Success for CALD students at USQ: Where to from here?

A seminar paper by Geoffrey Parkes

Today I would like to present some of the findings of a two year project looking at how USQ provides for its CALD students. I want to discuss the responses from surveys that analysed that service provision from a staff and student perspective, and detail some of the sub-projects that emerged or were built upon as a result of continuing funding in 2014. I have also, as some of you have noted, offered to ask some provocative questions about where to from here – and I would like to say up front that any such questions, reflections and comments are mine and mine alone, based on the research and data gathered and ongoing discussions with staff and students currently working at the University. There are significant differences between my own viewpoints and the necessarily-confined language of the recommendations of those who worked on CALD to Success – myself, Sue Bishop, Eric Kong and Jill Lawrence – and Achieving Success – which extended the group to Ann Dashwood and Lindy Kimmins. My point in making such provocations is not to criticise current USQ operations from an overly critical viewpoint, but rather to reflect on the needs of staff and students that remain unmet in our current activities. Here, when I say our, I am referring to the University as an institution, and ourselves as practitioners within the Open Access College. I make these comments here today because I believe in the transformative power of collaborative work that is at the core of the Open Access College and our particular ability to tell the stories of these CALD students to those at higher positions in the University where very little is being done. I note clearly here my own failure as Project Manager of Achieving Success to articulate our results and recommendations into anything that resembles a sustained and sustainable approach to CALD students’ success but I offer these provocations in the hope that we can work to move forward and that the work already done can form a basis for information provided to the newly formed National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia special interest group for CALD students and that you might participate in with me.

In 2013, the University’s then Social Justice Group funded CALD to Success for two years with a grant of $50,000. The information gathered in CALD to Success was designed to assist with students transitioning into and progressing through their undergraduate degrees. The group undertook to interview staff and students to ascertain what USQ was doing well, and what areas it could improve on when it came to helping CALD students.

Here, perhaps, is one of the first problems we encounter – the terminology. CALD refers to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse. In theory, it replaced the Non-English Speaking Background in the early 2010s, to recognise the multiplicity of lived experiences of students who were being lumped together despite their differences – for instance, international students with significant educational and wealth capital were being studied alongside those from refugee backgrounds and clumped in with those were students from second or third generation migrant families who were first in family at University. As with most ideas, it has its merits, in theory, but in practice CALD can be used to describe anyone who isn’t white and middle class. It does not adequately allow practitioners to differentiate between the experiences of students from Chinese families who have settled in eastern and northern Sydney and those of Pacific Island descent currently residing in the Logan-Springwood corridor. And, as we determined, it did not allow us as researchers to go beyond looking at what we could do for CALD students from refugee backgrounds. It needs to also be clear that our results are limited to students and staff who responded to invitations to participate in the studies and activities – we lack meaningful data to even begin to approach an appropriate analysis of USQ’s success or otherwise when dealing with online students from CALD backgrounds.

Returning to the Open Access College, what we did find from our research is that where we are succeeding fantastically is with Sue Bishop. Overwhelmingly the student respondents cited Sue as their point of contact in terms of who they came to when they needed help. Sue, as we know, is the University’s refugee support officer. What many of you don’t know is that she is also funded as a project via the government’s provision of Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, as was Achieving Success. The University and the College rightly identified the need for a person who could assist students from refugee backgrounds as they enter into the higher education sector and many students cited Sue as being helpful and caring. That they keep returning to Sue raises an interesting issue and a key point that was also discovered during the research project. CALD students are not benefitting from the institutional support structures that have been mainstreamed to support USQ students in terms of enrolment and assistance throughout their degrees. Two factors here became apparent – one, anecdotally, is that as any of you who have ever tried to study here at USQ know, enrolling and maintaining one’s enrolment requires a substantial effort and engagement with a computerised system that is not intuitive. No specific support, outside of Sue, exists to help students in their degree programs with their administrative issues. Furthermore, SRO’s and administrative staff, although eager to learn, admit to a lack of training in cross cultural competency and any specific matters that CALD students face. Any knowledge these staff had obtained was not through formal channels but rather via self-driven activities that occurred after engagement with CALD students. Such self-driven activities were common amongst the broader University staff and, while staff referred back to programs such as Excel which were a peer-driven form of cross-cultural training, no regular programs were identified that could introduce staff to or further their knowledge of common issues facing CALD students.

As I’ve indicated previously, part of the study was to analyse the issues facing students regarding progression through their degree programs. To this extent, academic staff were well and truly aware of these issues as a result of their teaching activities. Low Academic English and Digital literacies were among the top challenges that staff identified; similarly, lack of proficiency with Academic English skills was also the top challenge noted by students in their interviews. It is salient here to mention a particular, some might say peculiar, aspect of the divisional structure at USQ. Many universities in Australia have writing centres, specific locations where students at whatever level of their program, can access ongoing help to improve their academic literacies. These centres operate with staff who are integrated into the faculties or schools section, and academic language and literacy, at a Bachelor degree level, is often taught in a coordinated and integrated way that ensures classes develop these literacies within a discipline-specific focus. At USQ, there is no such specific centre – instead there is the Learning Centre, an offshoot of Learning and Teaching services in the Academic Division, where students have to make appointments for one on one help with staff who are often employed in a variety of roles. To be clear, this and what follows is not a criticism of the Learning Centre, but an explanation of why its services are not being accessed by CALD students from refugee backgrounds. To make appointments, students must negotiate the Learning Centre’s webpage and a reasonably detailed appointment making process outlining what they require help with – when English is your second language and your computer skills are limited to social media, email and some Word Processing abilities, this represents a substantial challenge. To make an appointment in person, students have to go into an unfamiliar location that may or may not be open, articulate their needs to the staff member present and then proceed through a similar process for a follow-up appointment. What is, in the sector, currently labelled “just in time” help – which is what many CALD students actually need – is unavailable. The only “just in time” help offered is an online service promoted as providing assistance 24/7 where students submit their work via an interface to an unknown person, again having to negotiate a document uploading system and a series of questions that nearly reduced me to screaming fits when I trialled it, and then wait for an emailed response. For those of you imagining the situation, the assistance is absolutely dependant on the student being close to completing their work – otherwise they have nothing to submit. One can see the almost-Pythonesque situation whereby a student needing help to commence their assignment is unable to receive it until they have almost completed it.

As I mentioned previously, other universities have academic English literacies embedded into their degree programs and the 2014 project, Achieving Success, was able to fund a trial of embedding relevant and timely extension activities, supported by a trained tutor, into four core courses across the University. The development of these materials was successful. Their uptake was not. We were faced with a situation where, because of institutional regulations, students could only be encouraged to participate in the activities, despite the fact that in other universities, students who are identified to be at risk participate in these type of extensions as a condition of their continued enrolment. Despite low numbers, the trial showed that students could benefit from such a program – one student who had failed previously was able to achieve a B and “in other cases, students studying courses outside their disciplines were able to pass their courses”. The promotion of REACH as a successful strategy for increasing students’ rates of success took a number of forms, was targeted and repeated throughout the semester, and responsive to ongoing updates from student results. Nevertheless, without any support from those higher up in the management chain who needed to make the decision to support obligatory extension activities, a measurable and meaningful indication of the potential of this program to actively assist students in need is not available.

However, REACH has received further funding for 2015 under a round of annual HEPPP grants and it is here in my presentation that an appreciable irony may well be noticed. As mentioned previously, digital literacies were identified by staff as an area in which CALD students needed to show marked improvement. Such a need had long been recognised by Sue Bishop and staff at the Open Access College, who had developed what became affectionately known as the ICT for Refugees project. Over three years and multiple offerings the course provided vital computer skills and, just as importantly, access to laptops that could be used by the students at any time. Why was this so important? To quote a recent presentation by Sue and myself, “Students who are older often do not have the online socialised experience that contemporary younger students do. Furthermore, cultural, geographical and University-based factors in Toowoomba continue to present a barrier to pathway students wanting to bridge this divide. Unlike students from a white, western family, many female students from refugee backgrounds who are Muslim simply cannot access computers at USQ in the same way. Their cultural beliefs and social situations make it impossible for them to use the available on-campus computer equipment after classes. Furthermore, unlike undergraduate students, pathway students are studying in classes for at least 25 hours per week, severely limiting the time available for outside-class computer usage. Toowoomba’s public transport system remains an incredible stumbling block to encouraging equity of access – there are no buses after 6pm and no buses on Sunday meaning that students from refugee backgrounds who have limited incomes simply cannot come to campus. Finally, unlike undergraduate students, students in pathway programs are unable to benefit from equity bursaries and Centrelink payments which can fund needed hardware and software purchases.”

How successful was the course? Successful enough to kill it. Again, quoting our recent presentation, “As it stands, the ICT for Refugees program is currently on an indefinite hiatus. Last year, USQ authorities recognised the validity of the course as an important tool in educating pathway students and incorporated future funding into a project application for three years, designed to improve digital literacies for students from a variety of backgrounds. Ironically this very recognition was the death knell – after a chance in government funding arrangements resulting from a blocked budget in the Senate, HEPPP funds for large projects were frozen and the ICT for Refugees project could no longer function. At a time when USQ has moved to an online format only for its course materials and is encouraging a wider participation of students from refugee backgrounds in areas such as Springfield and Ipswich, the course is sadly sitting as an archived document on the University’s Project Management site.”

The sense of frustration is compounded by the response from the Social Justice Board and the Social Justice Projects Board regarding the recommendations made by the CALD to Success and Achieving Success projects. There were 7 key recommendations, as follows:

7.1 Database of CALD Students

7.2 Academic Writing Skills

7.3 ICT Training

7.4 Student Support

7.5 Specific Student Support Officer

7.6 Cultural Awareness Training for Staff

7.7 Organising Social Events for CALD Students

Intriguingly, these recommendations match, almost exactly, the commitments given by the University of Southern Queensland in its 2014-16 Mission-based Compact with the Australian Government. In that document, USQ nominated CALD students as a new additional equity group, and confirmed the funding of the CALD to Success and REACH projects. It also committed to a project designed to “enhance the cultural transition of students from NESB to higher education” and to support learning and teaching staff “through training in intercultural competencies”. Perhaps naively, with such commitment expressed in a formal form and the University providing over 200 thousand dollars to investigate and improve the situation of CALD students, I myself, and many in our working group, concluded that those in charge of managing further funding and ongoing business as usual in the University would be committed to implementing these recommendations. At present, the only activities being funded are those developed by the University’s multicultural officer regarding a scheme involving a lunch time meeting between students and staff for conversation purposes, and activities that promote multicultural displays at USQ. Outside of the Open Access College, no specific work is being done to assist CALD students from refugee backgrounds who present with specific needs. No cultural training is taking place. I recognise openly that it is my failure as a project manager to ensure that project recommendations are converted into business actualities, but I also freely admit to not being a business case manager or someone who sits on these boards. I think, however, it is time to openly admit that we are failing at the institutional level to do what USQ’s Social Justice Strategic Plan articulates: “Embedding socially just principles and actions into all areas of future enterprise planning, resourcing and implementation”.

The question arises, what can we do? To be honest, at a broader institutional level, I’m not sure. I’m open to suggestions, to discussions and to participating in plans that can achieve this on a regular basis rather than depending on intermittent HEPPP funding and the unclear and unstated decision making processes at upper levels of management. There are however two ways in which I think the Open Access College can address the needs of students in current pathway programs.

The first relates to the changing nature of what we as a College are able to offer. It is now policy that we offer only ELICOS level 3 and above, and that we do not have the resources, or funding, to sustain offerings for those at a lower level or for students who cannot pass level 3. These lower levels have traditionally been seen as pathway points for many CALD students from refugee backgrounds, and now they must achieve a much higher score to enter the pathway program. The focus is on a pathway to University, which, given the current funding restrictions and the overall purpose of the College seems reasonable. My suggestion however is that the College also functions as an extension of the University’s social justice work, and that we cannot divorce ourselves from the needs of the communities we serve. We have a long history of accepting refugee students and nurturing them into their degree programs. We now have to accept that only some of our students are destined for that outcome. To approach and acknowledge and work with that requires an adoption of a model that the TPP program has worked with now for some time – that TPP, although providing a pathway into university, can also be used by students to decide what it is they want to do with their futures. My point today is that similarly, at a level 3 offering where students do not show signs of being able to progress or indeed an interest in further studies, social and career counselling can be provided to allow students to follow a path out of the University. I was heartened by recent developments that saw TAFE representatives meet with College staff to discuss transitions, and Sue Bishop and I have met with Nicholas Lambert, the Program Manager for Skills for Education & Employment (SEE). SEE offers CALD students from refugee backgrounds and other CALD students a further 800 hours of language training which can be directed towards language for employment or education, and has a focus on using everyday language to develop students’ skills in language accuracy and fluency. My suggestion is that as a College, in light of our new operating focus on pathways, we need to be working with community operations such as SEE, viewing them as collaborators, rather than competition, so that we as College and University staff can do what the strategic plan claims to do: “to service the diverse student and employee cohorts that live, learn and work within it and grow people, productivity and innovation at a local, regional and national level”.

My final challenge to you all is to ask that you turn your wealth of experience into collaborative knowledge that may help the students we teach today succeed as undergraduate and postgraduate students in the future. The National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia has formed a special interest group relating to CALD students, of which I am the chairperson. I would like to encourage you to discuss with me any research that you have done, or that you would like to do, so that we as a group can contribute to a needed national conversation about best practice learning and teaching for CALD students. USQ continues to list CALD students as one of its core priority groups in its Social Justice Strategic Plan – by showing USQ what is already being done, by networking with those who are offering something more at other institutions, and by developing plans to encouraging those in management to implement necessary recommendations that affect students’ lives, we may indeed have a chance to achieve our transformative potential as a college and a university.