Addressing the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students: a case study of African students

Key Words

Sudanese students   perceptions of learning   university experience   peer mentoring initiative

Abstract

An increase in migration of Sudanese and South Sudanese people to Australia due to civil unrest in their home country has increased the numbers of Sudanese students at university (Turner, 2009). Migrant experiences, particularly for those for whom English is an additional language, can impact negatively on education and learning (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007). An analysis of the performance of Sudanese students at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Western Australia between 2010 and 2014 revealed poor academic results. It was found that although ECU provides a range of ALL programs and services, there was little take up of these services by Sudanese students, and if they were used by students, they had little impact on student performance. This prompted the undertaking of a project to explore the experiences of Sudanese students enrolled at ECU. The project employed a multi-method approach. Two quantitative scales examined motivations for learning and English Language Confidence. Interviews or focus groups explored the students' perceptions of their learning and university experiences. The findings indicate that Sudanese students are extrinsically motivated to study and feel confident about their language skills; however, several barriers, including socio-political factors unique to Sudanese students, hindered their achievement at university (Affolter & Allaf, 2014). It became clear that although these students need extra assistance with academic and language skills, the conventional student support services have limited effect (Karimshah et al., 2013). Rather, programs that encourage social integration within the university, having a good support network of family and friends and a sense of self-agency are more likely to positively impact Sudanese student achievement at university (Thomas, 2012; Maher & Macallister, 2013). This paper will briefly describe the implementation and outcomes of the Top-up Project at ECU, a HEPP-funded peer-mentoring initiative designed in 2015 to support domestic African undergraduate students confronted with academic challenges at Edith Cowan University, and the role that ALL practitioners have in the project. While the project is still ongoing, the results achieved so far indicate that the sense of community created has inspired students and led to an enhanced understanding of academic learning skills.

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