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# Exploring experiences of access and belonging in higher education:

Reciprocal research with refugee  
students as an underrepresented equity  
group

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### Project description:

The experiences of emerging refugee communities in undergraduate HE, specifically in regional settlement areas like Newcastle, have been subject to little empirical exploration. This project therefore sought to contribute toward the developing national conversation around access to and participation in higher education by students from refugee backgrounds by creating a dialogue with refugee-background students with respect to their experiences of undergraduate study, particularly in terms of the ways they sought support and their sense of belonging to their programs and the university in general.

### Conceptual and/or methodological framework:

This project sought to strengthen the refugee voice in the university community through a participatory and reciprocal research design; student-participants contributed to the development of the interview schedule, offered their thoughts and opinions through interviews, participated in a student panel at a national symposium on students from refugee backgrounds and have member-validated preliminary findings and publications that have arisen from this project.

### Key findings:

- Studying can be inclusive and empowering, but also exclusionary and disenfranchising;
- Interactions with other students and staff are, for the most part, experienced as positive but less frequent encounters of distance, alienation, and racism have a significant impact on students from refugee background, making them feel that they do not belong at university; and
- Whilst this sense of alienation is not a product of overt expressions of exclusion, it is implicated in the ways in which spaces and structures of interaction on campus are set up to cater to students who are not recognisable to our participants.

The sense of exclusion that our participants experienced stemmed from a variety of causes, including: digital gatekeeping of services; a lack of understanding from staff in relation to the experiences of refugee-background students and assumptions of deficiency; and an affective sense that spaces on campus—including support services—are designed for an ideal, homogenous student body which does not cater to the distinct and complex suite of needs that students from a refugee background have. Moreover, current institutional mechanisms for identifying students from refugee backgrounds are not nuanced or consistent enough to give an accurate picture of the diversity within and size of this student group studying at UON.

### Implications for the future:

A map of available support was developed from a systematic internal audit which students and teachers can utilise to facilitate better channels of information and assist students to find and access support. The major areas that warrant further attention, both locally and nationally, are that:

1. Online information is not always accessible and initial face-to-face guides and brokers enable students to navigate support and academic systems;
2. Diversity awareness and anti-racism strategies are needed for staff and students; and
3. Greater recognition of students from refugee backgrounds should be facilitated through representation on student councils and multicultural reference panels and inclusion in conversations around planning orientation or student surveys.