








Original Article

# Widening University Access for Students of Asylum-Seeking Backgrounds: (Mis)recognition in an Australian Context

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Despite the intensely competitive international higher education sector, universities can still play a role in providing public good through building social solidarity and mobility in volatile and increasingly divided societies. This paper draws on a longitudinal narrative enquiry that follows 22 students from asylum-seeking backgrounds in Australian universities—a distinct group within the category of forced migration whose university experiences have rarely been studied. It explores the students' visceral realities and tensions as they attempt to navigate government and institutional policies and practices which fail to recognise the unique category and needs of this distinct group. The paper develops a conceptual frame comprising a critical theory of recognition (Axel Honneth) and the feminist developments of recognition (Nancy Fraser). It explores how competing discourses are being played out in Australian universities about the educational needs of students from asylum-seeking backgrounds. Finally, it critically reflects on the role of universities' policies and practices in enabling and/or constraining public good through recognising the unique needs of students of asylum-seeking backgrounds.

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## Introduction

This research into contemporary migration for those fleeing and seeking asylum in a host nation was designed to hear the voices of those who often remain voiceless and seeks to understand how students from a refugee and asylum-seeking background experience life in the higher education sector in Australia. However, before exploring this issue it is important to acknowledge that participation in compulsory education for children and youth from refugee backgrounds prior to settlement is far lower than for



nationals (Dryden-Peterson, 2010). Although figures vary from nation to nation, globally, children of refugee background are five times more likely to be out of school compared to non-refugee children (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2015). 50% of refugee children have access to primary education compared to 90% of non-refugee children (UNHCR, 2015). At lower secondary level, the figures worsen, with 84% of children having access, compared to 22% of children of refugee background (UNHCR, 2015). As a result of these alarming figures, there has been an increasing stress placed on the need for refugee children to gain access to compulsory education. However, less stress has been placed on the need for post-compulsory training and qualifications despite statistics suggesting that just three per cent of those of a refugee background attend university compared to 37% globally (UNHCR, 2019). Yet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4, to “[e]nsure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning” (UNHCR, 2015, p. 6) cannot be achieved by 2030 without serious sustained attention to university access and participation for all students, including those from refugee backgrounds.

A small but burgeoning literature is now examining the journeys of those from refugee background into, through and beyond higher education and in particular, universities (Hartley *et al.*, 2018; Naidoo *et al.*, 2019; Webb *et al.*, 2019). However, one group which has tended to fall through the cracks of this body of scholarship is students from asylum-seeking backgrounds in universities. A major reason for this is that although terms such as asylum seekers, refugees and forced migration are often used interchangeably in the media and society more generally, each term carries different entitlements in terms of financial support, legal recognition and a myriad of other services offered by settlement countries. Legal recognition and services for asylum-seeking students will also differ depending on the host nation in which an individual settles.

In brief, students from “asylum-seeking” backgrounds are a distinct group, with unique needs and constraints. They are “refugees” due to their well-founded fear of being persecuted; officially, however, they are awaiting this designation as status. As such, they have not yet been awarded the same protection as students from refugee backgrounds. To understand the situation facing students from asylum-seeking backgrounds, it is important to recognise some of the differences between students of non-refugee, refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds in the university sector.

In the Australian university sector, there are major distinctions between the treatment of students of refugee background and those seeking asylum. Most critically, unlike students of refugee background, individuals who have been designated as asylum-seeking in Australia do not qualify as domestic students. Instead, they are placed in the category of international students (Hartley *et al.*, 2018; White, 2017) [1]. This means that they must pay high university fees while generally suffering from peripheral, precarious and perilous conditions in terms of settlement in their temporary host nation. These conditions include being placed on short-term bridging or temporary protection visas that can be revoked by the



Federal Government at any time should their refugee assessment be unfavourable (Australian Department of Home Affairs, 2019). The small amount of research that has been undertaken in the Australian context on this cohort (c.f., Dunwoodie *et al.*, 2020; Hartley *et al.*, 2018; Reimer *et al.*, 2019; Stevenson and Baker, 2018; White, 2017) suggests that the very different conditions under which they live may not be sufficiently recognised and taken into account by university policies and administrators. This is despite an increasing number of Australian universities offering scholarships for those of asylum-seeking background. Yet, policies that recognise and work with and around the very real constraints faced by this cohort of students are crucial in ensuring that students can gain the full potential of their education, such as opportunities for mentorship, friendship, “skills for reliance, problem solving, critical thinking and teamwork ... [improved] ... job prospects, and boosts ... [in] ... confidence and self-esteem” (UNHCR, 2015, p. 5). Policies at institutional and national level simultaneously can work to open up such opportunities and/or constrain these goals and aspirations.

This article examines the experiences of asylum seekers in Australian universities, focusing on the interplay between their experiences of university education and university policies. The paper begins by defining two key terms—*asylum seeker* and *refugee*—as these are crucial in understanding the different conditions through which students of asylum-seeking background may experience university education. It then outlines the conceptual frame of the paper which draws on theories of justice informed by the concepts of recognition (Axel Honneth) and feminist developments of recognition and (mis)recognition (i.e. Nancy Fraser). In doing so, it explores how competing discourses are being played out at the institutional and individual level in terms of the educational needs of students from asylum-seeking backgrounds. The article then draws on interviews conducted with 22 first-year ethnically diverse students of asylum-seeking background about their experiences of the challenges and constraints in accessing and transitioning into higher education in one of the most populous states of Australia, Victoria. By analysing these student experiences through the lenses of theories of recognition and (mis)recognition, the article aims to contribute to understanding how university policy and practices can actively contribute to public good through recognising the unique needs of students of asylum-seeking backgrounds. The article concludes with a discussion of implications for policy and practice in Australian universities and beyond.

## Definition of Key Terms and Literature Review

The term “refugee” has been defined in international law in order to afford refugees protection. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol as well as other legal texts, such as the 1969 Organisation of African Unity Refugee Convention, remain the cornerstone of modern refugee protection (UNHCR, 2011).



The 1951 Convention [signed by 145 Nation states including Australia (UNHCR, 2011)] defines a refugee as:

Any person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country (UNHCR, 2011, p. 3).

In 2019, the UNHCR (2019) reported the numbers of people who have been forcibly displaced; now, it exceeds 70 million, including nearly 26 million of these peoples classified as refugees, and many millions are still awaiting refugee status resolution. Countries of origin include crisis areas such as Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia. Most of the displaced people seek refuge in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, Uganda and Sudan (UNHCR, 2019) with fewer reaching countries such as the UK, Canada, Sweden and Australia. As signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, all countries are expected to ensure that the rights of refugees are respected and protected.

The protection afforded to refugees under the convention has many components. These include safety from being returned to the dangers in which they have fled; access to asylum processes that are fair and efficient; and assurance that the host nation government take measures to ensure that those seeking refuge have their basic human rights respected, allowing them to live in dignity and safety, while assisting them to find a longer-term resolution to their upheaval (UNHCR, 2011). The host nation in which the refugee resides, in accordance with the 1951 convention, must bear the primary responsibility for this protection. As the Refugee Council of Australia (2016, p. 1) notes:

Individuals seeking asylum are people who move across borders in search of protection. An asylum seeker describes someone who has applied for protection as a refugee and is awaiting the determination of their status.

Host nations or refugee authorities (e.g. UNHCR) can recognise asylum seekers as refugees by deeming them as fitting the international definition of refugee. Most refugees have at some point sought asylum; that is, they have lodged an individual claim for protection and have had that claim favourably assessed by a government or by the UNHCR.

Crucial to this clarification is that people do not “become” refugees at the point when their claims for protection are upheld. They were already refugees, and the assessment process has simply recognised their pre-existing status (Refugee Council of Australia, 2016). From the moment people flee their country due to a well-founded fear of persecution, as stipulated in the Refugee Convention



(UNHCR, 2011), they become refugees and are entitled to international protection and assistance. This means that a person can simultaneously be a refugee and an asylum seeker. The other side of the argument is that asylum seekers who do not have the grounds for protection and whose claims are consequently rejected are not and never were actually refugees.

In regard to education, Article 22 of the 1951 UNHCR Refugee Convention ensures that refugees are treated as nationals with respect to elementary education and are accorded treatment:

not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships (UNHCR, 1951).

The global education movement has traditionally focused efforts on the first part of Article 22, the provision of primary education. Higher education has largely been seen as too expensive and taking resources away from the goal to achieve universal primary education (Dryden-Peterson, 2010; United Nations, 2015). There has, however, been more recent recognition of higher education as a critical, often protective, instrument, ensuring a sustainable and meaningful life for people seeking asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2010; Hartley *et al.*, 2018; Naidoo *et al.*, 2019; Universities Scotland, 2016; Webb *et al.*, 2019; White, 2017) and as a “powerful driver for change” (United Nations, 2016, Article 84).

National policy in most countries has not been responsive to the recognition of the importance of access to higher education for people seeking asylum. Webb *et al.* (2019) identify commonalities in the literature regarding policies in countries such as the UK, Canada, Australia and some European countries. One commonality is that people seeking asylum who are awaiting confirmation of their refugee status are treated as international students, with little recognition of their particular experience and unique needs. Typically, this designation means that they will need to pay high tuition fees and will not be provided with access to domestic student financial support programs, thus making higher education participation unworkable for many (Hartley *et al.*, 2018; Morrice, 2013; Schneider, 2018; Webb *et al.*, 2019). The issue is one of the “sameness” (Guo, 2010), in which all migrants are considered to have equal needs, with little room to acknowledge and respond to the particularities of those forced to migrate. Crucially, there is often what Stevenson and Baker (2018, p. 46) call “policy silence” around access to and participation in higher education for students seeking asylum—a silence which this article attempts to challenge.

Such policy silence, though, does not operate within a vacuum, but within particular policy contexts. In the UK and Australia, higher education policy has



been shaped by three decades of intentional efforts to open entry to students from designated under-represented groups (Stevenson and Baker, 2018; Webb *et al.*, 2019). These national equity frames, however, are focused on domestic populations. In Australia, target equity groups in universities have remained static since 1990 and do not reflect “the changing needs and profile of an increasingly diverse and multicultural Australian society” (Stevenson and Baker, 2018, p. 39). The frames also do not readily extend to include the intersectionality of the experiences of people seeking asylum (Stevenson and Baker, 2018). That is, in addition to their legal status, the lives of young people from refugee backgrounds are often simultaneously influenced by factors such as ethnicity, gender, class and/or religion, some of which might be experienced as being in tension with the expectations of the new host societies (Kaukko and Wernesjö, 2017). Thus, asylum-seeking and refugee students become stuck between policies predicated either on the experience of international student migration or that of domestic target groups, neither of which fit their situation.

In such policy contexts, research has found that the people charged with enacting policy—often staff at universities—attempt to find ways to make a better fit. They “workaround” the regulatory pillars” (Webb *et al.*, 2019, p. 14) or assist asylum-seeking students in “bypassing” traditional procedures (Morrice, 2009). One of the exceptions to this policy silence is Scotland. Universities Scotland (2016) has produced a document to ensure understanding across universities so “that any displaced person living in Scotland that wants to access higher education is not discouraged by the administrative procedures required to gain entry into higher education” (1). Universities are encouraged to “treat each application individually”, and although the same procedure of charging asylum-seeking students “international” fees is in place, universities have the option to charge them the lower “home” fee (Universities Scotland, 2016, p. 4). In other words, informal “workarounds” are formalised in policy.

Such flexibility does not exist in the Australian university policy context. As in many other countries, people seeking asylum are treated as international students and are ineligible for Federal Government financial assistance programs (Hartley *et al.*, 2018; Webb *et al.*, 2019). As an international student, an undergraduate degree averages AUD \$30,000 per year (McCarthy and Dauba, 2017). Lack of policy coherence creates the potential for an asylum-seeking student to graduate from a government secondary school in Australia, but then be deemed international for university studies (Hartley *et al.*, 2018; White, 2017). To counter this financial difficulty, 23 out of 43 universities in Australia currently provide scholarships to refugee and asylum-seeking students (Refugee Council of Australia, 2018), covering tuition fees and sometimes living costs. There are currently an estimated 204 asylum-seeking students across Australia with such scholarships (Hartley *et al.*, 2018). However, there are other federal policies that serve to discourage people seeking asylum from accessing higher education. One example is the policy which



denies income support for asylum-seeking students who engage in tertiary courses longer than 12 months. More recently, a policy change has caused people who study (full time or part time) while on Bridging Visas to lose 89% of their New Comer allowance and, in most cases, also their casework support (RCOA, 2018). As Hartley *et al.* (2018, p. 3) write, people seeking asylum are “forced to endure a policy landscape that is not only hostile but changeable with very little, or no warning, which creates considerable stress and confusion”.

## Conceptual Framework

In order to understand and provide researchers and practitioners with the means to contest this changeable and hostile policy landscape, the concept of recognition will be used in this article to think through the policy effects on students from asylum-seeker backgrounds. This is because the concept of recognition, derived from the work of Honneth (1995) and Fraser (2009), has increasingly been drawn on explicitly in research on widening participation for students from refugee backgrounds (Morrice, 2013; Stevenson and Willott, 2007). Nevertheless, the majority of recent studies in this field have adopted a broader definition of the notion of recognition and referred to a range of practices, such as institutional insensitivity to the experiences and needs of students from refugee backgrounds and exclusionary or discriminatory practices that engender feelings of not belonging (Mangan and Winter, 2017). In their synthesis of ten studies from the UK, Australia and Malta, Mangan and Winter (2017) summarised the predominance of this finding of exclusionary practices and experiences of discrimination by arguing that the terms (in)validation and (mis)recognition of the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in higher education are central themes in the literature. This systematic review of qualitative literature about the difficulties students from refugee backgrounds have had in accessing higher education highlights diversity in the operationalisation of the concept of recognition in research studies. A similar point is made by Sprung (2013) who used Honneth’s (1995) concept of recognition along with other theories of fields and institutions to explore the processes of discrimination and exclusion of adult migrants in university adult and vocational education. In addition, Keddie (2012a, b) drew on Nancy Fraser’s (2009) theories of injustice and recognition/misrecognition in her research focused on the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in schools. Given these variations in the usage of the concept of recognition, this section of the article will provide a brief overview of the philosophical and political roots of these concepts before outlining how the concept of recognition will be employed.

The common thread running through theories of recognition (Taylor, 1994) is the acknowledgement that there is a vital human need for people to have their



identity recognised in order for them to be fully agentic. Informed by the work of Hegel and his analysis of the problems of power asymmetry for mutual recognition in the master–slave relationship, Taylor (1994) argues that recognition between individuals must be mutual because asymmetrical relationships curtail the flourishing of marginalised groups and individuals. Similarly influenced by Hegelian thinking, Honneth’s (1995) arguments about recognition identify three places, i.e. the family, civil society and the state, where recognition demonstrated through love, respect and esteem is vital for self-actualisation (Martineau *et al.*, 2012). Adopting these perspectives, Sprung (2013) operationalises the concept of “love”-based relationships in educational contexts. She argues that when “love” (or mutual recognition and respect) develops between students (and with staff) from different social locations, such relationships can support individual and group agency and militate against the lack of respect and esteem brought about by the denial of recognition that people from refugee backgrounds experience at structural, i.e. legal and political, symbolic and/or institutional levels. Therefore, in this article, the perspective of Honneth (1995) that “*recognition underpins agency*” and therefore enables marginalised groups or individuals to struggle for justice in the redistribution of resources is used as a category for deductive analysis of the experiences of students from asylum-seeking backgrounds.

Fraser (2000, p. 107), however, extends this argument about agency. She presents a slightly different view and argues that there is diversity in the application of the concept of recognition because “struggles for the ‘recognition of difference’ have seemed charged with emancipatory promise”. Fraser’s (2000) concept of recognition foregrounds the distribution and redistribution of economic and material differences and argues that justice requires a material and sociocultural struggle for participatory parity. She contends that the identity model of recognition exemplified by adherents to the Hegelian tradition risks problems of displacement and reification and may result in promoting further economic inequality or encourage greater misrecognition and mistrust (Martineau, 2012). Instead Fraser (2000) proposes treating the problem of misrecognition not simply as a status problem, but rather a problem in which people are socially and materially subordinated. To redress these inequalities, institutionalised patterns of subordination need to be examined and the economic and sociocultural harm that stems from status (and material) subordination needs to be confronted. Fraser claims:

Unlike the identity model, then, the status model views misrecognition in the context of a broader understanding of contemporary society. From this perspective, status subordination cannot be understood in isolation from economic arrangements, nor recognition abstracted from distribution. On the contrary, only by considering both dimensions together can one determine what is impeding participatory parity in any particular instance; only by





teasing out the complex imbrications of status and economic class can one determine how best to redress the injustice (Fraser, 2000, p. 119).

Arguably Fraser is drawing here on a neo-Marxist tradition, which contests Hegelian arguments and is exemplified by Bourdieu's work on misrecognition (Webb *et al.*, 2017). However, Fraser's (2007) concept takes a different turn from Bourdieu's in identifying the inner emotional effects of misrecognition alongside a concern with the structuring effects of social interactions and institutional inequalities. In the context of our research with students from asylum-seeking backgrounds in higher education, by adopting Fraser's approach to recognition the analysis intends to explore how institutional practices might construct some types of students and social backgrounds as normative and others as deficient or inferior. Similarly, for example, Keddie's (2012a, b) analyses of an Australian primary school drew on Fraser's model of social justice. It examined: the economic and material distribution of resources for specialised programs for support within the school and its environment; the cultural valuing of students from refugee backgrounds within these programs; the curriculum and participatory parity in relation to the perceptions of those responsible for the school practices; and the views of those experiencing the effects of these practices. Morrice (2013) also highlights how Fraser's conception of social justice as parity of participation reveals that while students from refugee backgrounds are not deliberately excluded from the life of the university, the diverse experiences that they have had are not made visible in policy discourse. For the research discussed in the present article, attention will be given to the economic and material distribution of resources alongside the perceptions held by those from asylum-seeking backgrounds as to their agency to access these.

Morrice (2013) suggests that to enable the full participation for refugees, institutional barriers affecting the distribution of resources need to be removed. She maintains that this would widen the social support structures to refugee students and equate them to those that are available automatically to other international students. At the same time, she argues that it would also be vital to develop pedagogical practices, which draw on Freirian understandings that value the "localised" knowledge that refugee students bring with them. In this regard, Morrice (2013) implies that her analysis brings together the model of recognition as identity and "love" in the curriculum and classroom that Sprung (2013) identified, along with a focus on the importance of the distribution of resources and value discourses dominating the institution that Keddie (2012a, b) has identified.

In light of this account, the article draws in the main on the work of Fraser (2000, 2007) which theorises injustice as arising from three analytically distinct yet implicitly connected aspects: economic material (redistributive), sociocultural (recognitive) and political–legal (representative). In this model, misrecognition and recognition are acknowledged to not only affect the self/agency of the



misrecognised but also provide a rationale for the superordinated to justify inequalities in the distribution of resources and status subordination of others. To this end, the article explores the presence of firstly the recognition of difference and secondly the recognition as redistribution (or misrecognition of this). Mindful of the contribution of the identity-based theories of recognition on people's agency derived from Honneth (1995) and developed further by Sprung (2013), the article also considers a third aspect of mutual recognition that can be described as "love"-based.

## Methodology and Analysis

The data for this article are collected as part of an ongoing, longitudinal study entitled "The experiences of higher education and beyond of people seeking asylum in Australia". This article draws on a first round of semi-structured interviews, in which 22 first-year students from asylum-seeking backgrounds discussed their experiences of navigating seven different tertiary institutions in Victoria, Australia. The age range of the participants was 18–35, with the average age being 22. Nine participants were identified as female and 13 as male. Students had arrived in Australia from Iran, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and New Guinea. They represented several ethnicities in these regions and had often arrived in Australia through countries of transit. The students' fields of study ranged from science, engineering, nursing, psychology and education. All except three students were on a university scholarship or bursary [2]. Due to the danger of participants being identified, this information is intentionally presented at a general level [3].

All interviews were conducted in English either face-to-face or online, using Skype or Zoom. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The interviews lasted on average 42 min. The interviews included a core set of questions, but were modified based on the participants' responses. This allowed the participants to determine the direction of the interview, as well as give room for their context-specific insights.

The data for this article were analysed using a deductive thematic method (Graziano and Raulin, 2013), following the conceptual framework of recognition theory. The data were first coded by one of the authors using NVIVO12 software. The rest of the authors then read and discussed the transcripts and their coding in light of recognition theory. The resulting analysis was agreed on and written by the whole team.

In the deductive analysis, the interviews were first coded in relation to broad, overarching themes encompassing: (1) recognition of different selves, (2) (mis)recognition, (3) inability to fully participate, (4) love, respect and esteem, and (5) misrecognition as deficit. The subsequent analysis focused on three

subthemes, which appeared to be strongly emphasised in the interviews. These were:

1. Recognition of difference (Fraser, 2000).
2. Recognition as distribution, including how the students and their needs were recognised or misrecognised by their institutions (Fraser, 2000).
3. Recognition between individuals, including how the students and their needs were recognised or misrecognised and how this influenced the students' ability to fully participate in university (Honneth, 1995).

In the next section, we elaborate on these three themes.

## Recognition of Difference

Fraser (2000) notes that treating everybody equally does not automatically confer recognition. As many participants revealed, the equation of equality with recognition means that recognition was likely to remain on a superficial level or even become misrecognition. Recognition as identification and recognition of difference, as vital human needs, enable people to be agentic and participate fully in civil society (Fraser, 2000; Honneth, 1995; Taylor, 1994). Students felt that recognising their needs as different from international students with whom they were categorised was a crucial prerequisite for them to feel agentic and able to fully participate in tertiary studies.

Many participants did not have family in Australia, had uncertain visa situations and came from traumatised backgrounds. Most had limited experiences of secondary school in any country and were studying in a language other than their mother tongue. Most participants were also the first in their families to pursue higher education: only three had a parent who was educated beyond secondary school.

Consequently, one of the key issues a number of participants discussed was their limited understanding of how universities worked, including comprehending who was responsible for which services and with whom they could engage and trust. One of the participants recounted:

I had no idea how things work so ... because maybe people have already living here, they ... have relatives who have been going to university here so they know kind of many things but I did not. I didn't know how units works, how percentage—how much percentage you need to get to pass (Ruby,<sup>1</sup> 24yo female).

In a similar fashion, another student discussed how unique the university environment was compared to anything he had experienced before. He noted:



the environment of university is totally different from the school environment or any other place. I wasn't normal for one month or more than one month until I get used to the environment, the campus and the classes (Sam, 22yo male).

Some of the students' experiences at the beginning of study, such as feeling lost and overwhelmed are not unique to students from asylum-seeking backgrounds. However, as these barriers intersected and overlapped, they became significant. As one student noted:

someone like me who is going to university and that is experiencing this a different environment [...] with different problems that they have with their language, with the culture everything else, I think it's hard, it's not easy (Sam, 22yo male).

A unique issue for participants was the problem of knowing who to trust when it came to sharing highly sensitive personal information such as passports and visas. Such information might, for example, be shared with the student's birth nation and could result in placing existing family at home at risk of imprisonment or worse. Students were understandably concerned that staff may not understand or show sensitivity for this kind of situation. As one participant noted:

Oh, when I went there [student services] and I would say, [...] I've applied for, like asylum seeker scholarship, [...] and then they would just ask, how are you an asylum seeker? How does this scholarship work? And you just had to explain everything to them (Yasmin, 18yo female).

Participants also lacked the confidence to question procedures, ask for help or access services. One of the students recounted:

So when I first started I couldn't really find anyone, I had no mentors, I didn't know any services, I didn't know where to go, who to contact, I only knew [the university student services] (Baraz, 23yo male).

In terms of (mis)recognition, participants discussed how even though they were asylum-seeking students; they were considered international students on paper. As one student commented, "Regardless of whether I'm on a Bridging Visa or you are on a student visa we all regarded as international students. So that's an area where they need to really distinguish". This had practical implications in relation to study services and benefits, as discussed later.

Health and well-being was another important difference which the students noted needed to be better recognised. Although these concerns apply to all students, they should be recognised as different for asylum-seeking students for two reasons: Firstly, due to their asylum-seeking background, many of their health problems,

including mental health, were severe and remained untreated. Secondly, students were often unsure about whether they could access health services without a Federal Government-issued healthcare card. This dilemma needs to be recognised on individual and institutional levels, because overlooking it might lead to detrimental effects [4]. A student recounted below how she did not know who to turn to in regard to her mental health issues. This resulted in her failing her first semester:

I actually didn't know anything about the student service, about ... I can see a psychologist here or [who] I can ask—I didn't know where I can ask questions, whenever I go, they didn't know themselves too, so ... I failed the first semester (Ruby, 24yo female).

In order for the recognition of students from asylum-seeking backgrounds to move beyond the superficial, it is necessary that universities not only recognise their differences but also distribute and redistribute economic and material differences as part of a struggle for participatory parity.

## **Recognition as Distribution**

Institutional recognition of asylum-seeking students' differences cannot be separated from the distribution of material and economic services that impact students' ability to participate at university. For example, one student recounted:

[...] if I had any problems I used to go to [the university student services] and they're like, "This is not our area, this is not our responsibility" (Baraz, 23yo male).

Students repeatedly raised the issue of being told particular services were not the responsibility of a specific unit. However, this issue could be overcome by dedicating the role of working with asylum-seeking students to a specific portfolio, and ensuring staff were employed who had specific knowledge and skills in how to work with this cohort of students. Some universities had recognised this need and employed dedicated staff, as discussed in a subsequent section.

Being categorised as an international student was also an issue of redistributive recognition. For instance, students struggled to afford materials, but they were not entitled to receive financial aid to buy books. Orientation sessions held at the commencement of studies were the same as for international students, the latter of whom had only recently come to Australia. Yet many of the participants had spent quite a long time in Australia, and thus, orientation sessions addressing their specific needs would be more beneficial. However, these kinds of tailored sessions appeared not to be offered in many of the institutions.



If institutional policies and practices did not recognise students' multiple intersecting differences, such differences threatened to become major disadvantages. While participants wanted to be recognised in their uniqueness, many of them decided not to disclose their asylum-seeking status, particularly to university staff. As one participant observed, "I don't tell about being a refugee to lecturers, teachers but ... [I tell] ... some students when we talk, where you've come from, how long you've been here, that's it, nothing more..." Another student observed:

Not many people know that I'm from refugee background because they usually think I'm an international. ... And the reason they don't know because I'm from asylum-seeker background is I would like to keep it that way—confidential (Roshan, 19yo male).

The reasons for non-disclosure varied, but paradoxically, one of the main reasons was the students' fear of losing already acquired benefits, such as scholarships. As one student remarked, while the scholarship was crucial, it was also stressful for he was unclear what other rights (such as the possibility of staying in Australia) might be attached to the scholarship. He was also unclear if having a scholarship meant that he was required to achieve at a particularly high academic level. He observed, "Yeah especially when I started uni there was that pressure to keep the scholarship because that's what holding my rights now". The pressure caused from not sharing their precarious situation while also trying hard to fulfil their academic duties was something students found very hard to communicate to staff.

This led to a Catch 22 situation: some institutions (although not all) were unaware of students' situations and the possible precariousness of their visa status. They did not know what services or support they would need to organise for these students. Simultaneously, students were unaware of their existing rights and felt unsafe to challenge the system. Thus, students had needs that institutions should recognise so that they could fully participate in their studies, but students felt unable to share their needs for fear of being harmed by the institutions. Moreover, students did not want to be seen to "step outside the rules", be "needy" and feared appearing "challenging". One student remarked:

Yes it's bad because we are waiting on new visa so a real life situation comes from news or from the university [...] that makes me worried. I mean I am scared. I am scared to challenge ... [ask questions to lecturers about] ... study (Shanaz, 25yo female).

All students noted that they faced institutional challenges at their universities, but some thought that was understandable, as they were a marginal group among students. As one student noted:



the system is not made for [refugees] you know, the system is made for a mainstream person who is straight out of high school, which is fair enough, that's how the system works right (Amed, 21yo male).

We acknowledge that by recognising asylum-seeking students and offering them access through scholarship and bursaries, the universities are already taking steps towards recognising them. Most of the interviewed participants acknowledged and appreciated this. We would like to argue, however, that higher education policy could be modified to recognise the unique issues faced by students of asylum-seeking backgrounds, in a similar way to how students of disability or Indigenous students are recognised.

## **Recognition Between Individuals**

It is important for all students to know how universities work, what is expected of them and, on the other hand, what are their rights. This knowledge does not only come through formal channels, but informally via connections between individuals. All participants discussed the challenges of establishing and maintaining interactions with others who would recognise them and ease their participation at university in practical ways. Honneth (1995) calls this type of recognition, “love-based recognition”; it is recognition that touches the person, not in terms of their visa protection or asylum-seeking status but as an individual. This type of recognition was crucial for participants, many of whom feared that their life in Australia might be cut short at any moment. It meant that they were recognised as persons worthy of love. As one student remarked:

You just tell people I came here by boat and everything, they just think about how bad was it that you had to do it, but when they hear your story and listen to it, also they try to understand [...]. Knowing that people can understand and accept who you are is really good (Yasmin, 18yo female).

Yet other participants noted that their refugee experience might be an additional isolating factor. One student commented, “Sometimes I think refugee students, maybe they feel isolated, like maybe they feel separated from other students”. The isolation might be partially due to reluctance to share information or a feeling that even if it were shared, one's situation would not be understood.

When the students discussed the human relationships that supported them, they perhaps unsurprisingly mentioned other students from refugee backgrounds. Students who shared their experiences and connected to their background could show respect and understanding, without having to ask questions. As one student commented:



Yeah like [another asylum seeker student friend] is very important, because we can relate, and there's things that we can talk about that others probably I can't talk about with. So yeah it's really good to have someone like that (Shalim, 19yo female).

Friends were important in providing practical insider information and study support, both which were needed to be able to participate in a university. Moreover, as for all human beings, understanding friends were important for one's well-being:

I have friends who knows my situation and who knows English is my second language or when I have questions or when I couldn't like write an assignment I will ask them to help me or how I can write a story (Shanaz, 25yo female).

As noted earlier, students reported sharing very little of their experiences with their lecturers, teachers or students who were not from refugee backgrounds. However, and this is crucial to this paper, some participants at particular institutions identified trusted university staff whom they relied on. These individuals provided culturally relevant and respectful support and showed the students that they were recognised:

I love XXX University, I go there every day—like even during holiday I went into the university and I asked them lots of questions. They helped me a lot (Sharnaz, 25yo female).

In these cases, care and support was given by a staff member dedicated to students of asylum-seeking background who had the expertise, knowledge and resources to attend to their needs. As two students commented:

This university [...] were really welcoming [...] every time that I had any questions or any inquiry, anything that I really needed help, they were really there and if I emailed them within maximum of two hours they responded back to me, they were really helpful [...] when I needed them they were by my side (Mohammed, 21yo male).

I will send an email to [a staff member at a University] and then she will find the email very quickly and then if she thinks it's important to see her she said okay I have time this day, this date so if you want to see me come to see me and then this is how it works. So if I have a problem I send an email to her 100% (Sharnaz, 25yo female).

In these students' institutions, it was recognised that students with additional needs, such as students from asylum-seeking backgrounds, would benefit from a human connection that they could trust and on whom they could count. Importantly, university resources were provided for these dedicated positions. Such investments





may not be large in the overall university context, but represented a significant recognition from universities of the importance of such investments beyond initial scholarship funding.

The need to be recognised as human beings worthy of love and respect is vital. As one participant poignantly puts it, “As human, we all have rights too. And—yeah—until coming here and then I realised, oh, we have rights”.

In spite of the practical challenges of navigating universities as (mis)recognised asylum seekers, some students felt supported to reposition themselves as agentic and worthy human beings. This was enabled by supportive networks the students had created, along with the dedicated staff of some institutions. As a result, such students felt they had a right to dream about the future and about a good life:

I am dreaming, I’ve got so many wishes, so many dreams and every day I wake up I’ve got a board that is in front of my bed, every single day that I wake up I see my goals and my wishes and what I want to achieve (Mohammed, 21yo male).

## Discussion and Conclusion

While the main focus of our findings has been on students’ experiences of higher education, it is clear that these experiences are profoundly shaped by government and institutional policies and practices. These policies and practices have major impacts on the life chances of a group of students whose visa status conditions mean that they may not enjoy a second chance for education at tertiary level. Australian universities do not have a major influence on government policies which misrecognise and misrepresent asylum-seeking students as international students. However, they do have some leeway to ameliorate the worst effects of these policies for this vulnerable group. The decision to offer scholarships to asylum seekers is one such example.

However, a policy silence in regard to this group of students at university level meant that many (although importantly, not all) fell through the cracks when it came to a recognition that their differences required a redistribution of material and economic services in order to achieve participatory parity with other students. In other words, the “social status” of students of asylum-seeking background was “not (sufficiently) recognised” in Australian universities and “this cultural misrecognition impede[d] their participation as full partners in social interaction” (Morrice, 2013, p. 666).

Our findings suggest that many students from asylum-seeking backgrounds were not being adequately recognised in universities. This misrecognition contributed to their inability to fully participate in university and fulfil the potential of what they were working towards, i.e. gaining a degree. Some of the reasons for this



misrecognition, as perceived by the participants, were a lack of knowledge and understanding among university staff in regard to this cohort of students and unequally distributed resources and services.

Overall, there was an intertwining between the way in which students' different selves and needs were (mis)recognised by university policies, subsequent services and institutional practices. Staff practices in some institutions were prefigured by institutional policies and practices which homogenised asylum-seeking students under "one-size-fits-all" policies. This in turn led to these institutions apparently lacking knowledge about asylum seekers and an understandable, albeit inaccurate perception of some students that revealing themselves as "asylum seekers" would negatively impact their chances of studying at their institutions.

The policy misrecognition that a number of students reported suggested that as a group of students, they were being cast as deficient and "other" to a normative ideal of domestic versus international students, thus undergoing a form of social injustice (Fraser, 2007). The policy "sameness" (Guo, 2010) which cloaked the students meant that some reported enduring ritual humiliation and potential retraumatisation as they repeatedly explained to various staff (e.g. health services, reenrolment staff, etc.) about their unusual international student status, in order to receive services that other students took for granted. Yet, access to such services is crucial for this group of students to enjoy participatory parity.

Moreover, there was a cruel irony in the in-between space these students haunted. Pigeonholed as international students simultaneously rendered them both invisible, but also too visible. For example, when they were forced to re-present their visas and passports (if they are in possession of such documents) to staff who lacked the knowledge and training to respond sensitively to their visa status. Understandably distressed, frequently mistrustful of authority and sometimes not wishing to be pejoratively labelled as an asylum seeker, many retreated into invisibility. In so doing, they lost access to desperately needed services and the possibility of building relationships with other students or staff based on Honneth's (1995) love-based recognition. Furthermore, as Stuart Hall observes in relation to equity groups, in terms of the students' simultaneous status of invisibility/visibility, "there are issues to do with coming into representation... becoming visible is not enough, indeed it may make for more vulnerability, intervention or offence" (Hall, 1988, p. 133). In some students' cases, such "vulnerability" as a result of being too visible included the risk of harm and potentially death to relatives at home should the student's existence be revealed. The invisible/too visible binary of students of asylum-seeking background graphically illustrates how the second aspect of Fraser's framework of social injustice, i.e. sociocultural (recognitive) is deeply imbricated with the economic material (redistributive) aspect of social justice (e.g. students not receiving access to financial assistance to buy books) and its third political-legal (representative) aspect (e.g. students misrepresented as international students due to Federal Government legislation).



The participants' longing to be recognised as students, as asylum seekers and as humans links to Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth's (1995) reading of Hegel, in which they argue that true recognition requires the recognition of the worth of the whole person, encompassing all their differences. Community of recognition, be it at a university or elsewhere, requires that everybody's contribution and participation are acknowledged and appreciated (Huttunen, 2007, p. 433). Likewise, the barriers to one's contribution and/or participation must be acknowledged. Recognition which fails to acknowledge and value differences maintains inequalities, supports only a certain type of participation and reproduces the biases of the majority culture. These biases meant that at some universities at least, there appeared to be superficial recognition only—an implicit expectation that offering a scholarship was sufficient. Henceforth, asylum-seeking students were expected to understand how the university worked, navigate within it and potentially excel in their studies.

However, some students' comments suggested that at least some universities did not allow the policy silence and sameness associated with government policies to lead to misrecognition of asylum-seeking students. Instead, students reported that at least in a handful of universities which offered scholarships, knowledgeable and sensitive staff were appointed as dedicated practitioners to work with them. Such staff, students observed, understood their needs, were available on an ongoing basis to assist them and were gradually able to build relationships of trust and care so vital to enabling the students to be agentic and participate fully in university studies. These kinds of "workarounds" (Dunwoodie *et al.*, 2020; Webb *et al.*, 2019) are part of a broader suite of policy-in-the-making "workarounds" adopted by Australian universities, in concert with overseas universities such as those in the UK, in order to speak back to socially unjust government policies. It is clear, therefore, that there remains considerable power vested in universities to sensitively and thoughtfully exercise their individual and collective capacity to adopt policies and practices that promote public good through recognising students from asylum-seeking backgrounds. It is also clear, however, that the economic material (redistributive) aspect of social justice cannot and should not be confined to handing out scholarships. More is required in order for these students to achieve participatory parity. We hope that this article is one step in achieving this aim.

1. People from a refugee background who had arrived by boat before 19 July 2013 and had not had their protection application finalised along with plane arrivals who arrive with false documents were deemed to be no longer eligible for permanent protection in Australia (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, n.d.). Three of the 22 participants in this study came to Australia prior to this date and were classified as domestic students. Therefore, they did not incur international student fees.



2. Across the seven participating universities, the value of scholarships and bursaries varied. However, in all instances full tuition fees were covered and the value of the annual bursaries ranged from \$0 to \$5000. For the three students who did not have their fees covered, they, too, arrived in Australia seeking asylum and at the time of data gathering had been granted either a protection visa or family reunion visa; hence, they were eligible for a Commonwealth supported place.
3. At the time of writing this article, a Federal election was looming and the Australian Federal Government's assessment of individuals on bridging visas appeared to intensify. As the visas were increasingly scrutinised, many students, including some participants of this study, were at risk of losing their visas and therefore of deportation. Informal discussions with participants suggested that some universities where there were no trained and dedicated staff who had gained students' trust might be unaware that this was occurring. This raises concerning implications for recognition of this group of students in university systems.
4. One of the authors has escorted students of asylum-seeking background to university health services and has had to educate staff about the student's right to gain treatment. Given the anecdotal lack of knowledge about this group of students among some university health services, such anecdotes underscore why students may feel discouraged from seeking help.

## Note

- 1 We have chosen non-specific pseudonyms to avoid the students being identified by a name implying a country of origin.

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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