

342 Tutoring Forcibly Displaced Students: Understanding the Barriers and Unlocking the Potential of Tutoring Systems for Displaced Students at UK Universities

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

British universities have a long history of personal tutoring and the establishment of the Office for Students and the Teaching Excellence Framework have incentivised them to provide a personalised student experience that ensures student wellbeing (Lochti et al 2018). It might be expected, then, that they are well-positioned to offer exactly the sort of 'warm support' that forcibly displaced students (FDSs) need (Baker et al, 2018). This paper critically interrogates this assertion however, drawing on ongoing research into FDSs experiences of personal tutoring at four British universities. We use evidence from focus groups with FDSs and staff to provide a typology of the potential of personal tutoring systems, alongside insights into the obstacles and complexities that prevent FDSs from tapping into them effectively. In so doing, we present research findings that can inform good practice around personal tutoring within the increasingly complex systems of support for students at UK Universities.

Full paper

Introduction

UK universities are increasingly declaring their support for forcibly displaced students (FDSs) (Universities of Sanctuary, 2022). There are now over 80 scholarships for FDSs offered by British Universities for example, spurred by widespread concern to support Ukrainian scholars in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Student Action for Refugees, 2023). There are 60 UK Universities that are recognised as Universities of Sanctuary or working towards the award.

British Universities appear well-positioned to provide support to FDSs. They have a long tradition of personal tutoring (meaning 'all activities where academic or professional staff work in partnership with students to provide one-to-one support, advice and guidance, of either an academic or a pastoral nature' (Lochti et al, 2018: 2)) with roots in the eleventh century Oxbridge collegiate system (Lochti et al, 2018). They are now subject to regulation, including the Teaching Excellence Framework, which promotes individualised student support and inclusivity. They also have the third largest share of international students globally (after America and Australia, Universities UK 2022), which suggests expertise in supporting students after migrating.

Literature

Recent research has raised concerns about the accessibility of meaningful educational opportunities when refugee students are admitted into universities though (Morrice, 2013; Berg et al 2021; Cantat et al 2022; Naidoo et al 2018). There are often such high cultural and social barriers that refugee students feel isolated and marginalised (Naidoo, 2019).

Refugee students therefore value approachable, trustworthy forms of support – so called 'warm' support (Baker et al, 2018), characterised by familiarity, although still within formal structures of pedagogic provision. Warm support is distinct from 'hot' support which is both familiar and informal, such as peer support. Although individuals who provide warm support might 'work for the university and thereby potentially represent its interests' (ibid: 8) they are able to

forge relationships of trust with FDSs based on elements of shared identity, willingness to provide support beyond their contracts, and access to key information.

Such individuals might be seen to be doing the day-to-day work of adjusting universities themselves to the needs of FDSs. This sort of adjustment is key to decolonisation (Bhambra et al 2018). Freire's (1970) and bell hooks'(1994) work has long-emphasized the idea of partnership between teachers and students (Freire, 1970) and the notion that teachers and students should be able to learn from each other (hooks, 1994). Building on this, our approach examines the relationship between personal tutors and FDSs through a decolonial lens, drawing on Icaza and Vázquez' (2018) framework of 'Positionality', 'Relationality' and 'Transitionality' (p.119-120). Positionality refers to situating information in a geopolitical and historical context; Relationality means changing the power dynamics and valuing the different backgrounds of students and staff; and Transitionality involves discussing how the knowledge learned at university affects society (Icaza and Vázquez, 2018).

Methodology

We draw on focus groups with FDSs who have experienced personal tutoring at British universities. Focus groups can highlight the range of perspectives and experiences of a phenomenon, provoke debate and generate the conditions for coming to a shared understanding of complex issues (Powell and Single, 1996). This research seeks to use a decolonial approach through the research process, which enables participants to be 'co-producers' of research outcomes (Timmis et al, 2021) Our focus groups will include group activities, such as collectively populating message boards, which can help to improve participants' confidence by promoting the feeling they are speaking together and not being singled out (Bourne and Winstone, 2021). The project also explores the perspectives of university staff, including academics who are tutors, as well as widening participation officers, equality and diversity champions, and migration personnel, via separate focus groups. A reflexive thematic analysis approach will be utilised to analyse the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Findings

The research work is ongoing but we expect our findings to offer insight into the FDSs lived experience of university life and particularly aspects of personal tutoring. Through the theoretical lenses of positionality, relationality and transitionality, we hope to better understand the unique positioning of FDSs and how they can be better supported in ways that value their different backgrounds. Our analysis will potentially inform practice and suggest ways to better understand the complexities of how personal tutoring systems at universities can support FDSs. Our research, funded by a GW4 Initiator Grant (see <https://gw4.ac.uk/community/forcibly-displaced-students-in-higher-education/>), also aims to co-produce practical resources by and for FDSs and personal tutors that can be shared widely to help inform practice at other universities.

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