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Managing Social Differences in Higher Education: Hidden Distinctions (0149)

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Introduction

Widening participation policy discourses across higher education (HE) include social justice concerns about removing structural barriers to address the under-representation of certain social groups (HEFCE 2006; 2008). At the same time, and driven by market values, universities are competing to recruit high fee paying overseas students.

Refugee students are not recognised in either widening participation or international discourses, policies or practices. As a consequence little is known about refugees' presence in, or absence from HE, or their experiences once in HE. For refugees higher education can provide a route out of poverty, it can also be one of the key ways that they can re-establish their lives and begin to re-build their professional identities. On the surface, the minority who gain entry to HE appear to have settled into the privileged and sought after position of UK student, however, the experience of being a refugee continues to play a significant role in their lives. There is no convenient single narrative of what it means to be a refugee in HE, rather it is a complex experience producing multiple, sometimes conflicted subject positions. This paper draws on observations from life history interviews with four refugee students, two women and two men, who attended university between 2006 and 2010. It was part of a larger, longitudinal study involving twelve refugees; participants have been selected as their narratives highlight the differences and complexities of refugee identities in higher education.

Establishing Learner Identities

The kinds of learner identity constructed and the ease with which educational success can be achieved largely depends on the extent to which existing capital, whether educational or professional knowledge and experience, is recognised as legitimate and can be deployed (Bourdieu 2004; Morrice 2011). For Patricia, a teacher from Zimbabwe, the formal learning in HE was marked by a sense of belonging. She was brought up in an education system based on the English colonial system and the language of instruction was English. Similarities in the learning cultures and

expectations, and the absence of a language barrier, smoothed her transition to learning in the UK and she was able to confidently draw upon the knowledge, experience and practices she had accumulated, and apply them to the UK. She described herself as ‘an academic’, and viewed HE as an escape from the low expectations and racism she experienced while working in UK care homes. In contrast Farideh, who worked as a hospital dietician in Iran, had come from a very different education system and had to negotiate different learning styles and expectations. She struggled with what Lillis (2001) refers to an ‘institutional practice of mystery’ where the established literacy practices are not made explicit. She did not question her tutors and was reluctant to approach them for help, but she was critical of the expectations the system placed on students and the lack of clarity and transparency about those expectations:

Some lecturers give you a lot and you have to find a little. And some give you a little and you have to find a lot, but I still don’t know which one is what. I have to learn how to pick up what I need. They don’t really help...Lecturers in Iran work much harder.

Her story is narrated from a position of difference, exclusion and deficit. She was constantly aware that she didn’t have the ‘right’ knowledge and this was experienced as feeling out of place, and a constant doubt and insecurity about her ability to succeed. Classified as a home student for fee purposes, she was unable to locate or access the support services available to international students, who might be experiencing similar difficulties.

Hidden Distinctions and Exclusion

Dominating all of the narratives was how the refugee identity generated hidden distinctions and exclusion. The identity of refugee cast a deep shadow on their lives, their decision-making and ability to engage with higher education. All of the participants were negotiating complex, often painful transnational relationships with family members left behind, and had to cope with significant family events: births, deaths and marriages from the distance of exile. This was coupled with additional financial concerns and responsibilities which included sending remittances to family overseas. Savalan from Iran was the only son from a family of five daughters. It was his role to support not only his elderly parents, but his five sisters as they went to

university and got married. He describes the different cultural understandings and expectations between himself and some of his fellow students:

For them it is a different story. They phone daddy or mummy and they give them money. In my turn my mummy or daddy phones me, and they ask me for money, so it's slightly different!

Patricia was separated from her three young children and husband for almost three years before they managed to join her in the UK. During this time she combined full time study with 40 or 50 hour shift work in care homes in order to send remittances to her family.

Loneliness and varying degrees of poor mental health impacted on the lives of all of the students at different times. Alan, an Iranian Kurd, had worked as a civil engineer before coming to the UK. He gained a place on a Masters programme but his ongoing struggle with mental health issues triggered by his sudden and traumatic flight to the UK caused him to switch from full-time to part-time study mode while he sought medical support. Fear of deportation creates an additional layer of anxiety for some: refugees who arrived in the UK after 2005 are given only temporary status to remain in the UK, rather than permanent residency (Home Office 2005). After five years they have to apply to remain in the UK. For Savalan this meant that much of his second year was taken up with the application process and seeking to demonstrate that he was the 'good citizen' he believed the authorities would allow to remain in the UK.

Significantly, these differences were lived as private and hidden; the stigmatism and disparagement associated with refugee identity meant that students were unwilling to confide or make public their refugee backgrounds (Morrice 2013a; 2013b). Thus refugee students are rendered doubly invisible: they are rendered invisible in terms of the discourses, policies and practices in Higher Education and as a consequence of keeping their identity 'private' the struggles and inequalities experienced are not recognised.

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