their responsibilities was suggested as an important step towards the improvement of services:

“Students need to understand enrolling into a degree does not entitle you to get the degree. It is an opportunity that can lead to obtaining a degree with hard work”

Raising awareness that slowing down is okay was also suggested as leading to better management of expectations:

“Due to financial difficulties a lot of migrant students work full-time or part-time as well as studying […] some of these students don’t know that they can study part-time […] any student working above 10-15 hours per week must study part-time.”

Others commented that “students should not finish qualifications when they don’t have skills for suitable work”.

Having a compulsory pre-arrival university course was recommended by a few staff:

“Would be very helpful for us to have a compulsory pre-arrival university course for both local, international and migrant students. The program would be an online and face-to-face course. Student must complete the
unit, so it would be a form of assessment. We can make exemption for students who have done a degree before or they are here for exchange but for all other students we must make this unit compulsory”.

Moving from awareness to use of support services

Staff working for Student Advancement articulated that there is a gap between awareness of support services and usage of them. Increasing awareness was recommended through orientations, and more importantly, through regular engagement with students:

“We need to catch up with students regularly and find out how they are going throughout the whole semester […] the question to ask is not what services they use but rather what support services they don’t use and why”.

In a similar vein, the need to change strategies was identified by academic staff:

“We need to identify who is at risk early on like American universities. Not like here at week 8, 9 when it is too late […] changes need to be made are mandatory early assessments for all students, raising awareness that how students can access support services and most importantly raising awareness that asking for help is ok; helping them overcoming cultural beliefs that asking for help is a sign of weakness”.

Providing more counseling support

Staff underlined the need to provide more support in the form of personal psychological, cultural and career counseling, and stressed that often migrant students deal with a lot of social and cultural issues that affect their academic performance. Examples given included students’ lack of motivation and interest in their field of study, which is predominantly influenced by parental desires. According to staff, many ethnic minority students believe that engineering fields will lead to a secure career. Family pressures were also identified as being an influential factor in students’ academic performance:

“Family expectations have negative impact on students’ success at university. Expecting them to achieve high scores […]. Family’s choice of area of study leads to losing motivation to continue […] we need to be able to identity such issues. Some of the students not sure what interest they have. They need time and space to find out about themselves […] self-awareness and gaining some power is important so they can decide what they want to do”.

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Staff at CDC similarly said:

“What students talk about with us goes deeper than job-related issues and they are more counseling-related matters”

Other comments expressed by academic staff included the need for counseling support regarding financial management:

“Often migrant students come from environments that they didn’t have budget. Workshops and counseling services about how to avoid credit card debts and budgeting is important”.

**Better cultural training for staff and students**

Staff also stressed the need for improvement in cultural training for staff as well as students. One member of the academic staff emphasised that this need should have priority over others because he believes that all other problems staff and students are dealing with are rooted in cultural issues:

“We need more workshops about culture […] I suggest cultural mentorship […] migrant students deal with issues as simple as trusting police or using public transport. We can use students lived here for 10 years or more with similar cultural background as mentors.”

“Better cultural training for the staff is needed […]. There are power issues and gender issues that migrant students dealing with and staff are not aware of that […] we need to improve understanding of cultural dynamics […] understanding that migrant and international students are resource and they can teach us about their background. For example, migrant students can teach locals their language not always locals teach them English. Units like Intercultural Communication unit that is ended now would be helpful to be continued across different disciplines and faculties”.

In this regard, using non-Anglo Australian staff in HQ and in academic teams, having international film weeks on campus, and creating workshops about cultural adaptation run by non-Australian staff were also listed as possible strategies.
Focusing on growth and development of opportunities and experience

Focusing on growth and development of opportunities and experience rather than just gaining knowledge in particular fields was suggested by a few of the staff as new methods of support to be taken into account:

“University should not be about ticking the boxes of getting A grades […] it is about what students can do with that knowledge and skills […] It should be about engagement rather than destination”.

Generating and fostering opportunities to have conversations with professionals and academics in other fields was recommended to help students achieve self-discovery:

“University should be developing a person beyond a discipline […] We are so focused on discipline-specific knowledge that they need and totally ignoring personal and professional development that needs to go hand in hand in this learning process. OUT for example has some programs already focusing on such issues; radical approach to learning. They set group-based tasks that need a team to be completed that they have higher purpose than just the mark students get”.

Likewise, academic staff used examples of other universities that have more effective strategies in supporting migrant students:

“In other universities final-year students are set up as mentors for new students and their role get recognised by their universities and will go in their CV […] using this model in our university will be very effective”.

Career advice staff in this regard included the following:

“Relationship with organisations in the types of part-time/casual work is required so to help students build the confidence […] specially for male migrants that feel they don’t contribute to their families”.

Online Survey Findings

The follow-up online survey was sent to 40 students, eight of whom responded. It appeared that students’ educational aspirations have remained intact since the 2014 survey, and most of the students have given thought to pursuing further education, including HE. It was also
shown that the majority of the students were confident in achieving their goals despite finding the Australian education system difficult and challenging. It was reported, however, that students are still in pursuit of employment, and for those who found work in the last 12 months, it was mostly casual work in hospitality or disability care-related services.

Respondents also stated that they were still experiencing language barriers, and advised more support in this area. Yet none of the students mentioned the use of LAS when they were asked about the support service they had used at SUT in the last 12 months. CDC and the library were the only two services that students reported they used. It was suggested that career-related workshops and more support in finding employment is required. One student emphasised that this was just as important as English support programs.

2014 Follow-up Interview Findings

The seven individuals interviewed in 2014 were re-contacted to establish via their stories what barriers to study migrants and refugees face as they progress in their studies. In 2014, one out of the seven participants was doing a postgraduate degree and one was studying an undergraduate degree. The rest were undertaking VET courses at certificate II, III and IV levels. Six out of seven responded to the follow-up interview invitation. The two students (Eva and Narges) studying at HE level were continuing their courses at the time of the interview. Narges, however, who was completing an undergraduate degree with honours, noted that she is considering taking a year’s gap due to financial difficulties, and because she was finding the course particularly challenging – harder than she expected. Narges added: “I may need to re-consider my whole plan […]. I need a break to save some money and to re-think about my future plan.” The other challenges Narges and Eva reported experiencing studying at university level (in addition to economic burdens) were related to academic
writing. Assignment tasks – and essay writing in particular – appeared to be very different from what students learned at TAFE in Australia or in their previous educational experiences in their country of origin.

The other four interviewees also reported financial pressures as the biggest hurdle impacting their academic performance and future plans. This was despite the fact that a few of the participants stated that since the 2014 interview they have successfully completed their diploma, with two of them now undertaking another diploma course. All the six students expressed pathway planning and career advice counselling as suggestions for improvements to SUT migrant support services. As one of the participants commented:

“University role should not be only encouraging and focusing on education but also providing support on how they can secure employment is the very crucial and utmost important area to focus on. Because eventually after graduation every student’s concern is about employment, and providing those links to find employment can encourage students to pursue higher education.”

Migrant students are a social group (but not a homogenous group) from diverse backgrounds, and have varied needs and prospects. Therefore, universities may confront challenges to ensure their engagement in HE (Krause et al. 2005). Results from this study reveal that many of the students were unaware of the Australian (Western) university educational system and its academic expectations. Those who had some prior experience through doing Australian secondary and VET courses were less likely to state that they had difficulties understanding university expectations than those who had no prior experience in Australian education institutions (Joyce et al. 2010). Yet both groups in this study were under-prepared and unfamiliar with how university operates, and about the amount of work required. Being unacquainted with a new culture and with language barriers led many students to experience academic and/or culture shock and a significant amount of stress, which undoubtedly affected their performance. Despite the lack of a sense of belonging to university culture, the findings
of this study confirm that students were highly motivated to complete their degrees and to begin a professional career (Joyce et al. 2010).

According to these findings, and as proposed by the staff, a more tailored orientation into university is needed in order to better respond to migrant students’ challenges upon commencing university education. The findings in this regard from staff interviews also suggest that students from LSES and migrant backgrounds face various type of challenges in dealing with the demands of university education depending on how long they have already been in Australia, educational background, level of education of their parents, and other social, personal and/or psychological issues they are dealing with. Support strategies need to be varied for students who have completed high school in Australia as opposed to those who have no previous educational experience there. According to staff, being the first member of the family to undertake HE should also mean a difference in the method of support offered than to those whose parents are educated (Heisserer & Parette 2002; Van der Schee 2007).

Students who participated in this study expressed a level of stress and pressure in completing their studies. The main reasons given were financial struggles and family pressures. Having responsibility for their families exerted extra pressure on (especially male) students to take on full-time or part-time work as well as studying. Unemployed male participants were as anxious and concerned as students who had paid jobs, as they were not able to provide for their families. The level of stress was even higher for older unemployed male participants. This was linked to the values and norms of their cultures, where the primary role within the family for men was seen as their financial contribution.

The results of this study show that finding employment was the biggest motivator for undertaking university education, particularly for male students. Female applicants were
overwhelmed with different family pressures of being the primary carers for their children, and of convincing their husbands to undertake further education. This suggests that the challenges migrant students experience in university education are gendered, and this should be taken into consideration in universities’ future methods of support. According to this study, even factors such as age can influence students’ engagement and performances in HE (Ramburuth & Hartel 2010). Despite all these challenges it appears that both male and female students were willing to continue their education.

The outcomes of this research project also indicate that both students who have lived in Australia for between five to 10 years and those who have arrived less than two years ago struggle with English language (Cassity & Gow 2005; Dunworth 2009; Murray 2010; Olliff & Couch 2005). Students completing TAFE in Australia were also coping with language difficulties and unfamiliarity with academic writing and university assignment conventions. This echoes the findings of Joyce et al. (2010) that humanitarian English programs may not be sufficient for study at university level. However, the findings in this study also show that completing VET courses or living in an English-speaking country for a certain period of time may also not be adequate for preparing migrant students to gain the skills in English required of the university. This concern was raised by most of the staff, and intensive English courses and the instigation of a compulsory “university ready” certificate was advised. Findings suggest that bridging courses should be made available to migrant students prior to the beginning of their studies in order to familiarise them with university expectations, train them in language skills to the required level, and to develop their knowledge about the new culture. Cultural training should include better budget management, an understanding about credit card debts and most importantly, work-study balance.

The study findings reveal that a lack of clear communication and coordination between staff can cause confusion for students and lead to ineffective support strategies. More effective and
transparent communication between staff would help to better ascertain the types of challenges migrant students experience. According to the findings, this should go hand in hand with the development of a sense of ownership and responsibility among students (Kift, Nelson & Clarke 2010; Xiong & Lam 2013).

Summary of Recommendations

Table 4: Recommended strategies by students and staff for improvement of support services at SUT:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student suggestions</th>
<th>Staff suggestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase staff at LAS and provide more English support programs, particularly conversation classes.</td>
<td>Increase staff at LAS and provide intensive English courses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employ staff with migrant backgrounds, particularly in HQ; also employ those who have the interest and patience to do the job.</td>
<td>Increase awareness of available support services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide individual counsellors for individual needs.</td>
<td>Build relationships with organisations offering casual/part-time employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate interactions among groups of migrant students; activities suggested include cooking and sporting competitions.</td>
<td>Develop a sense of ownership and responsibility among migrant students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

Previous research had not adequately addressed the experiences of migrant students in HE. This study has attempted to fill this gap. The shared experiences and narratives of students, as well as the views of staff regarding the performance of migrant students outlined here are important in highlighting the diversity of migrant students and their previously-overlooked individual needs at university. The study is a reminder that migrant students should not be
considered a homogenous group, and offers some useful directions for better support strategies for migrant students in HE. It is acknowledged that the sample in this work is small, and is limited to one university in Melbourne; thus the findings cannot be generalised to all migrant students in HE, or even to related situations in other Australian cities. A research project with a larger sample carried out across different Australian universities is advised to achieve a more nuanced understanding of migrant student experiences. This study highlights the critical role of gender in migrant students’ experiences, and its impact on their academic performances. It should be pointed out that this study was conducted in a restricted amount of time. To further illuminate the role of gender in the experiences of migrant students at university, a more thorough investigation is recommended.
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Appendix A – Focus Group Questions

Themes: What are the barriers to study as migrants progress in their studies? What types of assistance was most useful? What are the gaps in services? What recommendations can be provided for improving Swinburne’s support services to migrant students?

Let us start with some questions related to what you like doing...

- How do you like being a student and studying at university?
- If you studied at TAFE prior to university, what do you believe is the biggest difference between TAFE and university study?
- Do you participate in any activities on campus/off campus? What are they?
- Do you have friends on campus?

Let us talk about future and a good life...

- What would you like to be doing in 10 years’ time?
- Do your plans for the future involve further education and training?
- Have you used employment and career advice services at university? If so, how did you find them?
- What possible challenges might arise in achieving your plans? (Cost, travel, family pressures, etc).
- Who or what are the most important influences on you in making plans for the future?

Let us talk about your experiences at Swinburne...

- You’ve told us what you like about being at university. What do you dislike about being at university?
- During your first year at university, what were your most important needs? (What support did you need the most that was not available for you).
- Have you used any of Swinburne’s support services? (Tell us which ones you have used).
- How were you informed about availability of support programs?
- What are reasons for not using Swinburne’s support services?
- In your view, what would encourage migrant students to use the available support?
- Looking back on your experiences at university, is there anything you wish had been different?
- Do you have any final comments to add? Did we miss any important questions?
Appendix B (1) – Swinburne Staff Questions (Non-academic)

1. What data/information is known and collected about the users of your services?
2. What proportion of your users are migrant students?
3. Can you describe the profile of the ‘typical’ migrant student consumer?
4. What support services are provided to migrant students?
5. What support services are they seeking from you?
6. What additional services would you consider providing to migrant students based on the existing knowledge about their needs?
7. Are you aware what other universities/other models provide in terms of migrant support for career planning and employment?
1. What proportion of your students are migrants?

2. What do you think are the factors that inform migrant students’ decisions to choose this path of study?

3. What are the particular challenges migrant students face when studying in higher education? Please describe.

4. With respect to learning and academic skills, what are their ‘typical’ needs?

5. How are their learning and assessment needs met? Can you provide examples of modifying teaching and assessment to meet their needs?

6. What approaches tend to work well with supporting migrant students to progress well in their studies?

7. What support is provided by your faculty? What additional support services do you suggest they use?

8. Do you have data/information about migrant students who are in the ‘show cause’ category/withdraw/ need to repeat the unit?

9. What are the highest priority needs of migrant students studying at Swinburne and what additional support services you think we need to consider providing?
Appendix C – Online Survey Questions

1. Where do you come from, and when did you arrive in Australia?

2. Over the last 12 months, what educational courses have you enrolled in/completed? (Please name)

3. How would you rate education-related difficulties in Australia in comparison with your home country?

4. Have you gained any further work experience (either voluntary or paid work) over the last 12 months? Please describe.

5. Have your educational aspirations (desires/dreams) changed over the last 12 months? (Yes/No. Please explain)

6. What is the highest qualification or position you wish to achieve? Please describe (e.g. university degree? Up to what level? Or name a profession)

7. How would you rate your confidence in achieving your goals/dreams?

8. Please describe any challenges or difficulties you've experienced while studying at Swinburne? (e.g. English language, study skills, team work, submitting assessments, other)

9. Have you used any of the support services available at Swinburne? (Yes/ No). Please name what support services you have used during last year.

10. How would you rate the effectiveness/usefulness of Swinburne’s support services?

11. Please suggest any areas for improvement that Swinburne could make to support new migrants.
Appendix D – Follow-up Questions with 2014 Participants

1. Since the 2014-15 interviews, how are you going with respect to your studies? Have you completed your studies? Has your (education) plan or direction changed in any way?

2. If you stayed with your plan, how close are you at this stage reaching your goal? What educational progress have you made since last year?

3. During last year at university/TAFE, what learning opportunities or support services did you take advantage of? What did you learn? Was it useful or helpful for you? In what way/s? Why?

4. If you transitioned from TAFE to Higher Education, tell us about your experience. Any difficulties? Did you need/support? What types of support have you sought out?

5. How were you informed about the availability of those support services?

6. Looking back on your experiences at Swinburne throughout last year, can you recall a significant experience that created an impact, influenced you/your studies in any way?

7. Can you recall other experiences at Swinburne that strongly impacted you?

8. What specific difficulties did you experience studying last year (especially at Swinburne if you study here)?

9. Have you thought about employment following graduation and career planning? If so, have you sought advice on this? From where?

10. Do you have any suggestions for improvement of support services for migrants?
Appendix E – Swinburne University Migrant Data

(Source: Student Advancement Office)

Totals

Total: 1337

Male: 804 (60.1%)
Female: 533 (39.9%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender by faculty</th>
<th>All faculties</th>
<th>FHAD</th>
<th>FSET</th>
<th>FBE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>533 (39.9%)</td>
<td>223  (60.4%)</td>
<td>96  (18.8%)</td>
<td>214 (46.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>804 (60.1%)</td>
<td>146  (39.6%)</td>
<td>416 (81.3%)</td>
<td>242 (53.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1337</td>
<td>369</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>456</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are significantly more males in FBE and FSET and significantly more females in FHAD (p<.001).

Average age of migrants by across gender and faculty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender by faculty</th>
<th>All faculties</th>
<th>FHAD</th>
<th>FSET</th>
<th>FBE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>25.95 (.304)</td>
<td>25.81 (.437)</td>
<td>25.89 (.666)</td>
<td>26.17 (.446)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>25.45 (.252)</td>
<td>26.02 (.540)</td>
<td>24.77 (.320)</td>
<td>25.55 (.420)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25.70 (.198)</td>
<td>25.91 (.348)</td>
<td>25.33 (.370)</td>
<td>25.86 (.306)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


There are no significant age differences across faculty or across gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Advisor Engagement Coordinator</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawthorn Campus- FSET</td>
<td>Hawthorn Campus- FHAD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### County of birth (highest 31 countries)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>9.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>8.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>7.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>5.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>4.93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>4.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia and Herzegovina</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian Federation</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mauritius</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.74%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 1. Percent of total migrant group.

Order of countries similar across faculties.