

Educational Experiences of African High School Students in Perth: Findings from a Community Consultation Exercise

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Abstract

One of the key targets of the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (“Bradley Review”) is to increase the percentage of Australian university students from low-socioeconomic status (LSES) backgrounds to twenty percent by 2020. Since the publication of the Bradley Review, a broad range of equity programs and strategies targeting various LSES students to enhance their access to and participation in higher education have been implemented. While most West Australian residents from Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) seem to fall into the LSES category, the proportion of the population participating in higher education is believed to be low. This paper presents anecdotes from a recent community consultation exercise with African high school students in Perth to understand their experiences and in particular, the manner in which this has influenced their respective post-secondary education career pathways. Following this exercise, a scientific study to explore the topic further is currently underway, while a community outreach event for encouraging the increased participation of SSA school students in higher education has been established.

Introduction

One of the key targets of the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education (“Bradley Review”) is to increase the percentage of university students from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds to 20% by the year 2020 (Bradley *et al* 2008; Commonwealth of Australia 2009). The Bradley Review and the benefits of obtaining a university degree have led to the implementation of various equity initiatives in schools and higher education institutions nationwide targeting students from low SES backgrounds to realise their aspirations to succeed in higher education. While these activities have led to an increase to a ratio of 0.62 for students from low SES backgrounds in higher education, much more needs to be done, as the figure still does not represent low SES groups in the broader population (Naylor *et al* 2013; Gore *et al* 2015).

The focus on students from low SES groups as targets of equity programs in higher education raises three key theoretical challenges. Some have questioned the label “low SES”, arguing that it is a deficit conceptualisation and portrays so called low SES students as a “problem” in higher education (McKay & Devlin 2015). Dockery *et al* (2015) have also criticised the “area measure” approach to determining socio-economic status because it has the tendency to misclassify individuals’ higher education opportunities and the associated potential for policy outcomes (see also Koshy 2011). Thirdly, it appears that the equity in higher education literature homogenizes people from low-SES backgrounds.

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Currently, there is a broad range of equity programs and strategies that are targeting refugee students to enhance access and participation in higher education (Silburn 2010; Naidoo 2013, 2015b). While a focus on refugee students is important, it risks clustering students from refugee backgrounds as a homogenous group who have similar competencies and/or challenges, although there is evidence that, among other issues, their experiences relate to the type of school they attend (public, private or mission) and gender (Norton & Cherastidtham 2014; Gale *et al* 2015). This has been echoed in Naidoo *et al*'s (2015a, p. 5) recent study of refugee students in the Greater Western Sydney secondary schools. The authors concluded that, 'refugee background students are not seen as a homogenous group with the same concerns, capabilities and hopes for their future life' (see also Terry & Naylor 2016). Therefore, there is the need to identify, develop, and target specific members of a low SES group, as opposed to implementing "one-size-fits-all" interventions (see Cardak 2014; Gale *et al* 2015; Gore *et al* 2015). With regard to SSA students, they have not received direct and specific attention as learners with specific characteristics, nor have their within-group differences been articulated.

Australian residents from Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are often erroneously thought of as a homogenised group, designated as 'disadvantaged', 'refugees' and/or low SES (Naidoo *et al.* 2010; Silburn *et al.* 2010). However, Adusei-Asante *et al* (2016) have argued in a recent publication that there are three categories of SSA in Western Australia, namely: (1) First Generation refugees; (2) Second Generation refugees; and (3) non-refugees. The First Generation refugees are Africans who were born in SSA, but have fled war or famine. Second Generation refugee Africans are the children of the First Generation refugees. Professionals and international students make up most of the non-refugee category.

The proportion of Australian residents from Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) participating in higher education in Western Australia is officially unknown, although it is generally believed to be low. Furthermore, there seem to be no empirical studies identifying the factors that contribute to their post-secondary school choices and destinations. The literature generally identifies issues such as a person's SES, quality of school or university career guidance and outreach programs, and educational background of parents and/or family as predictors of students' post-secondary school destinations (Somerville *et al* 2013; Cardak *et al* 2014). This paper presents anecdotes of a 2015 community consultation exercise with SSA high school students in Perth to establish their experiences in high school and how this has influenced their post-secondary education choices.

Anecdotes from the community consultation exercise pointed to an environment, particularly in public schools, that may deliberately discourage SSA high school students from pursuing higher education after Year 12, but this warrants further investigation. The exercise suggested that, only one of 6 SSA students in high school are able to go to the university after year 12, with majority of them either pursuing the Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathway or discontinue their education entirely. Below is presented the rationale for high dropout rates after high school and the factors contributing to the seeming overrepresentation of SSA high school students in the VET pathway right after Year 12.

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The consultation process began with interaction with community members to obtain a sense of the experiences of SSA in Perth high schools. Four student focus group discussions were held, and an interview with another student. In one of the focus groups, all the students had just completed, while in the other, they were all in Year 12. The rest were made up of students within different year groups (Year 10-12). A total of 15 students, aged between 16 and 25, participated in the consultative discussion, consisting of students from mission schools, public schools and independent public schools. Interactions were informal, and contacts for discussion were made at community gatherings; social functions, church and family gatherings. The informal discussions in the social gathering allowed the participants to freely express themselves after obtaining their verbal consent. Notes were taken during the interviews and focus group discussions. This paper presents the highlights of the themes distilled from the exercise.

Findings

Students who participated in the community consultation exercise shared the following general experiences they faced as SSA high school students. Some mentioned that:

- ‘Teachers are generally good (depending on school)’
- ‘Feel sidelined’;
- Teachers’ attitudes towards us is different as compared with other Australian students’
- ‘Feelings of not fitting in’
- ‘Feelings of not being part of the class’
- ‘Not receiving enough support from school’
- ‘No appropriate feedback from teachers’
- ‘Feeling of working extra harder to be included’
- ‘Generally placed in poor performing class groups, although my academic performance are good’.

Asked about the challenges the SSA students faced, the following anecdotes emerged:

- ‘Fitting in is a challenge’
- ‘Always judged by where you come from’
- ‘Thought of based on your race’
- ‘Low expectations, and making students feel they can’t do certain programs’
- ‘Judgemental base on race’
- ‘Fear to ask questions in class in order not to be judged’
- ‘No support in choosing career path’
- ‘Poor teacher support’
- ‘Understanding the teachers’
- ‘Feelings of de-motivation from teachers’
- ‘English language used as key determinant’
- ‘Feeling of discrimination and racial divide’
- ‘Making us feel they cannot achieve’
- ‘Profiling based on race’.

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When we asked the students about the career guidance support they mentioned that:

- ‘All schools had career advisers’
- ‘Feeling of de-motivation received from some teachers’
- ‘Counsellors in some school provide good guidance based on performance’
- ‘Some counsellors make students feel they would amount to nothing’
- ‘Most African students are encouraged to go into the VET pathway’
- ‘Poor feedback on assignments’
- ‘Lack of clarity on what needs to be done’.

We proceeded to ask the students their plans after high school. Only 5 of the 15 students had chosen to go to pursue university education. The other ten had chosen the VET pathway, although six of them were generally unsure of their decision. The students proposed the following measures to help them excel in their studies:

- ‘Motivation from parents’
- ‘3-way relationship feedback system between parents, teachers and students’
- ‘Counselling and continuous encouragement of African students that they are capable’
- ‘Organise forums that would encourage African students’.

Discussion

Our community consultation with students from African backgrounds in Perth high schools has revealed that African students in Perth high schools are experiencing challenges and would need support to succeed at the secondary school level and also making informed decisions on their post-high school educational pathways. Generally, there appeared to be no significant difference in the perception of feelings expressed by students, although the support levels in the mission schools seemed to be better than the public schools. Students from SSA backgrounds reported feeling discriminated against and intimidated, on the basis of their skin colour. Generally, most of them receive little or no support at home to study. Most students also alleged feeling they have been profiled to believe that they are not capable of achieving, pointing mainly to teachers as contributors to this. Others mentioned that their performance was not appropriately used to support them, and generally do not speak out when dissatisfied. The anecdotes also showed that SSA students lack orientation for integrating into the Australian educational system and culture.

Following this exercise, a community outreach event to encourage the participation of Africans in higher education and make informed post-secondary choices (AIM HIGHER SUMMIT) began in 2016. Hosted by Edith Cowan University, the event brings together successful African professionals in various fields to inspire African students in Perth. Furthermore, Edith Cowan University is currently leading an empirical study that is exploring post-secondary choices and destinations of African students across Australia. The study seeks to present an analysis of a ten-year trend (2006-2016) in post-secondary school destinations of SSA students in Perth, Sydney and Melbourne, ultimately aimed at developing a model for encouraging the increased participation of SSA school students in higher education.

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