

Enabling Access to Higher Education for People Seeking Asylum: A Collective Approach

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Abstract: In response to Australian policies that impose punitive barriers to resettlement on many people seeking asylum, a range of civil society groups have initiated acts of welcome and inclusion, including some within universities. Denied permanent protection even when found to be a refugee, people who arrived from 13 August 2012 are forced to remain in limbo and many are effectively excluded from accessing higher education. A collective of people seeking asylum, academics, students and community members in Perth, Western Australia, has responded by working together on higher education projects that seek to open up the university to people seeking asylum. In this article, members of the collective critically reflect on these projects and their involvement. Its key aim is to demonstrate the importance of lived experience and collaboration in developing and enabling higher education possibilities for refugees and asylum seekers.

Keywords: refugees; asylum seekers; higher education

Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated in 2017 that only one per cent of refugees have access to tertiary education, compared with 36 per cent of the global population (UNHCR, 2017). Without access to higher education, refugeesⁱ and people seeking asylumⁱⁱ are denied opportunities to further their livelihoods and support their families, and to contribute to their communities. Although some Global North governments have responded to the arrival of people seeking asylum by supporting the efforts of higher education institutions to allow access to university studies for at least some of their new arrivals (Détourbe and Goastellec, 2018; European University Association, 2018), Australia currently offers no such federal government support. In response to the punitive barriers to resettlement imposed by the Australian Government on many people seeking asylum, civil society groups have been pivotal in initiating acts of welcome and inclusion, including some within universities.

This article explores the experience of the authors who self-organised as a collective that comprised academics, students, people seeking asylum and other community members to engage in a series of activities focused on enabling access to higher education for people seeking asylum in Australia. The development of the collective emerged from the research and advocacy that authors Caroline and Lisa, situated in the Centre for Human Rights Education, Curtin University, had been involved with in relation to the experiences of people seeking asylum living in the community (Fleay and Hartley 2015; Hartley and Fleay 2017). For those who had arrived to Australia by boat since 13 August 2012, this included facing considerable barriers to accessing higher education.

The purpose of this article is to reflect critically on the collective's projects and to do so collaboratively by drawing on the reflections of its members. It also aims to explore these efforts as an example of a social action that may be effective at the university level, even within an environment of restrictive government policies.

The collective members involved in writing this article include four people seeking asylum (two currently studying at the university), four university academics, and a community member affiliated with the university. This is the first article we have written together, and it focuses on our experiences of working collaboratively in this project from 2015 to the present. Caroline, Lisa, Baden, Christopher, Rosemary and Nasrullah first wrote their own

reflections about being involved in the collective and the activities we worked on together. Caroline and Lisa recorded conversations they had with Mumtaz, Mehdi and Abbas about their reflections. After these conversations were transcribed, Caroline edited each of the reflections, and Mumtaz, Mehdi and Abbas then read her edited version to ensure their reflection retained its intended meaning. Caroline then developed the first draft of the article drawing on some of the themes evident in the reflective pieces. This was then circulated to all for further discussion and editing.

This collectively authored article features two forms through which the authors' views are communicated. Firstly, reflecting that this article is a collaborative writing effort, some of the discussions to follow use 'our' and 'we' to communicate elements that reflect shared experiences. This was facilitated through Caroline. Secondly, as the purpose of the article is for all of the collaborators to reflect critically on their experiences of the project, individual co-authors are also directly cited and quoted. Through doing so, we aim to respect the diverse, complex and rich experiences of all of the co-authors. This is consistent with one of the key aims in this approach to enabling asylum seeker scholarship – to ensure that the lived experience of all of the participants is respected and shared. To paraphrase Paulo Freire (1985: 3), we consider *enabling research* to be most of all about thinking and reflecting about lived experience. These reflections about experience thus provide an important means of generating qualitative evidence and understanding (Offord, 2016: 62).

We first provide an overview of the Australian policy landscape in relation to people seeking asylum, followed by an outline of the development of the collaborative activities in which we all engaged. Then we explore some of the significant outcomes of these activities, including our experiences of shared learning and agency, as well as the impacts of the activities on access to higher education for people seeking asylum.

Policy background

There are currently approximately 30,000 people seeking asylum living in Australia who arrived by boat and have lived in limbo for more than six years. These are people who came before 13 August 2012 but their protection visa application had not been finalised by 18 September 2013 (when the then newly elected Coalition Government was sworn into office), or arrived from 13 August 2012 and were not sent to the offshore detention sites on Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. People seeking asylum in Australia have

either been residing in community detention or on a bridging visa until their claims for protection are assessed. If they are found to be refugees by the Department of Home Affairs, they are only eligible for a temporary protection visa – either a three-year Temporary Protection Visa or a five-year Safe Haven Enterprise Visa.ⁱⁱⁱ

As they are not permanent residents of Australia, people seeking asylum granted temporary protection visas do not have access to the same services and entitlements as permanent protection visas holders, such as refugees who were chosen offshore for resettlement through the humanitarian programme. One of the impactful differences in entitlements relates to higher education. People seeking asylum on temporary visas are not eligible for federal government programmes designed to assist students with financing higher education, including the Higher Education Loans Program, Commonwealth Supported Places and concession rates. This means people seeking asylum on bridging or temporary protection visas are required to pay expensive international student fees to attend vocational education and training and university. This effectively prevents most from furthering their education. In addition, people on a temporary protection visa are not eligible for federal government income support if they study a course for longer than 12 months, whereas bridging visa holders may lose their income support if the Department of Home Affairs deems them to be ‘job ready’, regardless of whether they are studying (Hartley et al., 2018).

Similar restrictions to accessing higher education are evident in England. People seeking asylum, and those already recognised as refugees, must reside in England for three years before they can access university studies without paying international student fees and be eligible for student support. But even after being recognised as a refugee, people who arrived as an asylum seeker are only granted refugee status for five years before potentially being granted indefinite leave to remain status. This can mean that universities are less likely to accept their application if they have less than four years remaining on their visa (Détourbe and Goastellec, 2018: 8). The onus largely remains on universities to adopt initiatives to enable access to higher education for people seeking asylum, just as it is in Australia.

This is in contrast to Germany where there are fewer barriers for people seeking asylum to access higher education than in most other European countries (Détourbe and Goastellec, 2018: 11). Although they may face a lack of access to funded preparatory language courses and certain courses due to restricted admission quotas, most people seeking asylum in Germany have

access to free tuition places in higher education and a basic living allowance. This reflects that German universities ‘have received considerable support from Federal and Länder governments in order to develop new structures and measures’ (Steinhardt and Eckhardt, 2017: 28) to assist people seeking asylum.

However, further support that German universities have offered people seeking asylum over the past few years is due more to ‘voluntary initiatives by individuals or a local group’ (Jungblut et al., 2018: 9) than government action, suggesting the important contributions that actors are making in bringing about support through a bottom-up approach. Therefore, although this article reflects on actions in a very different policy landscape to Germany, it offers some insights into how access to higher education can be enabled for people seeking asylum through such a bottom-up rather than top-down approach.

Given the lack of federal government support in Australia, access to higher education for people seeking asylum has relied on the actions of universities. In the past three years, some universities, community groups, and some of the state and territory governments have sought to address some of these issues to enable access to higher education for people seeking asylum. Measures adopted by universities include the provision of fee-waiver scholarships, bursaries, part-time jobs attached to the scholarship, travel cards and computers (Hartley et al., 2018). However, the adoption of these measures can also depend on the actions of individuals and groups within the university. To date, there has been no published research that critically reflects on activities undertaken by people within an institution to enable such access to higher education.

Overview of project activities

Given the policy landscape outlined above that effectively denies people seeking asylum access to higher education, Caroline, Lisa and Baden wanted to collaborate with people in this situation to ‘open up’ the university and enable their access to studies. After persuading the university to offer a small number of full fee-waiving scholarships to people seeking asylum starting in 2015, Lisa and Caroline organised a meeting to explain the application processes to people seeking asylum in Perth.

For Abbas, the meeting and announcement of the scholarship conveyed to him that there was ‘a place in Australia that wants to give refugees and asylum seekers a chance to get involved in the community and improve their

knowledge and find a better future in the Australian community.’ The meeting was useful in explaining the scholarship application process, as was the ongoing facilitation that the Centre provided for the application process. But Abbas was also aware of the great challenges there would be to accessing one of these scholarships:

‘I was sure it would be competitive, I needed to pass the [English language] test, I needed to provide documents that say I am able to study, and I needed to show them I can cope with the course that I selected.’

It became clear to everyone at that first meeting that passing the English language requirements to be accepted into a course was going to be particularly difficult for most scholarship applicants. This was especially so given that people seeking asylum had been denied access to funded English classes during the years they were forced to live on a bridging visa. Thus it became evident that access to specialised English language classes was needed.

Informal IELTS Preparation Classes

Caroline and Lisa first investigated if the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) preparation classes offered by local providers could be made available to people seeking asylum at affordable rates. As Caroline recalls:

‘While it was frustrating to not find a provider willing to make their course accessible to people seeking asylum, it was heartening to find people within and outside the university who were committed to trying to find out if this access might be possible, and who provided very useful advice. It felt like we had started to develop a community of people keen to help enable access to university studies for people seeking asylum. When ultimately it was not possible to secure affordable access to existing courses, we were able to work fairly quickly with a number of community members and students with experience in this area to develop such a course.’

The course began in the latter half of 2015 in a classroom at the university, where one evening per week was spent on reading and writing skills and another evening focused on speaking skills. As Nasrullah outlines:

‘The goal was to prepare asylum seekers for the International English Language Testing System. One class was run by a volunteer teacher who had years of experience in English language teaching and included the modules of reading, writing and listening. In each module, typical exam questions were presented and the tips and tricks relating to those questions

were explained and exercises were practised. The speaking module was run by academics and student volunteers where conversational groups were formed to improve the speaking skills required for the test.’

Caroline, Lisa, Baden and Christopher were among the volunteers involved in the speaking classes and engaged in regular conversations with Mumtaz, Abbas and Nasrullah and others throughout the course term. Eight people completed the classes over the following three months.

At the end of the classes, although some of the participants applied for a scholarship to begin studies in 2016, only a small number were successful in securing some of the few places. Caroline, Lisa and Baden were keen to offer some other form of connection or involvement with the university in 2016 for those who would appreciate it. They offered to keep meeting with anyone who had attended those classes with the aim of working together to develop activities that would further enable access to higher education for people seeking asylum.

Enabling Asylum Seeker Scholarship Research Project

To provide a space within which these collaborative activities could emerge, Caroline, Lisa and Baden started a research project with the initial aim of developing new ways to engage with, understand, teach about and respond to the lived experience of people seeking asylum in Australia. They realised this would demand careful consideration of how, as activist-focused academics, they ethically participated in the project given their position of privilege within the university. They also understood they had to work within a university system that prioritised teaching and research activities considered to be financially viable. These pressures effectively serve to limit the extent that academics can engage in activism. However, with an understanding of the politics of the university, and its stated values of social inclusion, they began the project with the aim of developing knowledge in a collaborative way through activities that would be focused on further ‘opening up’ the university to people seeking asylum. In this way the project seeks to claim ‘a democratic public space’ within the university that is

‘willing to confront the myriad global problems that produce needless human suffering, obscene forms of inequality, ongoing exploitation of marginalised groups, rapidly expanding masses of disposable human beings, increasing forms of social exclusion, and new forms of authoritarianism’ (Giroux, 2007: 203).

Guided by an understanding of teaching and learning that places central importance on encounters, Caroline, Lisa and Baden wanted to focus on

developing spaces for engaging with each other in a collaborative and respectful way. This reflected their deep respect for those who have sought asylum and their understanding of the need to listen and build mutually safe spaces of learning. It is also consistent with an understanding of critical pedagogy that scrutinises ‘structures of power, knowledge, and practice’ (Denzin, 2009: 381). It recognises that people seeking asylum are bound up in unequal and oppressive systems that serve to exclude them from many aspects of social and cultural life in Australia. To enable their voice and participation within one of these institutions – the university – the project aim was to be as open, respectful and transparent as possible, making the learning about thinking together, working out together, and finding solutions together. Consequently, Caroline, Lisa and Baden decided to adopt a participatory action research approach, which meant that the collective was formed with no defined projects in mind but with a strong sense of the need for there to be practical outcomes of relevance and use to people seeking asylum (Ward, 2007).

After securing a small university grant, the research project began with Caroline and Lisa asking each of the eight people involved which priority areas should guide the activities the collective would develop. All prioritised the need to address the lack of access to English language classes in order to be able to meet university entrance requirements, and to gain employment. For Nasrullah, this reflects the importance of learning English given it is ‘a fundamental tool of communication not only in day-to-day life but also in higher education’. Most also highlighted that the collective’s activities should aim to benefit anyone seeking asylum, not just themselves. The first meeting of the collective discussed a summary of these conversations and then a range of activities were explored that might assist in increasing access to English language classes for people seeking asylum, as well as access to higher education for those who wished to pursue this.

Presentation Seminars on Lived Experience

Some of the activities that emerged from the research project involved developing presentation seminars about the importance of access to higher education and the lived experience of seeking asylum. The first seminar was delivered to Curtin University academic and administrative staff, key influencers and students, the second to a core group of university staff in student support roles, and a further two seminars were held at other universities in Perth. The aim of the presentations was to raise awareness within the university and beyond of the importance of access to higher

education, and to support the advocacy efforts of the collective in ensuring that full fee-waiving scholarships continued to be offered by Curtin University as well as the provision of further support. In recognition of the work involved, all presenters were paid the hourly university lecturing rate when delivering their presentations.

Outcomes

Some of the most significant outcomes that emerged from these activities for all of us included the shared learning that resulted from our participation. Another outcome was the sense of agency experienced by many of us through our involvement. In addition, the activities resulted in access to higher education for some of the research project participants and at least several other people seeking asylum.

Shared learning

We all experienced learning through our encounters during the activities, and we felt we also enabled the learning of others.

Informal IELTS Preparation Classes

There were learning outcomes that emerged from the IELTS preparation classes that were connected to the educational aims of the course, as well as those based on our shared encounters in the classes. At least some of the people seeking asylum who participated in the informal IELTS preparation classes reported that their English language skills had improved. Abbas considered the course ‘was very effective because at the end of the course, I could rank my skills as higher.’

Nasrullah had a similar experience. He found the speaking classes in particular to be

‘a unique experience – being able to practise speaking with someone who is a native speaker helped me a lot. The classes ran for almost three months which helped us not only become familiar with the IELTS test but also improved our scoring in the test and finally fulfilled the English entry requirement to university.’

Lisa and Caroline also learned from the experience about how to structure the conversational sessions to be more effective. They had not run such sessions before and started them based on advice from the community member with experience in teaching English who was teaching the reading, writing and listening classes. In an early session, Mumtaz advised during a conversation with Lisa that the format of the one-to-one conversations be

changed in order to better prepare people for an IELTS exam, which was duly done.

But we also all experienced learning that emerged from our encounters with each other. As Lisa describes it:

‘the conversational evenings component of the IELTS preparation classes were a microcosm of interaction and cultural and social exchange. Each week groups comprising people from a range of countries, women, men, young people and older people, met to engage in conversations that aimed to improve the speaking skills of those whose first language was not English.’

Mumtaz found the classes to be an opportunity to engage with those in Australia who were not from his community. He found the classes provided a space for

‘how I can improve myself in terms of being with other people who live in Australia, like those at the Centre for Human Rights Education, because 90 per cent of the time we are with our community mates. It is good to be with others, we can learn a lot of things.’

Christopher found the experience to be

‘a rather unique window and perspective into different life worlds. It was really my first experiences of working directly and intimately with refugees and asylum seekers and I found it a moving and enriching experience. This experience has made what often appears to be an abstract notion of the asylum seeker to be a real understanding of their authentic lived experience.’

Through these conversations, we negotiated and learned about different understandings of social and cultural expectations, with each of us sharing elements of our own life stories in the sessions. Mumtaz became aware that

‘there are people who are very sympathetic towards refugees. Sometimes, if you are feeling bad – sometimes things are not very light – there are some people who are really caring and compassionate. I’m also learning how good it is that there are people from different cultural backgrounds and countries who are just living very normal and peaceful lives – they don’t have many troubles which is not the case with some other countries.’

During these encounters, however, Christopher was aware of the need to ‘be careful in communications style and protocols including my not assuming any prior knowledge or indeed understanding of their cultural positioning or prior lives’. As Baden describes, there were challenges in doing so:

‘Sometimes, intimate details were exchanged as part of the learning together, and it was hard to discern how some of these details were received. The fact that some of the refugees and asylum seekers followed Islam made conversations interesting and even risky at times. When one person found out I was in a same sex relationship, they asked many invasive questions, which normally in other contexts, you would not consider appropriate. But cultural encounters come with certain risks and also a sense of vulnerability (for all involved) and have to be approached with clarity and sensitivity. I would often debrief after classes with my partner or with Caroline or Lisa to gauge whether I was approaching things in the right way. I was unsure, for example, whether I had said too much on one occasion. One never quite knows.’

Despite these challenges, we consider that the development of mutual respect and trust during the English conversation classes paved the way to the collaborative activities that followed. As Christopher expresses it:

‘I felt respectful listening, plenty of humour and interactive dialogue were the key attributes of the learning and talking together at all the sessions. And I think these characteristics brought a strong result to the enterprise, whether it was a one-to-one chat or in a small group setting. Further, it helped bring about a relationship that helped build trust and further opened up the ability to generate ideas and enliven dialogue.’

Project Meetings

Participating in the project meetings enabled Mumtaz, Abbas, Mehdi and Nasrullah to learn about study pathway opportunities, as well as work collectively to further enable access to higher education for people seeking asylum.

Mehdi wanted to be involved in the meetings given they were ‘an opportunity to work towards my education future as well as that of others.’ Growing up in Iran, where his family had to move a number of times, he learned that working together was how to build a business that could sustain the family: ‘This whole process gave me the perspective that solidarity solves the problem.’

For Mumtaz, the decision to participate in the meetings that followed the English classes reflected his view that being

‘part of a network is a privilege, particularly a network which is very productive in making a lot of connections with others. It was also to find out about opportunities I may not know exist. And the pizzas, yeah, it all started with the pizzas, I’m a food lover really you know!’

He also experienced his involvement in the meetings as a

‘sort of commitment to be part of a group. You think that you’re part of a group so it means you’re committed and you make it happen. Second, the good thing was that it was a very friendly environment where we could express our difficulties or whatever we experienced, and through those meetings we did.’

Similarly, Abbas found the meetings to be

‘a good place to meet more people who come from an academic background, and to meet more people from my country who are students or even lecturers at Curtin University and I can talk to them and share my difficulties, and also maybe change their mind with my stories about what happened to me if they are still supporting the government.’

However, there were challenges to participating in the meetings. As Mumtaz outlines, sometimes meeting together in person can be more confronting than communicating your thoughts by email.

‘If somebody is not very good at English, not very fluent, if he or she is part of a group and might have something to say, they may not be very comfortable or able to express themselves at the time. They could have done that through an email. A lot of times to us, where English is our second language, we cannot express ourselves.’

For Abbas, whether someone attended a meeting or not could also depend on how they were feeling at that time.

‘It’s all about our situation. I definitely liked to participate in these meetings when I have peace of mind or am in a good mood, but I missed some of them.’

When he was not working outside of Perth, Mehdi went to great lengths to get to the meetings.

‘Sometimes I came to the meetings by walking from Perth to Curtin. I didn’t even have one and a half dollars to pay for a taxi. It was not your fault, I was disorganised and it was the end of the pay weeks and I didn’t have a job. This was my motivation, I don’t say “oh poor me” that I was walking. I had the motivation to work through these things to get here and be part of the meeting.’

These reflections, shared in conversations with Caroline and Lisa for this article, have consequently contributed to what they and Baden have all learned about the meetings process. As Lisa notes:

‘Although we tried to ensure that the meetings were as accessible as possible by providing food, and making meetings at night, Mehdi mentioning he had walked from Perth to Curtin because he had no money raised two thoughts for me. First was utmost admiration for his dedication to the collective. But the second was the need to be continually reflexive about the barriers to participation. In this situation, we hadn’t considered the expense of travel and we feel terrible that it was overlooked.’

But the meetings were also spaces in which Mumtaz, Abbas, Nasrullah and Mehdi gained further knowledge about the challenges in accessing higher education for people seeking asylum, and how these may be navigated. As Mehdi recalls:

‘I was completely blind about the process and trying to find out what the next step is that I am supposed to do. For example, when I attended this group for the first time, we had a conversation about the possibility to get into the enabling course. So there are ways. But I’m very slow at that because I am not very confident I would participate well. One of the problems is I can’t memorise things.’

Presentation Seminars

Learning also resulted from the presentations, both for members of the collective as well as the audience members at these events. The development of the first presentations seminar in 2016 was a collaborative effort between all authors plus another member of the collective, and a number of the Centre’s students who assisted with the design of the PowerPoint slides. Four members of the collective who were seeking asylum presented, Caroline provided a short presentation providing context to the issue, and Baden chaired the event.

Nasrullah decided to be one of the presenters in this first seminar.

‘I could be a voice for others who came from difficult circumstances to pursue the goal of their life and fight the uncertainty that was imposed on them. I focused on the topic of the critical role that education plays in the settlement of asylum seekers through drawing on the story of my life because I have experienced the importance of education in my life.’

The learning process during the preparation for the presentations was enhanced through the development of a collaborative and supportive environment. Another Centre academic member of the collective, Rosemary, helped each of the key presenters prepare for the first event held at the university. She worked with each presenter to develop ideas for the focus of their presentation stories, and assisted with the design of their presentation.

The stories chosen by the presenters explored topics in relation to the importance of education for people seeking asylum, the experiences of seeking asylum, and experiences of accessing education. A number of practice sessions were then held during which all the presenters received feedback from other members of the collective. As Abbas describes it:

‘When Rosemary was helping me for the presentation, I felt that she wanted to get involved in part of my story. She put in more effort than I imagined. It wasn’t only help, it was support. I remember Rosemary when I was presenting – I was a little nervous and Rosemary was more nervous than me. So I felt that she was presenting too, not only me.’

Rosemary found the process to be

‘a moving and enriching experience as each man shared more of his personal story with me during our meetings and I gained more insights into life in Afghanistan under Taliban rule and the constraints of life in Iran under a dictatorship. While I am studying refugee life stories as part of my doctoral studies, these stories touched me deeply. I listened to stories of family and friends left behind or killed, the harsh realities of daily life in home countries, and the need to flee to another country to be safe – only to be forced to live under the oppressive confines of Australia’s asylum seeker system. These were young men who wanted only to study and make a contribution to their communities.’

For Mumtaz the presentations ‘meant that the audience can get to know the experiences or the difficulties from somebody like myself instead of letting them hear it through the news or research or whatever.’ Abbas considers that:

‘sharing information with other people was the main purpose because when you have difficulties back home and you escape to another country and seek refuge, you want to say why you are escaping from your country. You want to share what happened to you, to help other people be aware of the situation.’

Some 50 people, primarily from the university, attended the first event. They included staff from the Scholarships office and those with admissions responsibilities, as well as people from refugee support agencies. Nasrullah felt the presentations had a ‘positive impact on the audience to motivate them in assisting asylum seekers to access education’. Many in the audience appeared moved by the presentations. Rosemary considers that:

‘these presentations became powerful tools for advocacy as each man brought his own values and identity to life as he spoke. Each person highlighted in different ways how education was the key to thriving in a new country.’

As one senior staff member commented to her after the presentations:

‘I had no idea about the background of these people, the education they had undertaken back in their home country and the pain and trauma each had suffered. Of course they should be able to access higher education. They have studied and worked so hard already.’

Several Curtin staff in the audience also expressed to Caroline that they were willing to help in any way they could to ensure that scholarships continued to be provided by Curtin for people seeking asylum. Caroline notes:

‘I found the responses of those who worked at Curtin to be incredibly heartening and their support reassuring. What they had learned from the presentations was pivotal in their willingness to act and it seemed that it would now be possible to widen an advocacy network within the university.’

Baden found the presentation evening

‘to be revolutionary. Listening to their stories reminded me how crucial it is to provide places of safety and respect for sharing traumatic and life-changing experiences. They taught us so much. They enabled the university community to understand their situation more.’

In 2017, Mehdi presented at a meeting of Curtin support staff with Caroline and Lisa to further raise awareness about the barriers facing people seeking asylum in accessing higher education. It was also to find further allies within the university student support areas to help advocate for greater support for people seeking asylum. While Caroline and Lisa provided an overview of the policy context and the barriers that people seeking asylum face in accessing higher education, Mehdi spoke about his experiences of seeking asylum and the impacts of Australia’s punitive policies on him. As Caroline recalls:

‘Mehdi’s presentation had a powerful impact on one of the senior staff members at the meeting and she and others in her department became important advocates within the university to ensure several scholarships for people seeking asylum were offered the following few years. They also later facilitated the access of scholarship recipients to financial assistance.’

Mehdi considers that the presentation facilitated his own learning of the barriers and the process of accessing university, as well as those who attended the meeting.

‘The most important thing for that meeting was for them to find out about the barriers. I was trying. Language is one of the problems, it wasn’t a very organised conversation. But it was definitely a good experience. It was like an exam of what we had been doing in those meetings. All of the issues we

discussed in our meetings were raised at this one. They make sense for me now. I am in a better situation in my mind and I've got a better perspective of the whole process about getting access to the university than then. That's why it makes more sense. For me, it's taken a little bit of time.'

He also sees it as an exercise in building solidarity.

'The presentations are about making more noise or raising your voice to make solidarity. Opening the hearts of people, showing them the reality of what is happening. It makes that solidarity between everyone.'

As Lisa recalls:

'The most important aspect of the presentation was the impact that Mehdi's honest sharing of his story had. It allowed for a deeper understanding of the lived experience of people seeking asylum in Australia and their struggles to access higher education.'

An experience of agency

Despite the persistence of assumptions that refugees are victims and without agency, growing research demonstrates that vulnerability is not an appropriate way to view refugee experiences (Gateley, 2015; Hutchinson and Dorsett, 2012; Hugman et al., 2011). Indeed, people from a refugee background 'should not be seen as passive victims; they have some degree of agency, even under the most difficult conditions' (Castles et al., 2014: 213).

We see our collective as a process that has provided opportunities to exercise agency. Nasrullah decided to join the meetings because he saw it as an opportunity to 'bring changes to my life and other asylum seekers by participating in volunteering groups who help asylum seekers.' It was something he could do to respond to the challenges he faces 'in the form of feeling excluded from community and a burden to society, and prolonged uncertainty.'

When his work commitments allowed it, Mehdi joined the meetings because he wanted to be part of a collective with an activist focus.

'My point of view of the world, my personality, makes me more interested to be involved in anything that helps more people. That's why I started to be involved in this group and whenever we had any event or a meeting, I tried to contribute and be part of it. And it's also given me lots of hope because living in uncertainty on a bridging visa, with no permanent home, with no plan for the future, is one of the hardest things that I've ever experienced. I didn't know before that this is how it could be, living with the experience of not having your name on a piece of paper, not having a

passport or being able to live freely as the rest of society does. Not to be recognised.'

Speaking in public about his experiences is something Mehdi has long felt compelled to do.

'It is worth the difficult thoughts I have after a speech because I have talked about a particular situation I've been through or the hardness in my life, if it is going to open the heart of someone listening, and make any opportunity for people who have been through the process I have been through. If those who attend at an event can do something better for people like me, I would prefer to take the risk and pressure of public speaking than keeping it quiet where no one knows about it and where no one else would do it.'

Abbas found participating in the presentations and the audiences' responses to be affirming in relation to a sense of belonging. One of the reasons for his participation was

'to meet more people and talk about my difficulties and in this way I could be a little more comfortable in this society. The reason some people go to a psychologist is that they want to talk. For me that presentation was a kind of session with a psychologist. It gave me peace of mind to be honest. I felt at that time after the presentation, that I'm part of the community. People were very kind, people were very supportive, all of these things encouraged me. It was really lovely.

At the moment asylum seekers don't have an identity. They are not belonging to any country. So at that time I couldn't say I'm Iranian, I couldn't say I'm a refugee in Australia, because I'm not sure if the government will accept my claim. It was a good feeling because sometimes talking about these things in front of people, they can give you more power. I definitely had a good feeling at the end of the presentation about what I presented.'

For Mumtaz, presenting his story was also an exercise in agency in the middle of living under restrictive policies.

'It is about an individual like me, that I should be able to do something, if that is even talking about where I came from just in a simple story, or maybe a more complicated one.'

Caroline and Lisa, who had conducted research projects and advocated with people seeking asylum for some years, found that organising and participating in the English classes provided a sense of agency, of being able to step up and organise them when governments and institutions would not. As Lisa saw it:

‘I really enjoyed these nights – to do something as a “activist-academic” that had positive emotions attached to it was very nourishing professionally and personally. Rather than focusing on the suffering and despair that is so often associated with the experiences of forced migration, the classes enabled a sense of optimism for the future when working in a group, and created a wonderful synergy between us all as we shared stories over (cold) pizza.’

For Caroline, the meetings in 2016 and 2017, and the presentations the collective organised, were a continuation of this sense of agency.

‘I found working with everyone involved in the collective to be one of the most motivating experiences of my academic career. We collectively developed a supportive environment within which we developed deeper understandings of the barriers faced by people seeking asylum in accessing higher education and were able to share those insights with others. We also developed a deeper understanding of the university’s decision-making processes and how they might be navigated.’

As Nasrullah expresses it, the collective effectively became ‘an Advisory Group for the Centre for Human Rights Education and Curtin in relation to issues about accessing education’ and continues to play an active role within the university on these issues.

Increased access to higher education (for some)

There were also very practical outcomes from these activities for some of the people seeking asylum involved in terms of their access to higher education. Some of the people who came to the IELTS preparation classes reported that their participation had improved their English language skills and contributed to their passing an IELTS test. For Abbas, Nasrullah and one other collective member, this led to successful scholarship applications and they began their studies at the university in 2017. Three others who participated in the IELTS preparation classes were able to access higher education at other institutions. Others not interested in accessing higher education participated out of a desire to improve their language skills.

The presentations also ultimately enabled access to higher education for more people seeking asylum from 2017 until the present. Through listening to the presentations of people’s lived experience, several staff across the university became important advocates who helped ensure at least a small number of full fee-waiving scholarships continued to be offered each of the following years. More recently, given that the scholarship recipients continue to be denied access to federally funded student assistance, some of these staff

have been pivotal in supporting our collective's efforts to persuade the university to provide financial assistance to those scholarship recipients.

Conclusion

The focus of this project was to work together to enable access to higher education for people seeking asylum. Some of the members of our collective did access university studies at Curtin, as well as a small number of other people seeking asylum, in addition to people who attended our IELTS classes who accessed studies elsewhere. To this extent, our project activities did have significant practical and humane outcomes. Our collective has had a direct impact on university decision-making to ensure a small number of full fee-paying scholarships are offered each year to people seeking asylum, and more recently a stipend for scholarship recipients as well.

In a federal political landscape with minimal prospects of shifting the Australian Government's punitive asylum seeker policies, efforts within the university held the most promise of enabling access to higher education for at least some people seeking asylum. On this point, the collective efforts outlined here may be instructive for those in other restrictive asylum policy environments to consider. In addition, these efforts may be useful for those in more favourable policy environments, such as Germany, but where bottom-up actions are also evident (Jungblut et al., 2018).

That our project activities have had such an impact is due to the involvement of all of the members of our collective. However, those of us who are not people seeking asylum consider that Abbas, Nasrullah, Mehdi and Mumtaz have played a crucial role. Their willingness to share their experiences of seeking asylum, and the importance of accessing higher education, has created shared learning experiences that were pivotal in developing alliances within the university. It was through these alliances that the university's decision-making around scholarships and other support became possible.

This shared learning has also informed the broader efforts of collective members to try to shift federal government policies. Although our project activities have not had an impact on the federal policies that continue to deny many people seeking asylum access to higher education (and many of their other rights), our efforts have opened up this university (and perhaps encouraged others to do the same). But other efforts are critical to address the causes of the barriers that people seeking asylum face in accessing higher education – causes that lie beyond the university. The immense difficulties of

living on a temporary visa are a driving force for the involvement of some of the collective members in efforts that call for permanent protection visas to be reinstated.

Overall, what has been critically meaningful and significant about this enabling project can be characterised by the quality and depth achieved through a participatory and highly collaborative journey. Over a period of more three years, the collective has developed the following defining and sustaining attributes. Firstly, by ensuring that the lived experience of people seeking asylum was foregrounded through the conception, structuring, planning and reflections throughout, the project generated and enabled practical and valuable outcomes built around agency and voice. Secondly, by ensuring a patient, interactive and collaborative approach together, underpinned by respect and listening, a community of belonging and trust was created. Thirdly, as a response to the current, punitive and oppressive government policies in relation to people seeking asylum, the project was able to act significantly as a humanising and educational force in the higher education context.

Finally, this project has built a space at a university that extends hospitality to people who are subjected to government policies that aim to exclude them. As Mumtaz outlines, ‘people from refugee backgrounds have a lot of things to say, but they are not heard all the time.’ This university space has been one of enabling people seeking asylum through providing the means, energies, consideration, respectful listening and the time to those who have not been able to access higher education. For Abbas this means that ‘Curtin University is a place of refuge. These activities give us a message that we are not alone, we don’t feel that no one supports us.’

ⁱ According to the Refugee Convention, a refugee is any person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country.

ⁱⁱ A person seeking asylum, or asylum seeker, is someone who has sought protection as a refugee, but whose claim for refugee protection has not yet been finalised.

ⁱⁱⁱ If a person on a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa works or studies in a designated regional area for 42 months, and satisfies other requirements, they may be eligible for one of a particular range of permanent visas in Australia.

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