**Managing difference and diversity in higher education: the limitations of widening participation discourses**

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**Introduction**

Widening participation policy discourses across HE include social justice concerns about removing structural barriers to address the under-representation of certain social groups ( HEFCE 2006; HEFCE 2008). These policy discourses have recognised the way that poverty, social exclusion and lack of education opportunity combine to reinforce and reproduce patterns of social disadvantage. This commitment to wider participation and equality have been underpinned by investment of resources to improve access and better support from student groups deemed to be under-represented. At the same time universities are competing to recruit high fee paying overseas students with individual universities developing policies and initiatives to recruit and support increasing numbers of students from outside of the EU.

Refugee students are not recognised in either widening participation or international discourses, policies or practices. Neither UCAS[[1]](#footnote-1) or HESA[[2]](#footnote-2) collect data relating to migrant background, and as they are not recognised as a social group, performance indicators are not set or monitored and they do not attract targeted educational funding or specialist support. As a consequence little is known about refugees’ presence in, or absence from HE, or their experiences once in HE.

For refugees who come to the UK with high levels of human capital, higher education in the UK is one of the key ways that they can re-establish their lives and begin to re-build their professional identities. Once refugee status is confirmed by the UK Home Office refugees can participate in educational opportunities on the same basis as their British counterparts. For the purposes of higher education they are treated as home students; they pay home student fees and can apply for student loans. However, despite in many ways appearing to have settled into the privileged and sought after position of UK student, the experience of being a refugee continues to play a significant role in their lives, and higher education is a complex experience which enables multiple, sometimes conflicted subject positions. There is no convenient single narrative of what it means to be a refugee in HE, instead the experience can be marked simultaneously by both belonging and recognition, deficit and exclusion. This paper juxtaposes vignettes of four refugees as they move through HE to draw out the diversity and commonalities in experience, and how pre- and post-migratory experiences shape the encounter with higher education.

**The re-location of *habitus* and capital**

In conceptualising the experience of refugees I have drawn on the work of Bourdieu, and in particular his concepts of field, capital and *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, Bourdieu 2004). Taken together these provide a useful conceptual framework for understanding how the knowledge and experiences of refugees’ past lives becomes negated and disqualified; it also sheds light on some of the experiences once in a new and different social space. In Bourdieu’s framework the various forms of capital – cultural, social, symbolic and economic – are resources which individuals can draw upon to secure advantage in particular fields. Crucially, in order for the various forms of capital to have value they have to exist in a field in which they are recognised and can be employed. Only when cultural and social capital has been recognised as legitimate can it be converted into symbolic capital which brings with it symbolic power. The refugees in this study have all come from social backgrounds where education and academic achievement are highly regarded and they have high aspirations. Their *habitus –* the embodied dispositions, expressed through ways of speaking, gesturing, standing, thinking and feeling - and the cultural and social capital acquired, have enabled them to move quite smoothly through education and into professional positions in their country of origin. Bourdieu argues that when an individual encounters a new and unfamiliar field *habitus* is transformed; it is permeable and constantly being restructured by the social world (Bourdieu 1990).

The vignettes illuminate how some forms of capital gained in their past life are recognized as capital in the field of higher education, while others remain unacknowledged. The experience of higher education in part reflects the extent of recognition of capital and the adherence between *habitus* and the field of higher education. However, one aspect of the experience which was common to all was how the refugee *habitus* impacted and shaped how they managed the significant emotional and financial pressures they experienced in HE. I suggest that the refugee *habitus* is indelibly marked by the experience of forced migration and by the hostile policy and public discourses in which refugees in the UK are situated; this emotional dimension of *habitus* is significant when considering the experiences of refugees. Feelings of shame and embarrassment around the refugee identity, coupled with loss of professional status and habituated respect, mark the experience of transition to the UK and become incorporated into the *habitus* (Morrice 2011).

The participants in this research were identified from a university based course which was specifically designed and developed to support refugees with higher level and professional qualifications to access either HE or employment commensurate with their existing qualifications (Morrice 2005). The four participants, two women and two men, were selected because they were successful in securing a place in HE, and all attended university between 2006 and 2010. They came from three different national backgrounds, Iran, Iraq and Zimbabwe, and all came from different professional backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews were conducted every six to nine months with the aim of exploring their experiences and perspectives as they moved through their degree courses.

**Patricia: capitalising on educational capital and the significance of *doxa***

Patricia was brought up in Zimbabwe where the education system was based on the English colonial system and the language of instruction was English. Both her parents were teachers and Patricia trained and worked as a primary school teacher for eleven years before fleeing to the UK, leaving her husband and three young children in Zimbabwe. For the first three years in the UK Patricia worked in care homes, and it was the perceived racism and low expectations of her as a Black African that made her decide to return to HE to study and qualify as a mental health nurse. Patricia described herself as ‘an academic’; she had come to the UK with a strong learner identity and sense of her academic abilities. Similarities between the two educational systems in terms of the learning culture and expectations, and the absence of a language barrier smoothed her transition to learning in the UK. Her experience of higher education was similar to her formal learning experiences in Zimbabwe, and she was able to confidently draw upon the knowledge, experience and practices she had accumulated, and apply them to the UK. She had a clear understanding of the personal tutor role and the importance of asking for help if needed; in fact personal tutors and support staff ‘…want you to use them because at the end of the day you might fail that essay…’ and make more work for them. What Bourdieu terms *doxa* describes the immediate adherence or ‘taken for granted’ sense between a *habitus* and the field to which it is attuned (1977: 164).

Despite dealing with the separation from her children and working full-time to support herself and her family in Zimbabwe, Patricia’s experience of being a refugee was not disclosed with other students. It was not ‘something that you just lay on the table and say ‘oh I’m an asylum seeker, I’ve got problems at home’. For Patricia the formal learning in HE was marked by a sense of belonging, it provided a way of transforming a racialised identity and proving her abilities and self worth. However, the painful separation from family members and the need to send remittances were markers of her refugee background and remained hidden distinctions and sources of exclusion.

**Farideh: struggles for recognition and belonging**

Farideh had been brought up and educated in Iran. In line with expectations of middle class Iranian families she progressed through high school and into university where she studied nutritional science. After working for eight years as a nutritionalist in a children’s hospital Farideh fled to the UK. After several years she enrolled on a pharmacy course. In contrast to Patricia, Farideh came from a very different education system and had to negotiate different learning styles and expectations. Entering university was a confusing and disturbing experience as she struggled to decipher the unfamiliar academic writing conventions, the learning styles, technicalities of referencing and the expectations of tutors regarding academic assignments. She made mistakes with her written work and found it difficult to follow and participate with classroom discussions. Her essays were returned because they did not conform to the academic expectations. Yet, because she was classified as a home student for fee purposes she was unable to locate or access the support services available to international students who might experience similar difficulties.

Farideh 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.

She struggled with what Lillis (2001) refers to an ‘institutional practice of mystery’: the literacy practices are not made explicit and yet these practices represent particular ways of knowing and being which ‘privileges the discursive routines of particular social groups whilst dismissing those of people who, culturally and communally, have access to and engage in a range of other practices’ (Lillis 2001: 39). Farideh was recognised, and recognised herself, as not having much cultural value: institutional mechanisms had fixed the value of her capital and inculcated a belief in that value to the extent to which she was unable to occupy the social space with any degree of entitlement or belonging. 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.

To compound this, Farideh had not established meaningful relationships during her time as a student which might have provided a source of peer support. Alongside studying full time she was working full time to support herself. She had very little opportunity to establish friendships, and being a student was an isolating and lonely experience. Her cultural *habitus* distanced and differentiated her from other students. There was no sense of shared everyday practices with other students as, for example, she didn’t go to bars or drink alcohol. There was no sign of ease or belonging which comes from occupying a social space with others who have a similar *habitus* and none of the social support structures available to international students.

**Savalan: transnational relationships, financial and emotional labour**

Savalan had his own computer business in Iran. His parents had five daughters before finally having a son. His narrative draws attention to the significance of transnational relationships with family members left behind, and the complexities involved in trying to reconcile different aspects of identity. Before starting an undergraduate degree in international business, he took an Access to HE course which provided a solid foundation for the academic expectations of university. The practical experience, ideas and understanding that he had built up through running his own business also gave him confidence; he was able to make links with some of the theoretical ideas and in many ways he felt he had an edge on some of his younger peers.

Although the academic side of university life was not too difficult and he enjoyed being a student, the emotional and financial dimensions were acute. He was working for a security company in the evenings, and waiting on tables during the day time to support himself and his family back in Iran. He describes the difference 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!

As the only son it was his role to make the decisions and support his parents financially; he felt this responsibility for his family as 'a lot of pressure'. When his two younger sisters started at university he took on financial responsibility for them, which made it increasingly difficult to combine study and work. Coupled with anxieties about his family in Iran and his ability to provide for them, were concerns about his vulnerable status in the UK. Savalan was one of the first refugees to be given only temporary status to remain in the UK, rather than permanent residency (Home Office 2005). In the third year of his degree his leave to remain expired and he had to apply to remain in the UK; fear of being deported became a constant worry overshadowing his life.

Despite these tremendous financial and emotional pressures, Savalan felt unable to share his struggles with his fellow students or his tutors. To do so would have exposed his status as a refugee in the UK.

Everything they [the media] say about refugees is bad…I am a refugee but I have got respect for myself, I don’t want to be down in front of people….it is embarrassing really.

For Savalan, life in higher education involved managing and reconciling different aspects of his transnational identity. Accruing cultural capital was fairly straightforward and he could build on the professional and practical capital he had developed through his business in Iran. His *habitus* was marked by his Iranian culture and the expectations placed upon the only son and brother, and latterly since becoming a refugee, by his vulnerable status as a temporary sojourner.

**Alan: trauma, belonging and boundaries of belonging**

Alan, an Iranian Kurd, had worked as a civil engineer before coming to the UK. He arrived in the UK in a box under a lorry and describes his flight from Iran as being without warning and unexpected. His migration narrative foregrounds the horror of sudden flight and his fear at finding himself in an unfamiliar environment, without family or friends, in which he could not begin to imagine a future. His first few years in the UK were spent trying to come to terms with the trauma of his flight into exile and undergoing medical treatment for his mental health.

Alan gained a place on a Masters programme to study civil engineering. Like Savalan he was studying for a degree which was linked to his career before he came to the UK, and he was able to draw upon the calculations and the methods he had used in Iran. In both of these cases the ability to draw upon their experiences and cultural capital was a significant factor in easing their transition through the structures and expectations of higher education. Part way through his MSc mental health issues intervened and Alan had to switch from full-time to part-time study mode in order to ‘sort things out’. Despite these ongoing difficulties he gained enormous confidence and sense of belonging from being a student.

I really enjoy the feeling of being a student again! …like to be there all the time. It’s a nice feeling. It’s a nice environment…Everyone is coming for a reason to get the knowledge, to get the qualifications, to know more about things …

Being a student at university represented more than a means to a qualification. It gave him a positive identity, that of being a full time student, and had significance on a personal and emotional level. It gave him a sense of agency and meaning at a time when forced migration had led to the disintegration of any biographical certainties he may have felt as a young person in Iran.

Despite this, hidden distinctions marked him out from his fellow students. Like the other three vignettes, Alan was having to work to support himself financially. While the formal, taught aspect of being a university student had a levelling effect: ‘everyone is the same so it’s fine’, the broader experience of being a student was marked by differences in *habitus* and differentials in financial resources and in motivations. He felt some of his fellow students had come to university ‘just for the fun and not for studying’; they had parties and went out most nights. It was a life style that he couldn’t afford to be part of and couldn’t disclose it to his peers. Underlying his story is the anguish which can underlie and impact upon the process of transition and reorientation to life in exile.

The narratives of Patricia, Alan and Savalan emphasise the alternative positive identities provided by being a student. However, like Farideh, they did not have the sense of ease and ‘fish in water’ quality that characterises the interactions of students with similar *habitus*. They had very different understandings and expectations of family and of the economic realities in which they lived; this constrained and shaped their experiences at students and generated distinction.

**Discussion**

The kinds of learner identity which could be constructed and the ease with which educational success could be achieved largely depended on the extent to which their existing capital could be deployed, and the degree of adherence between their *habitus* and the field of higher education. However, for all four participants their refugee *habitus* generated hidden distinctions and exclusion. The negativity in both public and policy discourses towards asylum issues shapes the refugee *habitus*, ensuring that the refugee/asylum identity is one which is generally disparaged and from which it is difficult to generate a sense of self respect and dignity. Consequently, for refugees in higher education it can remain the ‘elephant in the room’, imposing a deep shadow on their lives, their decision making and their ability to engage with higher education, and yet it remains unacknowledged and unrecognised in policy and practice.

The absence of recognition in either widening participation or international policy discourses or practices means that students with a refugee background, despite often having similar academic and support needs, are rendered invisible. There is no automatic entitlement to the specialist academic pedagogy and curricula, or the social activities and support structures which are designed and put in place to enable these students to succeed academically and develop a sense of belonging and entitlement in HE. Although not deliberately excluded from participating in academic life and social interaction, they are included in what Fraser refers to as a marginalised or subordinate way (Fraser 2007). The social status of refugee is not recognised in HE and this cultural misrecognition impedes their participation as ‘full partners in social interaction’ (Fraser 2007: 315). A starting point towards greater social justice for refugees would be the removal of institutional barriers to participation, such as ensuring the academic and social support structures provided for international students were also available to refugee students. Coupled with this, pedagogical practices which draw on a Freirean understanding that knowledge is a product of socio-cultural conditioning and the ‘partial’ or ‘local’ knowledge which students bring with them, in the case of refugee students their cultural capital, forms the foundation from which other knowledge can be built (Freire 1992).

The four vignettes sketched here have highlighted the importance of individual biography and past experiences in order to begin to understand the experience of refugees in higher education. They highlight the diversity of refugee experience and are a reminder against universalising the needs of refugee subjects or over-generalising experience with notions of trauma or victimhood. Instead, agency and complex identity work are revealed in each narrative.

The subjective experiences of refugees in HE are inextricably linked to the wider political and economic framework and the objective social reality of global inequality. The refugee *habitus* is shaped by the material realities of forced migration and globalisation which mean that refugees are often supporting themselves and family members in the country they have come from. The political responses to migration and globalisation are framed through policy and public discourses about citizenship and asylum which are driven by an imperative to restrict the movement of certain migrants and curtail entitlement to citizenship. Higher Education is not shielded from, or immune to these political imperatives: we see them played out in HE through economic discourses which compete for and welcome some migrants (international students paying overseas fees) as desirable and worthy subjects of support and attention, while ignoring and rendering invisible less desirable migrants: refugees.

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1. University Central Admissions System is the organisation through which applications are processed for entry to higher education in the UK [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Higher Education Statistics Agency is the central source for the collection and dissemination of statistics about publicly funded UK higher education. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)