'One day I will make it to university': Students from Refugee Backgrounds in University Pathway Programs

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Abstract. Australian universities have received an increasing number of students from refugee backgrounds (SfRBs) over the last few decades. However, programs adapted for the successful transition of this cohort remain relatively scarce. Therefore, there is a critical need for programs and strategies supporting SfRBs meaningful participation and success in their studies. This empirical paper reports on a project conducted at UniSA College. The research explores cultural and learning experiences of SfRBs in a university pathway program. This paper utilises data from a student survey, focus group, and interviews conducted with Peer Support Officers to explore students' aspirations, challenges they face and recommendations for the university and the enabling pathway program. The findings highlight that despite aspiring to obtain university qualifications, SfRBs encounter serious barriers including challenges associated with English language proficiency, as well as with navigating university and academic culture, managing family and work commitments whilst facing social exclusion and racism. For successful engagement of SfRBs education institutions need an all-encompassing approach consisting of culturally responsive efforts and peer-led support systems for students.

Keywords: students from refugee backgrounds; pathway programs; culturally responsive

1. Introduction

Australian classrooms have become increasingly diversified with the arrival of students from Middle Eastern and African refugee backgrounds over the past couple of decades (Hattam, 2018; Earnest et al., 2010). The education system is one of the first institutions they encounter upon settlement and yet universities have been slow in developing support for the specific needs of students from refugee backgrounds (SfRBs) (Joyce et al., 2010; Lenette, 2016; Ramsey & Baker 2019) or to

improve their retention and transition to higher education studies (Kong et al., 2016; Molla, 2022).

Research on SfRBs in higher education is relatively scarce (Baker and Irwin, 2021), revealing significant gaps in knowledge about the experiences of this cohort of students at university and even less is known about SfRBs in university pathway programs. The emerging studies about SfRBs' experiences at university find that - despite aspiring to obtain university qualifications (Lenette, Brough, & Cox, 2013; Clark and Lenette, 2020; Naidoo, 2021) - many SfRBs face considerable challenges in higher education. Given the significant gaps in knowledge about this cohort of students in enabling pathway programs, it will be paramount to investigate student experiences at university by focusing on the following:

- Factors that influence SfRBs to enrol and attend university pathways programs?
- What are the challenges that SfRBs experience at university?
- How SfRBs experience UniSA College in academic and social terms?
- SfRBs' perspectives on culturally competent social and academic support activities that UniSA College can provide to enrich their university experience?

This paper discusses a Federal Government Grant sponsored project at University of South Australia (UniSA) College which was established to explore cultural and learning experiences of SfRBs in a university pathway program. In order to contextualise the students' education experiences, this paper firstly explores their aspirations. Following on from this is a discussion concerning the challenges students experience in higher education. Finally, this paper offers some recommendations about culturally responsive approaches to student learning as a good practice that universities can implement to meet the complex needs of SfRBs.

1.1 Students from refugee backgrounds in Australia

Accessing education opportunities is vital for SfRBs, ensuring that the newly arrived can effectively integrate into the host country and in turn obtain better employment, contribute to the country and access to services (Naidoo et al., 2015; Ager & Strang, 2008). The existing literature also highlights the positive impact that participation in higher education can have on SfRBs, and their families, as well as the host society (Ramsey & Baker, 2019) and yet this cohort of students face many barriers to education (Molla, 2022). Some of the specific challenges, noted across the higher education sector for SfRBs include: English language skill development; academic skills and concepts; stigma; standardised testing; uncertainty; expectations of family and friends; competing priorities; funding and policy; difficulties navigating the university system; socialisation; guidance; time management; poverty; issues of safe housing; family dislocation; and employment opportunities (Earnest et al., 2010; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Lawson, 2014; Fagan et al., 2018; King & Owens, 2018; Naidoo et al., 2018).

Resonant with previous research, the data in this paper highlight students' experiences that reflect 'institutional, pedagogical, linguistic and cultural

misrecognitions' (Fagan et al., 2018, p. viii). We argue that endorsing culturally responsive approaches and developing appropriate cultural and social settings are vital for meaningful participation of SfRBs in higher education. The purpose of this it is to help with the realisation of their potential and full development of their capabilities.

2. Method

This project was carried out in the form of a pilot study aiming to better support transition and success of SfRBs at universities. The study was conducted in UniSA College. Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the University Ethics Committee prior to starting this project.

The approach adopted was mixed method whereby the quantitative approach incorporated a student survey while the qualitative approach included focus group and individual interviews with PSOs. The quantitative part of the project involved a consultative approach by surveying 59 Humanitarian Visa students studying at the UniSA College. The purpose of the survey was to identify concerns and issues this cohort of students experiences as well as matters pertaining to their engagement, academic integration and learning needs. This student-led approach then informed the specific project focus and helped to identify discrepancies in support services for students from refugees backgrounds. Student voices were consulted in an attempt to involve students as participants as well as stakeholders. As Halilovich (2013) argues, research with refugees must 'take a more pro-active role in speaking along with, not on behalf of, those they research' (p. 132).

After the survey, students were invited to be part of the focus group. The informal focus group was attended by 10 SfRBs. These students were recruited from an email call-out for participants and through staff networks with students. In the focus group the participants discussed the following themes: the moments they were most proud of; the challenges they face; the careers and goals they were aspiring to have; and their own recommendations for the university on how to best support SfRBs.

Finally, data was obtained through informal semi-structured interviews with PSOs who assisted the SfRBs. In the informal interviews, we aimed to identify the additional support that SfRBs required at this university, and the challenges that SfRBs students experience as well. The findings were then used to improve academic integration and outcomes for this cohort of students.

Thematic analysis of all the data was undertaken using the process promoted by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021). This process enables the researchers to identify the themes that emerge from such research. In order to analyse the data, we transcribed the data from the survey[1], the focus group as well as from the

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[1] While the survey was grounded in quantitative research methods, some questions about student motivations, caring commitments, challenges and study supports they require at university, included open-ended questions. Subsequently, the students' responses to these were thematically analysed.

individual interviews with PSOs. Given that 'researcher subjectivity is bias' and therefore a 'potential threat to coding reliability' (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 39), each researcher read the transcripts and ascribed codes for central meaning-based concepts, which were then combined into categories revealing the final themes. We also reconvened with the PSOs to discuss our reading of the data from the interviews for them to validate and cross-reference. The participants in the focus group and in the survey were offered to have the findings sent to them for cross-referencing, but none opted for this suggestion. The last stage of data analysis was defining and interpreting themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using the links between research objectives and key themes in order to provide explanations. These themes are presented in the 'Findings and Discussion' section.

2.1 Participants

The students participating in the survey included 59 Permanent Humanitarian Visa students enrolled in 2019 at UniSA College's pathway programs. The student data is included in the table below. A total of 16 students participated in the survey. Their responses were anonymous. The data was also collected from an informal focus group attended by 10 students. The participants were from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Iran and Iraq. Additional participants were the two PSOs working with SfRBs at the College. PSOs are previous College students aged 19-25 who were eligible for the position. One is a female student from Afghanistan, and the other is a male from Liberia.

Table 1: Student Demographics

Gender	Male = 29 Female = 30
Age of Students	0-21 = 40 22-24 = 8 26-29 = 4 30-49 = 6 50-59 = 1
Language spoken at home	Arabic, Burmese, French, Nepali, Pashto, Persian, Swahili
Country of Origin	Afghanistan, Congo, Cote D'Ivoire, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Iran, Iraq, Liberia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tanzania, Zambia
Program of Student	Diploma in Arts = 2 Diploma in Business = 2 Diploma in Health = 6 UniSA Foundation Studies = 49

3. UniSA College Pathway Programs

UniSA College is a school which is located within the University of South Australia, delivering equity pathways and enabling programs. Enabling programs are an essential feature of expanding participation in higher education incentives that cater for a range of social groups who may not have been able, financially or due to lack of prior education qualifications, to enter university via

traditional pathways (Hattam & Weiler, 2021). Enabling programs are different to credit-bearing undergraduate programs in two ways: (1) there are minimal entry requirements; and (2) they are Commonwealth supported so there is no tuition fees requirement.

Given the nature of the open-access programs, the student cohorts entering university *via* enabling programs are very diverse. This includes a large percentage of students from equity groups, many who are first-in-family at university and with no prior knowledge or experience of tertiary education. Over 1000 students now study at the College and students from low socio-economic-status (SES) backgrounds constitute half of the College student population (Hattam and Weiler, 2021). Similarly, English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD) students comprise one fifth of the College enrolments (Stokes, 2014), and anecdotally most are SfRBs. [2]

4. Findings and Discussion
4.1 Factors that influence SfRBs to enrol and attend university: Student aspirations

Achievement and aspirational features are central in the student's construction of their identities. As Pastoor (2015) observes, education and learning achievements are strong motivational forces that contribute to how students construct their identities, and ensure that they successfully transition into a new life. This was evident in this research project. In the focus group, the participants reflected that they are attending the pathway program because 'high school didn't go well' and they 'weren't getting good grades' and they felt that 'Uni provided better support' and that they were achieving 'higher grades at the College' (Student comment, Student focus group 2019). Some participants spoke about being 'proud to be offered position as a student (in a university)'. One participant reflected how important access to education was to her as she said she was proud to 'step out and push to try something new'. She outlined that 'coming from another country, all (of her) confidence was lost due to starting from scratch'. She felt that "no one wanted to listen to someone from a 3rd world country with 'limited ideas'" and she outlined that 'finding her place in the community is her proud moment' (Student focus group, 2019).

The results from the student survey resonate with the above discussions. With regards to main motivations and aspirations to study at university, most participants commented that one of the main reasons they are at university is 'to improve English'. As Figure 1 below indicates, the participants also specified that they choose to study at university because they 'want to get a job in their chosen career' as well as 'to create more opportunities' for themselves. The majority also responded that additional motivating factors to study are to 'build social

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[2] Self-identification of the refugee status is compounded with stigma. Given this and the perceived lack of services for SfRBs at the University, many students choose to not identify with the 'refugee label'. Some of the reasons for this include stigma associated with the 'refugee' label as well as the perceived lack of services for SfRBs at the University (Fagan et al., 2018). Furthermore, by coming to university, the displaced youth also associate with a new sense of belonging: unlike the identity of 'refugee', which is 'heavy with loss', the identity of 'student' is positive, it is 'hopeful with possibility' (Ferede, 2018, p. 8; as cited in Molla, 2022, p. 482).

networks and meet new people'. Some have added that they are also at university 'for their family' and 'to give back to the community'.

Q9 - What are your main motivations for studying at university? Choose any that apply to you from the list below:
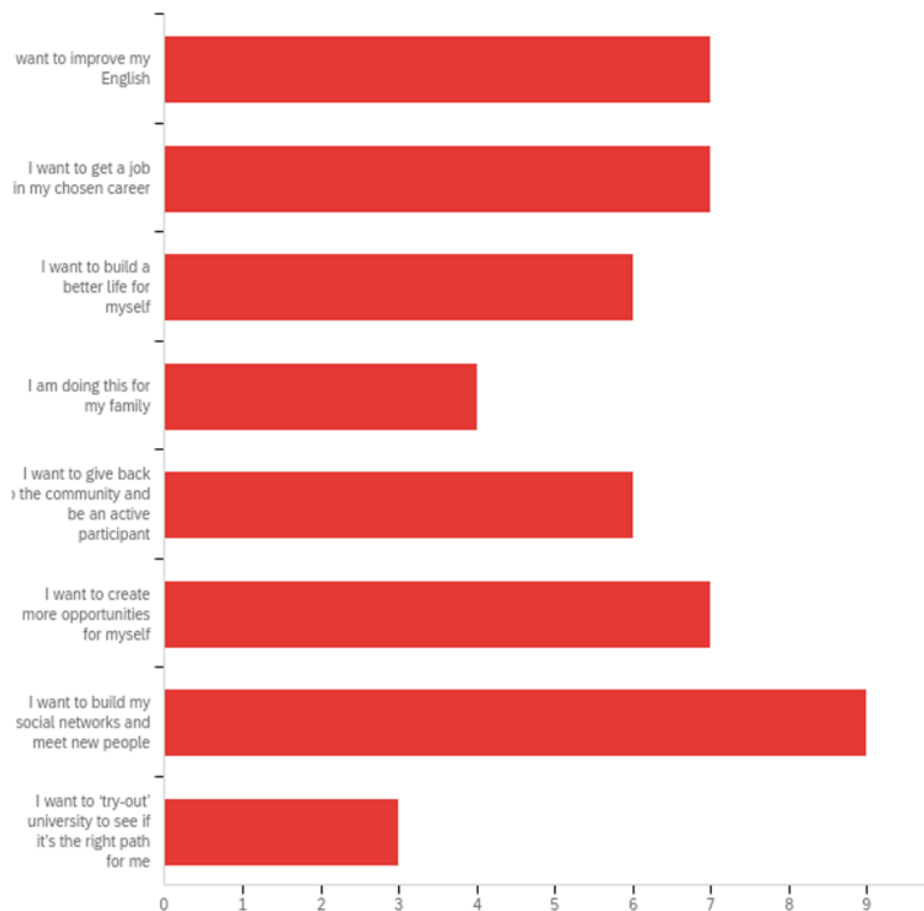

Figure 1: Student aspirations to attend University
Source: UniSA College

Many participants have also commented that they study because they want to develop their talent and creativity, but they are also enrolled to study out of 'interest'. Education pathways offer opportunities for SfRBs to rebuild their lives in a new society. As Baker et al. (2020) highlight, a significant challenge is the need to 'make up' for lost time. In their research, participants were eager to make good use of their time, and they communicated being hopeful that their participation in higher education (HE) would lead to significant improvements in their lives (Baker et al. 2020). Furthermore, as highlighted in Figure 2, 'status' and 'respect' are considered key features of achievement for SfRBs and their families, with education and career prospects as the process required to achieve this (Walker et al., 2005; King and Owens, 2018). SfRBs' resettlement journey is strongly founded in this sense of purpose and determination.

Q10 - Do you have any other motivations for studying at university? Please specify
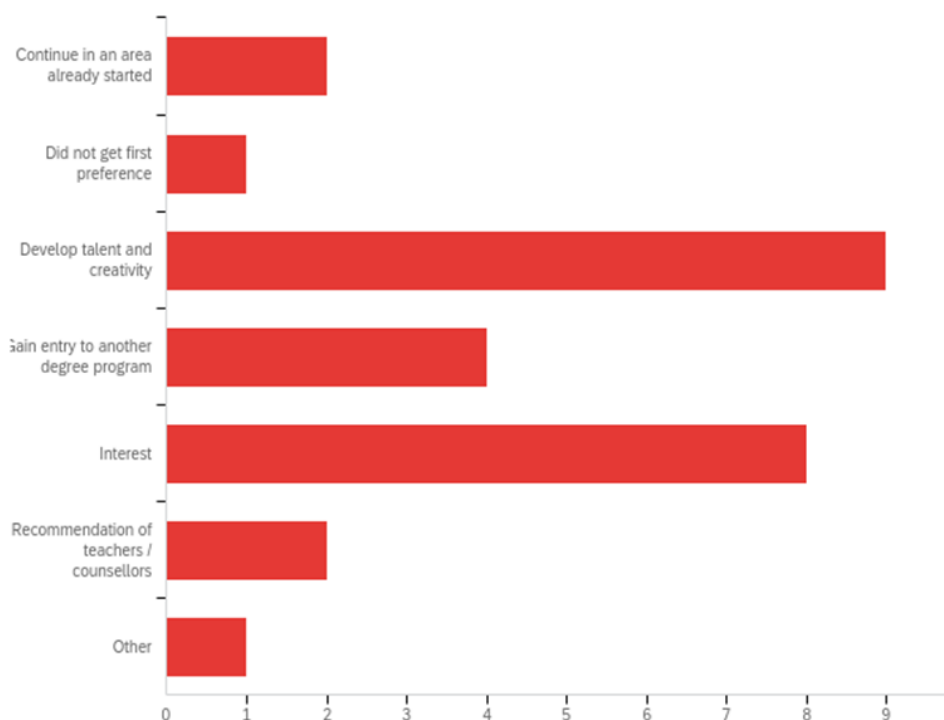

Figure 2. Student aspirations to attend University
Source: UniSA College

4.2 Challenges students from refugee backgrounds face in Higher Education

SfRBs face many barriers to education (Baker et al., 2020). The existing research highlights challenges related to English language skills, academic literacies, obstacles with participation in group activities and workshops, difficulties with navigating the university terrain, not knowing what services exist, as well as external obligations and commitments (Earnest et al., 2010; Baker et al., 2020). Similar results were reported in this project (see Figure 3).
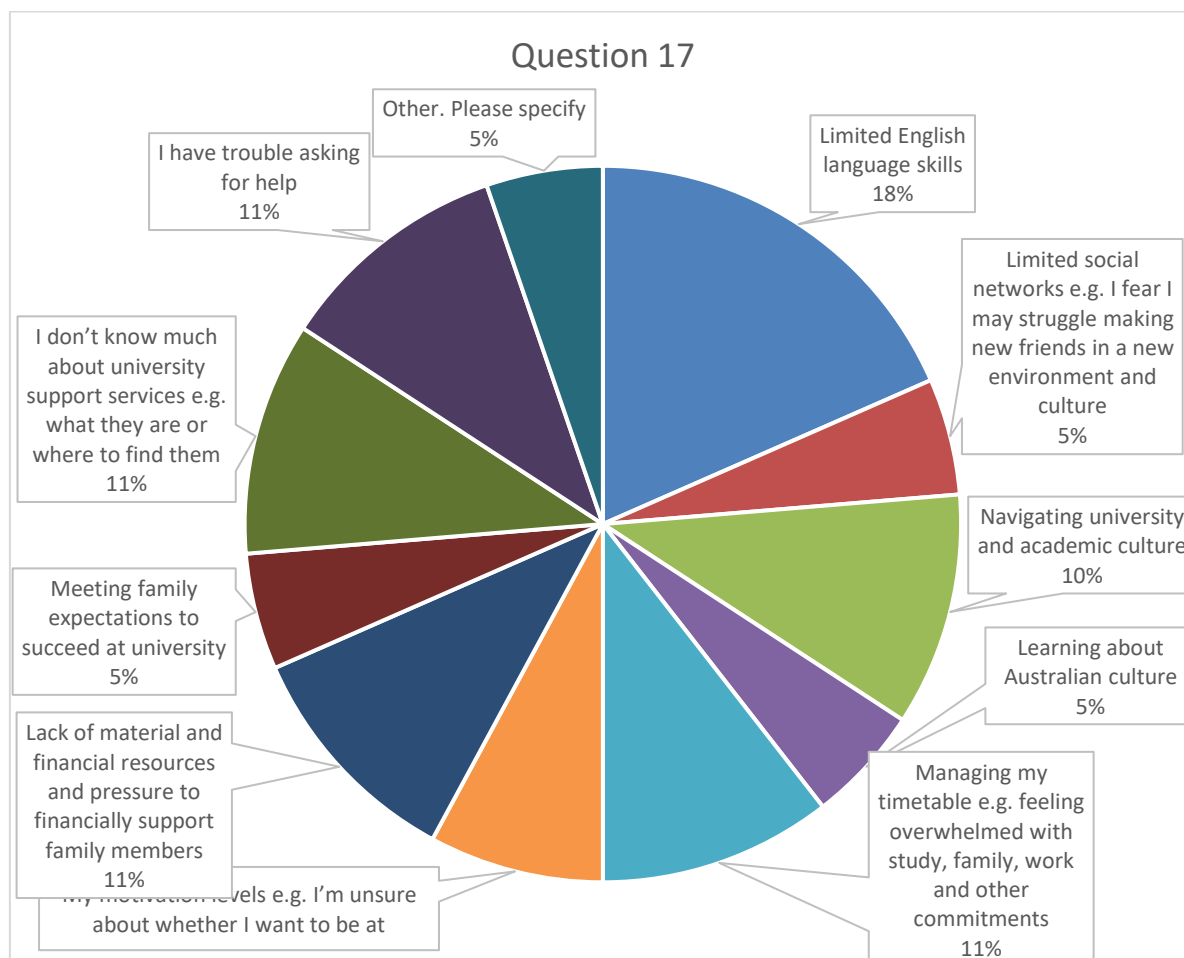
Question 17

Limited English language skills
18%

Limited social networks e.g. I fear I may struggle making new friends in a new environment and culture
5%

Navigating university and academic culture
10%

Learning about Australian culture
5%

Managing my timetable e.g. feeling overwhelmed with study, family, work and other commitments
11%

My motivation levels e.g. I'm unsure about whether I want to be at

Lack of material and financial resources and pressure to financially support family members
11%

Meeting family expectations to succeed at university
5%

I don't know much about university support services e.g. what they are or where to find them
11%

I have trouble asking for help
11%

Other. Please specify
5%

Figure 3. The most common challenges identified by the participants
Source: UniSA College

English language proficiency featured prominently in students' reflections on their experience in Australian tertiary education. The language difficulties can seriously undermine students' overall learning experiences. Language barriers were identified by one of the PSOs and they also discussed how SfRBs experience language barriers in terms of finding it 'difficult to start a conversation':

> **Peer Support Officer 1:** *The challenges SfRBs experience was, you know, language problem, which is pretty obvious. Yes, I spoke to one student, you know, he really sort of break it down to me in another way, he said 'most of the students, they're from refugee background, language is a problem but another thing is that let's say they go to like to the Study Help Pals, or Uni Mentors or PASS[3] for help with an assignment, that's sort of like starting a conversation. Yeah, that is what they are lacking… to start a conversation, especially like not even related to learning, but like in a public gathering let's say for example, on the Orientation Day or you*

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[3] At UniSA College we have created Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) sessions which students utilise regularly and receive peer assisted support with their academic writing and referencing.

know meeting new people, social gathering, you know, to start off the conversation with different people is difficult.

Interviewer: Do they feel that they lack confidence due to the language issues?

Peer Support Officer 1: *Yes, and also they fear that, you know, others may not understand what they say and that's probably based on their previous experiences*
Yeah, it's like that too in places like (where they have a) major responsibility (examples of these places included state-based institutions like hospitals or courts).

In particular, PSOs highlighted that students expressed fearing that 'others may not understand what they are saying' and this, in turn, may undermine their confidence when writing assignments or speaking in class. Furthermore, the survey participants expressed that despite arriving in Australia 5 or 6 years ago and completing some secondary education in Australia, they would still list 'limited English language skills' as one of the main challenges they face. For example, one male participant arrived in 2014 from Burundi and another female participant who arrived from Afghanistan in 2013, despite completing some secondary education in Australia, they still listed having 'limited English language skills' as one of the main challenges they deal with. This is, in part, because many SfRBs are not familiar with Western concepts of schooling and discipline, and due to their frequent clustering together as a homogenous group, this results in creating stress for themselves and the specific schools and areas (Fagan et al., 2018).[4] Furthermore, for SfRBs who are new to the Australian education system, this is compounded with the effort needed to decipher the hidden curriculum of academia.

In the survey, students also outlined that they struggle with 'managing the timetable, feeling overwhelmed with study, family and work'. These themes will be addressed separately. This, together with 'navigating university and academic culture' and 'not knowing much about university support services' were identified as some of the most pressing challenges.

4.3 Difficulties navigating university and academic culture
The participants in the survey overwhelmingly reported challenges navigating university and academic culture. One of the first reasons for this is privileging of Western knowledges and failing to recognise the assets and knowledge that SfRBs bring with them. As Fagan et al. (2018, p. vii) assert, 'what lies at the centre of many of the challenges experienced by SfRBs are tacit, implicit, assumptions by policymakers, institutions and educators that privilege Western knowledge and misrecognise what SfRBs bring with them to Australian educational spaces'. Furthermore, for many students, both SfRBs and Australian-born students who are new to higher education, understanding and uncovering the hidden

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[4] Fagan et al. (2018) outline the language and literacy needs of SfRBs are lacking adequate support systems in schools. This is because standard English as an Additional Language/ Dialect (EAL/D) approaches do not address former disrupted schooling and the literacy instruction necessary for meaningful participation.

curriculum is challenging. In addition, all of the assessments at the university are predominantly based on writing and effective communication in institutionally endorsed ways is vital for successful completion, so not adhering to these guidelines leads to attrition and failure (Baker, 2018; Fagan et al., 2018). This implies that students, for whom English is an additional language, are already at a disadvantage and for SfRBs this is even more so. SfRBs often come from significantly different education backgrounds as well as academic cultures, and their education experiences are compounded with additional complications of resettlement, trauma-related psychological issues, and disrupted learning (Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Naidoo et al., 2015; Lenette, 2016).

In terms of the challenges of navigating university, the PSOs also commented that some students did not know how to navigate university in that they: *'weren't really aware of the structure (of the university) and I think it links back to not knowing which services were available'* (PSO A, 2019). They also mentioned the students reported 'not understanding the assignments properly' and that they would complain about 'receiving late submission penalty due to other commitments they had'.

Settlement obligations and time-limited assessment procedures that make invisible the linguistic translation efforts were also challenges that SfRBs experience. As one of the PSOs reflected, students reported struggling with 'drafting and re-drafting of assignments' and complained about 'not receiving explicit feedback' (PSO A, 2020). Similarly, difficulties with cultural assumptions about the uniformity of the student experience embedded in the course content were echoed in Fagan et al. (2018). Students reported challenges in comprehending and conveying academic material and requirements related to implicit university processes, such as, submitting assignments on time. Echoing the existing research (see Fagan et al., 2018; Naidoo et al., 2015; Earnest et al., 2010), the PSOs contended that students reported struggling with multiple assignment deadlines. They also noted that students expressed frustration in drafting their work many times and feeling that they were not receiving adequate feedback. For SfRBs, their family or community may not have this implicit knowledge of the university to adequately support or advise them. Consequently, some SfRBs, who struggle but do not defer their enrolment, find themselves in a vicious circle of receiving unsatisfactory grades and discontinuing their studies.

4.4 Social exclusion and racism
While the 'refugee experience' is by no means homogenous (Matthews, 2008; Lenette, 2016; Molla, 2022), the lack of feeling socially included was outlined as one of the most common challenges that SfRBs face. This was outlined by PSOs.

> **Peer Support Officer A:** *The first biggest challenge is social inclusion. Many of them feel like they don't, you know sort of mix, in their tutorially classes especially when they are new, after the Orientation and Starting Strong.[5] Yeah in their first class they don't really feel comfortable unless,*

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[5] *Orientation* and *Starting Strong* are introductory orientation events that are run at the start of every Study Period at UniSA. While *Orientation* is a UniSA-wide event for students, the *Starting Strong* program is an orientation session specifically for UniSA College students. In the *Starting Strong* session we provide preparatory information about university, introduce the students to the teaching staff. We also include segments on academic conventions like paraphrasing, summarising and

> *they see somebody that is from a similar background and they go and sit*
> *next to them and try and get involved.*

This is echoed in the findings from the focus group discussions. One participant asserted that she struggled because this was the 'first time she attended Uni' and she felt 'nobody wanted to talk to her' (Student focus group, 2019). Similarly, respondents from the Curtin University study reported that the lack of socialisation and stigma impacts on SfRBs feeling socially isolated at university (Fagan et al., 2018). As Fagan et al. (2018, p. 8) highlight, SfRBs have 'a unique habitus (ways of being and doing) that are shaped by the shame and embarrassment they feel as a result of their refugee status, and by the negative public and policy discourses around refugee and asylum seekers'. Another significant challenge that compounds the experience of social exclusion is racism.

Many SfRBs report the ongoing incidents of racism (Watkins, Noble and Wong, 2018) and racism hugely affects their capacity to 'fit in' (Yak, 2016). In the education environment, being treated as the 'other' when starting university is often conveyed by African and Muslim students (Lawson, 2014). Similar circumstances were reported by Onsando and Billett (2009) in their examination of African refugee students' experiences of learning at Australian Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions. Their findings highlight that, despite being in a safe environment, the students still encounter racism and social exclusion. Racism was also identified by PSOs in our research:

> *Another challenge is racism. Yes it is not, explicit, like for example, one of*
> *the students, she was in the tutorial, you know, everyone is speaking but*
> *when it was her turn to speak, she was cut short. Or maybe it was time*
> *for her to contribute yet she didn't say what she wanted to say and they*
> *just moved on* (PSO A, 2019).

This was echoed in the focus group discussions too. One of the participants in the focus group outlined that she finished the first semester 'with no new friends', and she felt people were actively avoiding her and felt that the 'Muslims are terrorists-stereotypes' which affected her social life (Focus group discussions, 2019). These testimonials attest that once they arrive, SfRBs do not slot neatly into the multicultural diversity of the Australian landscape. Rather the figure of the 'refugee' is delivered into 'pre-existing racialised discourse, and contemporary power/knowledge regimes that circulate and establish disparaging and contradictory representations' (Matthews, 2008., p. 42). As McWilliams and Bonet (2016, p. 167) argue, this is particularly cruel for people from refugee backgrounds who have often escaped conflicts that are 'painfully visible', as they are also entering economic/ideological conflicts that are 'actually more pernicious as refugee youth and families come to understand that [educational institutions] that allegedly promise hope, are not what they seem'.

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referencing as well as demonstrating academic integrity. In these events students are also introduced to university-wide services including counselling, the learning advisors and the career services.

4.5 Managing the timetable, family responsibilities and work commitments
The survey findings also reveal that students find navigating the complex university terrain challenging. More precisely, students reported 'struggling with managing their timetable' and 'having trouble asking for help'. This further compounds the academic and language challenges SfRBs experience in higher education.

Family responsibilities constituted another obstacle reported by the participants in the survey. All but one respondent reported that they lived with their family and 9 out of 15 declared that they 'have to care for their family'. The overwhelming nature of family responsibilities is represented in a comment by one female participant who arrived in 2019, in response to the question: 'do you have to care for other people?' She answered 'yes' and added 'a lot'.

Family responsibilities also feature strongly in other literature (Fagan et al., 2018; King and Owens, 2018; Baker et al., 2020). In Fagan et al.'s (2018) report they outlined that family responsibilities are often tied to cultural expectations. This may include an expectation to financially support the family overseas, and to care for children without relying on formal child-care, which all impacts on study time – a similar situation is reported in our study, as well.

Although many university students work while studying, for SfRBs, having a job is vital as the income is then used to support their immediate family. In our survey, some reported the 'lack of material and financial resources' and they highlighted feeling 'pressured to financially support family members'. Similarly, all three projects in Fagan et al.'s (2018, p. 22) report also highlighted the responsibility to financially support family in Australia and family back home can constrain student engagement and participation at university (see also Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Lawson, 2014). As one of the PSOs in our study explained:

> *The challenge I think is the work and study balance. Some of them are working very hard. Yes, then coming to school, you know the next day and they are tired. Some of them have siblings and they have to balance it all. And they look for jobs to provide support for their studies and also for their families as well. Some of them are trying to get a job in the disabilities and aged care* (PSO A, 2020).

PSOs also commented that some of the students have also asked about 'help with paying their fees' and others have opened up about 'commitments between work, university and family':

> *Some of them were able to open up about family situations, you know, avoiding having to face back home and in uni. Yes, some of them were having to do with work and study and some of them didn't have a job and needed to work, (they were wondering) where to get support, some of them you know, they had the issue of how to interpret the documents to parents when they go home, or whatever they learned at Uni, they had to interpret that to their parents* (PSO A, 2020).

For SfRBs the difficulties of navigating complex university terrain are deepened with challenges of balancing work, study and attending to family responsibilities and settlement obligations.

4.6 On study support services students need at university

The survey also asked the participants about the study support services they need at university. In their responses the majority of participants identified 'Workshops on academic literacy skills: paraphrasing, summarising and referencing' as the most important study support they need. This was followed by the need for 'research skills workshops', 'essay writing workshops' and 'workshops for developing conversational English' (see Figure 4).
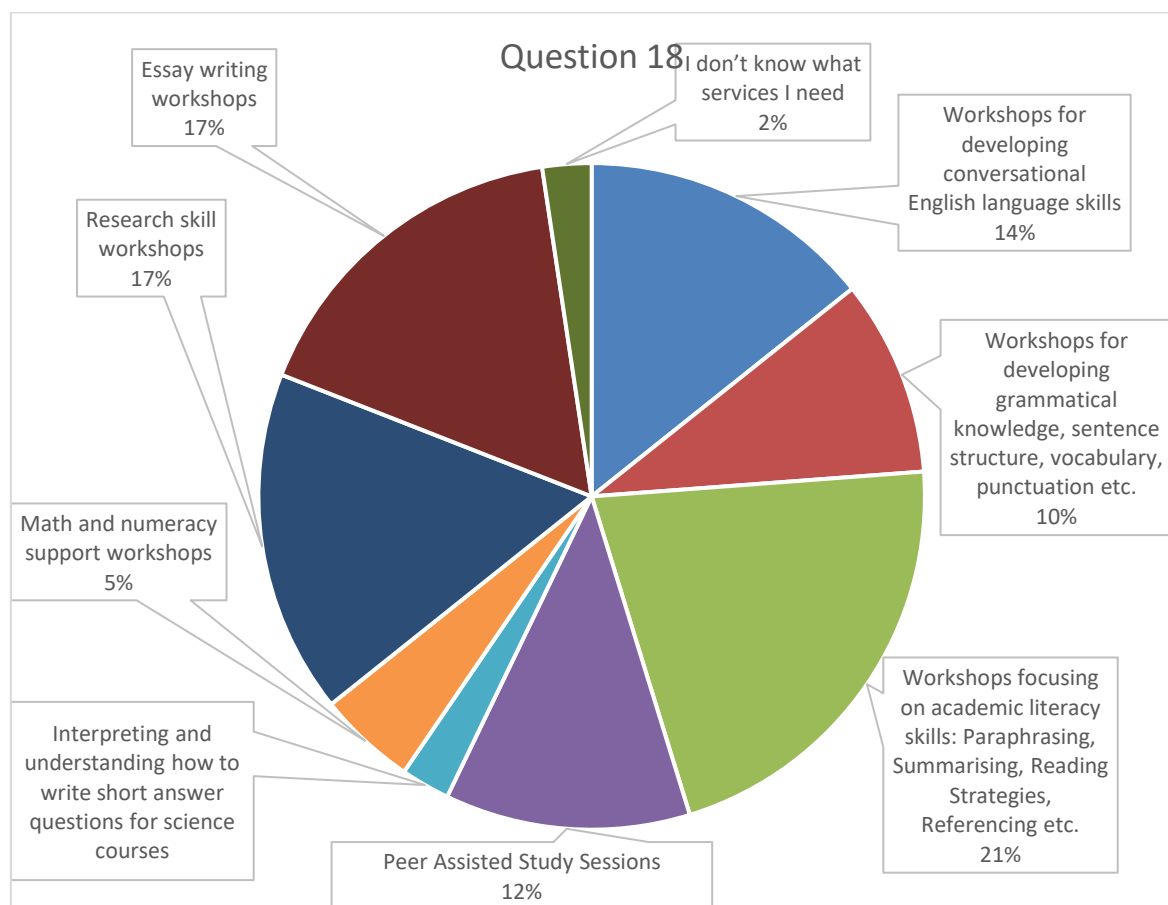

Figure 4. The study support services students feel they need at University
Source: UniSA College

These student selections are in line with findings from existing research (Fagan et al., 2018; Naidoo et al., 2015; Earnest et al., 2010). For instance, the data from Curtin University (Fagan et al., 2018) highlight that, for some students, academic literacies like referencing and essay writing were new concepts for them. Furthermore, participants in the Curtin University and Macquarie University studies also reported a preference for additional assistance with checking and correcting their assignments. Similarly, in our research PSOs reported that a common challenge students experience is not knowing where to access university

resources like the enrolment help, counselling services, as well as online resources such as *Studiosity*, or Study Help-Pals. The only online resources students knew how to access was the library site.[6]

The PSOs also outlined that most students are not aware of the student learning support services that are available through Uni-Mentors and PASS programs at UniSA College.[7] Instead, PSOs found that students get most of their learning support through drafting work and meeting the lecturers during consultation hours. Apart from needing help with 'navigating the university', participants also reported needing assistance with 'seeking employment and resumé writing', 'help with Centrelink' and 'help with visa and citizenship protocols'. This highlights that for SfRBs navigating complex university terrain is exacerbated with challenges of seeking employment or government assistance as well as needing assistance with the complex process embedded in seeking visa renewal or citizenship (see Figure 5).
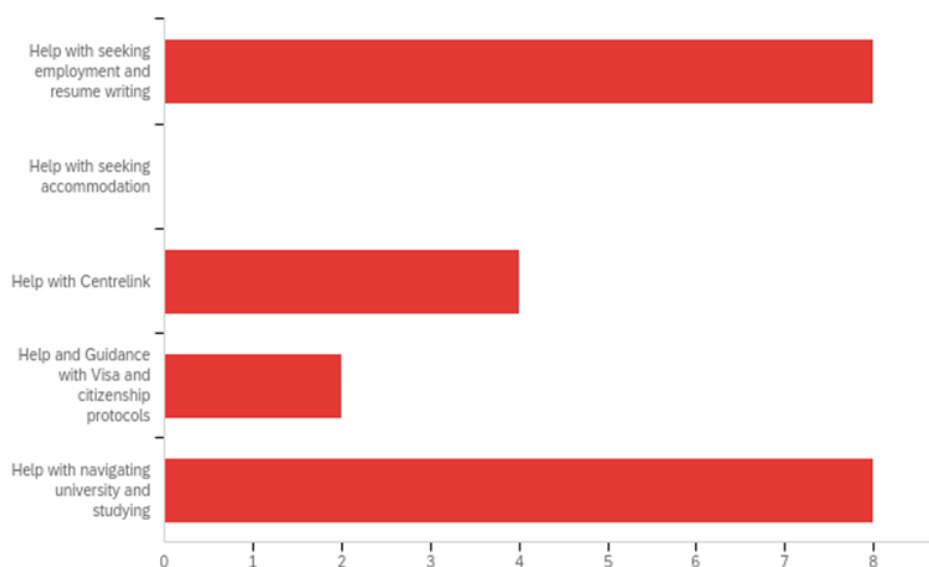

Figure 5. Other services students need at university
Source: UniSA College

4.6. Importance of peer support and informal networks

Face-to-face provision of services that were accessible and available was reported as essential in helping students progress with not only academic and language practices, but also for their social and cultural networking. Our findings echo the existing research (Fagan et al., 2018; Earnest et al., 2010) highlighting the need for formal and informal support networks. The student survey responses overwhelmingly reported that students mostly seek help from friends and fellow

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[6] Library and research skills are taught at one of our core courses called University Studies. In this course students are taught academic literacies as well as how to reference and conduct a literature review.
[7] At UniSA College we also have Uni-Mentor program where previous College students mentor new students

students (see Figure 6). This warranted an employment of the two PSOs. The role of the PSOs, in their words is, 'to have a face-to-face interaction with new students from refugee backgrounds, direct them to different services and just be there, you know, as their …as someone that they can talk to and someone they can trust that whatever they say…(they) can be an advocate on (their) behalf' (PSO A, 2020).

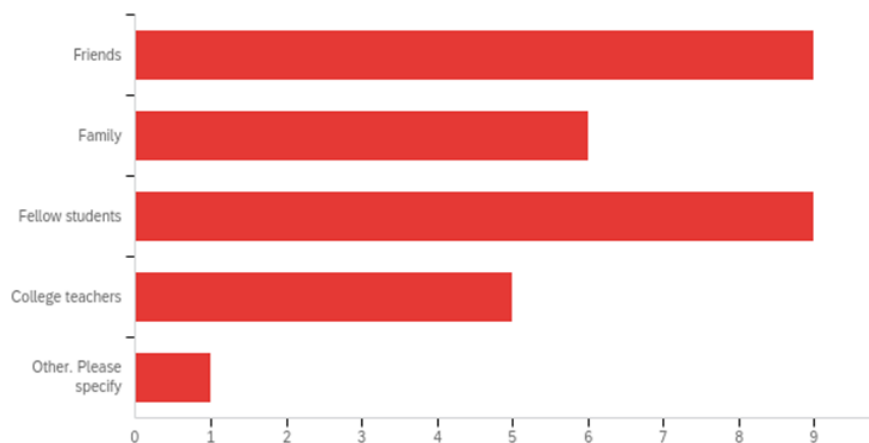Q20 - Who do you see for support with navigating university and your studies?

Figure 6. Seeking support with navigating university
Source: UniSA College

Since the establishment of their roles at UniSA College, PSOs report that they see about five or six students per week during the Study Period and that some of them need '*mainly a direction to learning support sentences. They might be working on an assignment, yet don't know where to go for help. Because most of the time the only place they know is the consultation hours for the lecturers but they don't know about PASS (peer assisted study support)* (PSO A).

During the interviews PSOs outlined how significant these peer-led approaches were for the students:

> **Peer Support Officer A:** *Yes some of them, they feel happy, when they go to the common room with an assignment and they look right and look left and see the lecturer and they see they are busy and then they see us come to them and we start a conversation and they feel happy, especially those that are refugee backgrounds, similar to see they feel more like they can relate.*
> **Interviewer:** Did the students ask you about your own experiences at university?
> **Peer Support Officer A:** *Yes, they want, they ask you like 'how did you go with this assignment, what did you do? That's how I start to direct them to the different services. So I tell them if you go to the Uni mentors they will help you with this.*
> *And one of them, at another consultation time one of them came back and he was like, thank you for directing me to like the PASS, all along I've going to the Study help Pals or Uni Mentors but not really getting the*

extra help. After receiving the PASS (advice) they were really happy that yes, he helped him with that.

Similar motivating factors were also highlighted in previous research (Vickers et al., 2017; Earnest et al., 2010; see also Silburn et al., 2010). SfRBs participating in Earnest et al.'s study (2010) mentioned the significance of one-to-one contacts, such as mentors, lecturers and tutors who were reassuring and helped them to persevere during challenging times. As Baker et al. (2018, p. 1) in their research suggest, SfRBs do not perceive the 'cold' (unfamiliar-formal) institutional support as something that is 'for them'. Instead they prefer the 'warm' (familiar-formal) support offered via 'trusted' people who act as literacy/sociocultural brokers or 'hot' (familiar-informal) support of their grapevine of other students (past and present) or knowledgeable community members.

4.7 Accessing mental health services at University

Issues with mental health and mental health services were not raised in the survey by any of the participants and yet as the interviews with PSOs show, and in line with the existing research, mental health is another area requiring attention. As PSOs' comments reveal, SfRBs perceive these services as lacking in cultural and refugee competence, and subsequently they: firstly, find them unrelatable; and secondly, also feel that the practitioners may not possess an understanding of what they had gone through. As PSOs outlines:

> **Peer Support Officer A:** *Mostly the students use like their learning support service….and the counselling and stuff they are not really aware of it… and most students are going through a lot but most of them, they feel like when they go to the services, they won't really get that support, and also they fear that it will be held against them that they will be quoted in them.*
>
> **Interviewer:** Can you please elaborate on what you mean you when you say that students go through a lot?
>
> **Peer Support Officer A:** *Yeah, like what I mean is they have to balance work and study that's just one problem by itself and sometimes, you know, they are confronted with domestic issues like violence or trauma from the past or even like, (lack of) social inclusion at uni. All of those things play on their mind and some of them they may not even want to come to Uni, but because of the pressure from their parents, they are here and they're trying to do their best and when they come, they face obstacles. Yes, all of those things are sort of weighing them down, they don't even talk about it but if they don't talk about it, they will not, you know, have the right support.*

Addressing emotional needs was also highlighted by the other PSO when she outlined a recommendation for 'working with different areas of the College to embed different strategies and support for the emotional needs of SfRBs'.

The help-seeking behaviours of SfRBs are shaped by the cultural norms and attitudes (Pastoor, 2015) and this makes it challenging for participants to disclose mental health issues or try to find treatment for these (Jack et al., 2019). Student-participants in Fagan et al.'s (2018) study highlighted their availability to talk

about mental health is hindered by the stigma associated with mental health in their cultural groups. Yet trauma and traumatic personal histories (death of family members, loss of home and personal property, displacement, physical violence (King & Owens, 2018) can significantly affect one's ability to adjust, concentrate and achieve academically (Grant & Francis, 2011). Overcoming trauma accompanied with the competing settlement-related priorities and acculturation make it very difficult for SfRBs to focus entirely on their studies.

5. Recommendations: On culturally responsive student support

Challenging the deficit views of SfRBs who have been traditionally under-represented in higher education was the central point of discussion in the student focus group. When asked about their personal recommendations for the university and the enabling sector, one of the students said that she would like the university to know that: 'all students from all backgrounds are strong in their own ways and have valuable knowledge that all students can learn from'. Another participant also said that it is important to 'spread the message about refugee students to all students', while another commented that it would be nice if people remembered 'how to spell (their) name' (Student focus group, 2019).

When PSOs were asked about how to best support SfRBs, their recommendation is to form a social platform which includes the student voice:

> **Peer Support Officer B:** *It is important to continue creating a social platform where students can express their views on different aspects of learning, challenges they are facing and how it is affecting the emotions and well-being. Setting a safe and vulnerable environment for these students to express their emotional needs will be essential to the institution in providing services to cater for those needs* (PSO B).

Addressing the emotional needs of SfRBs was also outlined by the PSOs:

> **Peer Support Officer B:** *For example: The counselling service, tutors and other learning support services can run workshops, focus group and different events with students from refugee backgrounds. All these emotional needs that will be mentioned during the social gathering events can be discussed with people in different roles of support services. This discussion can be focused on how to cater for these emotional needs of students* (PSO B).

These recommendations seem pressing given the existing research which highlights social and academic support (both formal and informal) from peers, teachers, university programs and family as significant contributory factors to academic progress (Baker, 2020; Fagan et al., 2018; Earnest et al., 2010). In order to improve academic success of SfRBs an adoption of culturally responsive strategies and teaching approaches are required.

Numerous scholars have proposed culturally responsive practices as a useful framework to help promote equity, inclusivity and respect in schools and universities. In the US, these approaches have predominantly looked at culturally diversifying the connection between learners' communities and schools (Bottiani et al., 2018), endorsing learners' cultural backgrounds from an asset-based view

and as 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al., 1992) and being culturally responsive in multicultural schools (Nieto, 2013; Phillippo, 2012; Toldson & Lemmons, 2013). In the Australian context, culturally responsive pedagogies (CRPs) 'refer to those pedagogies that actively value, and mobilise as resources, the cultural repertoires and intelligences that students bring to the learning relationship' (Morrison et al., 2019, p. v). Particularly relevant is Rigney and Hattam's (2018) thesis: toward an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy which they utilise for improving education outcomes for Indigenous students. In their more recent work, Morrison et al. (2019, p. v) argue that given 'the current conditions of super-diversity in Australian classrooms, culturally responsive pedagogy offers a hopeful approach to improving the educational experiences of all students'. Together, the existing work on Culturally Responsive Practices (CRP) illuminate that in order to promote student engagement and learning, we must endorse students' cultural differences as an asset to be encouraged by schools, rather than as a challenge that needs to be managed (Bottiani et al., 2018).

Culturally responsive approaches also resonate in the recommendations of previous research on enabling SfRBs to participate meaningfully in higher education (see Ben Moshe, 2008; Earnest et al., 2010; Lawson, 2014; Molla, 2021). These recommendations principally promote the need for a holistic approach in which institutions take into account 'socio-economic and cultural circumstances and provide general life education services beyond the usual remit of an education provider' and provide cross-cultural training for all staff (Ben-Moshe et al., 2008, p. 7). As Molla (2021) asserts: 'culturally, socially and historically responsive pedagogy is transformative in the sense that it prepares students to effectively navigate their worlds, reflect on their position, and envision alternative futures' (p. 10).

Some of the culturally responsive practices that we have developed at UniSA College include student support as well as culturally responsive education training for all our staff. In terms of supporting SfRBs, we have dedicated student officers or Peer Support Officers who carefully monitor students' progress and are often involved in communicating key enrolment dates to them. PSOs are also trained to assist with the students' social support and academic referrals as well as to refer the students to a range of university-wide services. As the data revealed in this paper shows, PSOs help improve students' social and cultural capital ensuring they develop competencies. This requires the ability to navigate the academic environment. Another resource developed as part of the student support initiatives is Peer Assisted Study Support (PASS) where students receive ghelp with their academic writing and referencing. Finally, to further facilitate peer connections, the PSOs have created *UniSA College Refugee Club,* which is a student-run University association for SfRBs.

With regard to the staff support and training needs, the project has resulted in some incentives which enhance staff knowledge (both academic and professional staff) of SfRBs' requirements. This culturally responsive approach is reflected in the tutor training sessions which include modules educating the staff about SfRBs at UniSA College. These modules consist of professional development workshops

for staff to deconstruct the tacit presumptions and stereotypes about SfRBs, and to highlight the aspirations and assets that SfRBs convey in the classroom.

Since this research was a pilot study, its scope was limited. Nevertheless, this article contributes to the much-needed body of knowledge on the experiences of SfRBs in university pathway programs. As noted previously, research on this cohort of students is still emerging. This study resonates with the findings highlighted in current literature on SfRBs and reiterates that universities need to go 'beyond literacy supports and involve changing the campus ethos to one of inter-culturality and socioeconomic inclusivity' (Naidoo, 2021, p. 193). Future research addressing in more detail how and where CRPs are applied to create more inclusive university environments for SfRBs, as well as investigating how CRPs are experienced by SfRBs would be of both benefit to SfRBs and universities in Australia.

6. Conclusion

This paper reported on the UniSA College project which aimed to build the capacities of SfRBs which they will need in order to succeed in higher education. This paper explored the aspirations as well as challenges that SfRBs experience in order to assist with their needs, aspirations and education dreams. The data from the focus group, the survey and the PSOs interviews highlight that higher education plays a central role in the lives of SfRBs. Universities are uniquely placed to provide SfRBs with transformative education prospects that help with the realisation of their individual hopes and ambitions. For successful engagement of SfRBs, education institutions need an all-encompassing approach consisting of culturally responsive efforts, and peer-led supports for students.

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Appendix A

Survey questions for students from refugee backgrounds (SfRBs)

1. Are you male, female or non-gender specific?
2. What is your country of birth?
3. b) When did you arrive in Australia?
4. Which language do you speak at home?
5. Are you a Humanitarian Visa Holder?
6. How many courses are you studying this study period?
7. Did you undergo secondary schooling or VET, TAFE study before UniSA College?
8. Do you live with family here in Adelaide?
8. a) What are your main motivations for studying at university? Choose any that apply to you from the list below:

- I want to improve my English
- I want to get a job in my chosen career
- I want to build a better life for myself
- I am doing this for my family
- I want to give back to the community and be an active participant
- I want to create more opportunities for myself
- I want to build my social networks and meet new people
- I want to 'try-out' university to see if it's the right path for me

8. b) Do you have any other motivations for studying at university? Please specify

- Continue in an area already started
- Did not get first preference
- Develop talent and creativity
- Gain entry to another degree program
- Interest
- Recommendation of teachers / counsellors
- Other

9. a) Do you work?
9. b) If yes, how many hours per week do you work?

- 0-4 hours
- 4-8 hours
- 8-12 hours
- 12-20 hours
- 20+ hours

10. Do you receive Centrelink assistance?
11. Do you pay for your accommodation?
12. Do you care for people, i.e. children, parents, siblings, other family members?
13. Do you have any other commitments not including work e.g. sporting clubs, cultural/religious commitments, other hobbies or volunteering roles? If yes, please specify.

13. a) On average, how many hours per week do you spend caring for family or other commitments such as sport, hobbies, etc.)

0-1 hour

1-2 hours

2-5 hours

5 + hours

14. What are some challenges that face while studying at the College? Mark those that are most applicable to you.

Limited English language skills
Limited social networks, e.g. I fear I may struggle making new friends in a new environment and culture
Navigating university and academic culture
Learning about Australian culture
Managing my timetable, e.g. feeling overwhelmed with study, family, work and other commitments
My motivation levels, e.g. I'm unsure about whether I want to be at university.
Lack of material and financial resources and pressure to financially support family members
Meeting family expectations to succeed at university
I don't know much about university support services, e.g. what they are or where to find them
I have trouble asking for help

14. b) Are there any other challenges that worry you? Please specify.

15. What study support services do you feel you need at the College?

Workshops for developing conversational English language skills
Workshops for developing grammatical knowledge, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, etc.
Workshops focusing on academic literacy skills: Paraphrasing, Summarising, Reading Strategies, Referencing, etc.
Peer Assisted Study Sessions
Interpreting and understanding how to write short answer questions for science courses
Math and numeracy support workshops
Research skill workshops
Essay writing workshops
I don't know what services I need

16. What other support services do you feel you need at the College?

Help with seeking employment and resumé writing
Help with seeking accommodation
Help with Centrelink
Help and Guidance with Visa and citizenship protocols
Help with navigating university and studying

16. b) Are there any other services you require? Please specify.

17. Who do you see for support with navigating university and your studies?

Friends
Family
Fellow students
College teachers

17. b) Other, please specify.

18. Do you know where to seek help if you need it? Please mark the services you are aware of:

Learning advisors: helping with assignments
Student Engagement Unit: student counselling
Student Engagement Unit: helping with accommodation
Student Engagement Unit: helping with employment

19. Do you feel comfortable seeking help when you need it?
   If yes, what have sought help with previously?
   If not, why not? Please elaborate

Appendix B

Questions for individual interviews with peer support officers (PSO)

1. How old are you?

2. What is your country of origin?

3. How long have you been in Australia?

5. Are you the first in the family to study at University?

6. How many students were you seeing per week? What sort of help did they need from you?

7. What do you feel were the biggest challenges that students from refugee backgrounds you saw in your role as a PSO face?

9. Do you feel you were adequately prepared to respond to students' inquiries?

10. Please describe the most difficult student situation you encountered as a PSO?

11. Please describe the most rewarding student situation you encountered as a PSO?

12. To create an ideal situation, what advice would you give to the institution (UNISA College) on how we can best support students from refugee backgrounds?