

# **(Re)claiming social capital for students from refugee backgrounds: Lessons from OLT research**

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In the last two decades, Australian universities have received increasing numbers of students from refugee backgrounds. There is relatively little research that addresses the educational and socio-cultural expectations and experiences of Humanitarian Entrant Background (HEB) students, especially those who were educated and held status in their own countries and who are now looking to gain educational and economic capital by entering Australian Higher Education. This paper presents preliminary findings from an Australian Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT)-funded project that explores the transitions experiences of students from refugee backgrounds into university, which is a partnership between the University of Newcastle (UON), Macquarie University (MQ) and Curtin University (CU). Despite being highly motivated and sometimes having experienced tertiary education in their home countries, students from refugee backgrounds often become a relatively invisible group due to their domestic student status and they remain underrepresented in Australian Higher Education. This project aims to identify effective support and transition pedagogies for this cohort through examination of three broad pathways that students from refugee backgrounds commonly take to access undergraduate study: from Vocational Education and Training (VET) and through an enabling program (UON); from High School (MQ); and from an Intensive English Centre (IEC) (CU).

This presentation presents early research findings from analysis of focus groups and in-depth interviews with participants from all three pathways. Through initial analysis of interview transcripts, overlapping themes have emerged which document tensions related to language and cultural experiences and expectations and concerns for future

employment opportunities or aspirations for future careers. Students from refugee backgrounds are a deeply heterogeneous group and have a complex suite of needs that differ according to their age, language background, discipline area and personal circumstances. These needs, and the overlaps and dissonances in the findings, are highlighted in the presentation, and we propose areas that warrant further research attention.