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'I have to be my own mother and father': the African Student Experience at University, a Case Study Using Narrative Analysis

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Abstract

Recent refugee arrivals in Australia are overwhelmingly young, with 45,900 of the 54,824 humanitarian visa entrants between 2002 and 2007 aged between sixteen and thirty years of age. At the critical transition of entering adult life, these young people experience a massive relocation shock and challenges to identity. Many have experienced extreme trauma and are making this transition without close family. As one Sudanese student commented, "I have to be my own mother and father". Tertiary education is a vital pathway for establishing the future of these young people. This article tells the story of one refugee student who has overcome enormous challenges to succeed in engaging both academically and with the university community. Drawn from a series of interviews of African students undertaken in 2011, this student provides rich evidence of the challenges faced and the factors that facilitate success in a tertiary setting. He is a gifted storyteller and the opportunity to tell his story through a student ambassador program has been a protective factor that has provided him with a powerful identity resource. A thematic and linguistic analysis is offered. This analysis provides insights into the needs of African students and some ways in which universities can meet those needs.

Introduction

I am twenty-five years old and I was born in Southern Sudan during the war. My family were cattlemen and I herded cattle until I was thirteen. When war came to my area, my father joined the rebels and we had to flee my village; sadly my mother was

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heavily pregnant and could not run. She was killed. I was too small to carry a gun so I was not taken as a child soldier. My first experience of school was writing my letters in the dust in the schools under the trees of South Sudan. We fled to Kenya and I started school in the refugee camp there when I was fourteen. I was one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, I should have gone to America but with 9/11 they stopped taking us. I came to Australia on my own, it was a random selection from the many young men in the camp.

I said "Look, how can I start here? I have to do something to go back and tell the story. In ten years' time I will be able to speak English and I will be able to get a job, I wouldn't get a degree but at least a diploma will do. I have to be my own mother and father." - Ac, QUT Business Student (A pseudonym has been used to protect the participant's identity).

Universities are increasingly challenged with the radical diversification of their students, staff and some of their courses. In Australia, this is a reflection of the internationalisation of higher education and the move to widen university participation among its own citizens. This move to open up higher education to a broader population base was motivated both by a policy shift towards 'social inclusion' by the Rudd/Gillard governments and the pragmatic need to provide more skilled workers for the Australian economy. To consider one example of diversification, ten years ago there were few students of African origin in Australian universities. "Among students born overseas, the largest growth between 2006 and 2011 was for those born in Africa and the Middle East.... the African regions recorded an average of around 52 per cent growth in student numbers, equating to an increase of 8,665 students" (Australian Council for Educational Research – ACER, 2013). Now, in 2013, African students are found in many classes: some are from refugee backgrounds, some are international, while others are AusAID students, reflecting Australia's recent shift in its aid focus to the African continent. Recent refugee arrivals in Australia are overwhelmingly young.

Between 2002 and 2007 Australia welcomed 54,824 humanitarian visa entrants; 45,900 of these were aged between sixteen and thirty years of age (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008). As yet the number of students from refugee backgrounds in Australian universities remains relatively small (Earnest, Joyce, De Mori and Silvagni, 2010, pp. 155-74). However these figures are certainly an

underestimation, as some students from such backgrounds have already become Australian citizens and it thus difficult to disaggregate them from overall student data. Also, it is expected that these numbers will increase as such students move through the technical and further education system and other alternative entry points. The chance to go to university should provide an opportunity for African refugee students to build their capacity to participate in Australian society, to improve their standard of living and, in a sense, to “gain control over [their] own destinies” (Nakata, 2007, p.6). However, such students face immense challenges both in successfully completing their studies and in finding work upon completion. This article presents the story of one such student, Ac, his background and his experience of university. The article begins with a discussion of some of the contextual issues that frame this research. A narrative analysis of Ac’s story is then offered, examining story type, language and contextual themes and providing an in-depth analysis of the lived experience of a student from a refugee background. The research question addressed is: What factors have enabled Ac to succeed at university?

Background

I first heard Ac’s story during a series of interviews of African students at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), conducted in early 2011 as part of a project jointly-funded by the Australian Association of Language and Learning and QUT Equity’s Widening Participation Fund. These funds permitted us to employ two part-time African peer advisors to connect with African students on campus and to launch initiatives to support these students. As part of our response to QUT Equity’s Widening Participation, we initially held focus groups for all domestic students whose records indicated that they spoke a language other than English at home. This was in line with Gidley et al (2010, pp.123-47) who note that Australian social inclusion policy often underestimates the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse groups and those with refugee status. Two groups (one of thirty students, one of twelve) presented. These students were mostly African in origin but also included Afghani and South American students. The focus groups were held in the Language and Learning Unit which is housed within International Student Services and for most of the participants it was the first time they had heard of the Unit. We followed up these focus groups with eight in-depth interviews with students from Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Zambia. Both the focus groups and these interviews raised issues such as the need for better language and learning support, and

advertising of such services, and career mentoring. A number of students had failed at least one unit and were clearly ashamed to admit this. Engineering students found it difficult to find work placements and those who did cited numerous examples of racism. Others told stories of graduates going back to unskilled work, for example “at the meat factory”. A common theme was the failure of some university staff to pick up on the needs of these students and to orient them to appropriate services. Students’ comments revealed a strong duality that went beyond a desire for simple local social inclusion. Although they hoped that education would enable them to be integrated into Australian society, “to get a good job”, they were drawn back to those they had left behind in Africa. A typical comment was “I feel so motivated to work hard to prove myself to my parents and to maybe one day help people back home by starting a school”.

I had started working with Ac as a language and learning adviser during the second half of his first year but it was not until I interviewed him that the strength of his story emerged. I conducted two in-depth interviews with him at the beginning and end of his second year at university. These two hour-long interviews thus look back over four semesters and Ac reflected on his learning across this time. It became clear very quickly that Ac had a passion to tell his story, was a gifted storyteller, and had a strong sense of “ownership of his narrative” (Marshall and Case, 2010, pp.491-504). In fact, it will be argued that Ac’s gift in telling his own story has become an identity resource and a vehicle for him to engage with university life through the student ambassador program. The value of engagement with the university and the community (for example in clubs and faith groups) was mentioned by a number of African students. However Ac’s story stood out because of his resilience and determination. These qualities enabled him to turn around his own experience of initially not feeling welcome at university by actively becoming a student ambassador whose duty it is to welcome new students. Also he was able to reflect on the value of the credit-bearing courses he had taken during his Business degree, such as “Bridging Cultures”, and how these had facilitated his personal and academic development. Thus, Ac’s case provided rich evidence of the challenges faced by such students and the protective factors that can facilitate success in a tertiary setting. For these reasons, it was decided to examine his case in more detail.

Context

Social Inclusion

A backdrop to Ac's story is the debate over the Social Inclusion Agenda, adopted by the Rudd Government in 2008 in Australia to create a society "in which all Australians feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of our society" (Australian Government).

Opening up access to tertiary education to disadvantaged groups is seen as both a pathway to a more socially inclusive society, but also, crucially, as a means of creating a more skilled workforce. Through the Bradley Review, the Rudd Government set ambitious targets for tertiary participation by the less affluent, indigenous peoples and residents in remote areas. The government provided financial incentives to expand such enrolments and to provide intensive support to disadvantaged students to improve retention and completion rates.

A recent conference of the Association of Academic Language and Learning (2011), *Critical Discussions about Social Inclusion*, questioned the nature of the inclusion supposedly offered by access to university and whether indeed this brought real opportunity and participation. A challenge for institutions is to develop "critical and transformative pedagogies of hope" that give value to the perspectives of those now being encouraged to participate (Gaynor, 2011). This is particularly pertinent for African students from refugee backgrounds now entering universities; they have powerful stories to tell us, if only they are given a forum.

Refugee Students in Higher Education

Two recent reports have made valuable recommendations concerning the learning styles and academic needs of students from refugee backgrounds, particularly from Africa. Victoria University's Institute for Community, Ethnicity and Policy Alternatives published a best practice model for the tertiary education and training sector to improve access for refugees (Ben-Moshe et al, 2008). Problems raised include a lack of understanding of the culture of Australian universities, language barriers, and feeling excluded from the student community. Among recommendations were needs for: a dedicated contact officer; fee relief; careful monitoring of students including exit information; pre-study programs; work-integrated learning; and financial help. A holistic approach in which institutions take into account "socio-economic and cultural circumstances and provide general life education services

beyond the usual remit of an education provider” is essential, as is cross-cultural training for staff such as tutors, lecturers and librarians (Ben-Moshe et al, 2008).

Another study found issues related to English language skills, academic and information literacy, difficulty in participating in group work and tutorials, being too shy to ask questions, lack of understanding of services available, external pressures and commitment. Motivating factors were also highlighted and participants in the study mentioned the value of one-to-one contacts, such as mentors and lecturers and tutors who had encouraged them at key moments to continue with their studies. From this research, a video and a series of training materials have been created, entitled *LIFE: Learning interactively for engagement* (Earnest et al, 2010; Silburn et al, 2010).

In a separate initiative, La Trobe University's Equality and Diversity Centre responded to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' (DEEWR) call for universities to target specific groups within the 'non-English speaking background' equity group by focusing on students from a refugee background. They appointed a dedicated refugee community contact officer at each of their five campuses. The program took a holistic approach, providing orientation to support services, one-to-one tutoring, computers, reconditioned bikes and incentives to attend meetings. The program (2008-2010) reported excellent results, with the 109 students who participated in the program displaying good rates of retention (Latrobe Equality and Diversity Centre, personal communication, November 2011).

Findings from Earnest et al (2010) indicate that community development approaches that connect students from refugee backgrounds with each other and the university community (all students and staff) are critical for the success and retention of refugee students. This is in line with research on student engagement which found that students from diverse ethnic backgrounds benefited most (in terms of final grades) from participating in collaborative learning and educational activities outside of class (Wasley, 2006). The challenge to institutions is to find conduits and ideas for such meaningful engagement.

The case examined in this article provides a detailed narrative analysis of the experience of a student from a refugee background over two years, providing not just a snap shot of needs at one time but longitudinal insight into the way academic success can develop. It is a rich example of the way in which such students can become deeply connected with the university community.

Methodology - *Narrative*

This research takes the narrative turn (Riessman, 2003) and uses narrative analysis to interpret Ac's story. Narrative research has become an increasingly popular approach to social research in Australia, and my own journey from a quantitatively-trained psychologist to narrative researcher has been greatly assisted by the regular meetings of the Brisbane-based Narrative Research Network. I have come to realise that stories are at the heart of each person's identity. As I interviewed African refugee students, I was struck by the pride they took in sharing their stories and how these stories enabled them to create meaning for their experiences (May, 2011). Narrative research also permits a constructivist approach which links the narrative to the broader culture and permits a detailed and nuanced analysis (Gergen, 1994). This is particularly pertinent in accounting for the considerable cultural adjustments made by African refugee students at university in Australia.

The first step in narrative research is story collection. Two in-depth interviews were conducted with Ac, at the beginning and the end of his second year. Six open-ended interview questions were developed to elicit conversation about university experience and factors that have enabled him to continue studying. I prompted him to talk in as much detail as he could about his experience. These interviews were recorded and transcribed.

With the first interview I crafted a vignette, a short creative narrative account based on the interview material. This vignette was presented for peer review at the Brisbane Narrative Research Network. It was agreed that this vignette did not capture the vitality and movement of Ac's speech. I then wrote the second part of the story from the second interview, almost in the exact words in which Ac told it to me and included notes about its prosodic features.

The second step in narrative research is analysis. There are many approaches to analysis; Riessman (2003) outlines at least three: thematic, structural, and dialogic/performative. McCormack (2000, pp.282-97) provides a useful approach to viewing the transcript through the "multiple lenses" of:

1. Identifying the type of story: for example is the storyteller providing a moral or a story of personal growth?
2. Analysing its language: what is said and not said? How does the language used reflect the story and the teller?
3. Cultural and contextual factors.

4. Identifying ‘moments’ in the story which have a special significance, in narrative methodology these are called ‘epiphanies’.

This analysis uses McCormack’s four lenses and some thematic analysis based on Riessman (2003). Ethical clearance for the research was obtained as part of QUT’s First Year in Higher Education (FYHE) initiative. The narrative accounts used in this research were presented to Ac and he gave me permission to use these for this research.

Analysis of narrative elements and language - *Story Type*

Ac’s overall story is a narrative about his education journey; it illustrates his personal growth from the little boy drawing his letters in the sand to a student in a prestigious business school. Its protagonist is someone who enjoys learning and senses the transformative power of education. He is proud of his achievement and wishes to share this story to encourage others.

The story is powerful and he enjoys telling it. It is ongoing in nature and Ac has framed it as a 10-year episode (from his arrival in 2003 to 2013, when he hopes to graduate). “I have given myself ten years to make him [his father] proud.” The recurrent thread in his story is a reflective conversation between himself and the people he has left behind in his village. “I am come to QUT, the university of the real world [the university’s advertising slogan], as a son from a real village.”

Language

Ac speaks English fluently with a rich grasp of idiom characteristic of someone who has acquired language in an informal setting and who is a good language learner with a good ear for key phrases and social idiom (e.g., “Look hey what’s going on here?”). The language Ac uses in his narrative shows him observing himself, for example, “I find myself running away. You think that’s like the end of the world but then. Wow, I thought hey exactly what’s going on here? I said: Look, how I can start here? I have to do something to go back and tell the story in 10-years’ time”. He reflects on his own learning in a candid, humorous and conversational manner and creates strong visual images in the listener’s mind. “Australians are individualistic, they like their personal space and if they don’t want to sit next me it’s not a problem.”

This candid reflective style serves him well in interactions with other students and in his student ambassador role. His discourse gives evidence of someone who is critically aware and capable of learning from experience. His language is peppered with questions both to

himself and about the situations he faces. He is aware that asking questions has helped him to navigate the complex situations he has faced in the past ten years. When he arrived at the airport he said “I couldn’t ask a lot questions I didn’t know English”. He ends the interview by reflecting on his learning and that he can use questions as a strategy for academic success. “To succeed I’ll ask a lot of questions. I didn’t do that but I found if I ask a lot of questions, they will give you good advice, before I didn’t do that.” This capacity to learn from experience, to ask questions and to seek advice bodes well for Ac. Krause (2005, pp. 55-68) found that such behaviours correlated positively with successful completion of undergraduate studies.

Cultural and contextual themes - *Education*

From writing in the dust in a refugee camp, Ac, aged 17, arrived in Australia alone. He was settled in the regional centre of Toowoomba. Private schools provided him with free schooling and he received support for ESL and career counselling. He also made friends: “There was an Aboriginal boy in Grade 12 with me and he was very friendly and helped me a lot”.

However, the absence of formal schooling has created many areas of academic life where Ac has little or no knowledge. He finds concepts he has learned, for example in economics, intriguing; he will often repeat examples given by his lecturer (for example his comment that he was part of a “random selection from the many young men in the camp” However, without early foundations for senior schooling in either maths or economics, he has found core subjects in business (e.g., Economics 1) challenging to pass.

On the other hand, his capacity to critically reflect on his experience is important. He initially had little idea that some assignment tasks were looking for exactly this type of reflection. When he consulted me about an introductory unit on workplace English, where he was asked to reflect on cultural differences in a team, his first draft was stilted and formulaic. When he realised that his own reflections about theory were needed, he wrote an excellent reflection and was delighted with his mark. This learning has impacted positively on his studies this year in a subject on cross-cultural negotiation.

Choices

The choice of study and a career path is complex and bewildering for Ac.

From school I wondered what I could do. My childhood was all about fighting [raised inflection]. I thought military could work for me. I did it for two years and then I realised I wouldn't get a high position because of my accent and you need high qualifications, so I stopped being a soldier and started thinking about study.

He longs for parental advice—"I have to be my own mother and father"—and at the same time feels the burden to succeed to be able to make his father and his community proud. He completed a diploma in business at a technical and further education institute, which was a very positive experience for him: "Wow I can't believe I am graduating with a diploma". With encouragement from his teachers there he enrolled in a Bachelor of Business at QUT. He has experienced some confusion negotiating choices about his major: "I did accounting because I feel a little bit sure about payroll and concepts like that. I still don't know what's going on with my course structure. I just hope I can get a job at the end of the day".

Clarke and Clarke (2010), in their study of Sudanese students at the University of Southern Queensland, found that these students generally had little understanding of career pathways. They argue that, for many, high education aspirations leading to unrealistic course choices can be a barrier to successful engagement. Ac certainly requires careful career mentoring and help to find work experience. However to argue that the higher education aspirations of someone like Ac are a barrier to successful engagement seems to miss the point. With appropriate support that scaffolds his growing understanding, and approaches to teaching and learning that are inclusive, he has proved himself able to overcome educational disadvantage and take advantage of opportunities to obtain his degree.

Accessing Support at University

Ac found his first semester very difficult; orientation was fraught: "I found myself in an orientation for post graduate students, there had been a mistake on the letter, I didn't realise for a couple of hours. I needed help but didn't know where to go". Students from refugee backgrounds may benefit from language and learning support provided for international students, but the way these are marketed and labelled may stop such students accessing them. "It was hard, but eventually I pretended to be international and saw an adviser there who helped me a lot. I used that service until now. Suddenly I got a very good mark like

others.” Some refugee students may wish to fly below the radar and not seek help until advised to, for example, after failing. Ac was rather different in this respect; his motivation and courage gave him the confidence to seek help. Now his aim is to achieve at a higher level. In his role as an executive member of the QUT African Association and a student ambassador, he frequently refers students to support services.

Learning

In a large city university, group work may be the only opportunity students have to mix with those from other cultures. This experience can be variable for all students but particularly those who speak English as a second language. Those from refugee backgrounds may not have the networks available to international students. Ac’s initial experience was not good: “I didn’t do that well in my first semester, I found group work hard. I felt people didn’t want to sit next to me”. This experience of being treated as “other” (Luke, 2005, p. 287) in the first weeks at university is commonly reported by African and Muslim students. Fortunately it did not cause Ac to drop out and by the end of his second year he had gained a valuable perspective on this issue. He had taken a credit-bearing course on cross-cultural negotiation, Bridging Cultures. He commented:

I’m learning. I didn’t know about cultural differences in the beginning. But from my studies I learned I am from a very collective culture. I have learned that Australians are individualistic they like their personal space and if they don’t want to sit next me, it’s not a problem. I wish I had the course about cultural when I started. First of all I’m very proud of my culture, it’s not a bad culture it’s a good culture.

This is a significant moment in Ac’s story and was a turning point in his life in Australia. Such transformative learning experiences should be encouraged by all those involved in tertiary study. Another significant moment in his story comes when he describes his first experience of public speaking.

In the beginning I felt so shy when I had to stand up and give a presentation in front of my elders, I had never done anything like that before. Now I am a student ambassador and go out to disadvantaged schools and talk about my transition. The kids find it interesting and the principals often say “I have never heard anything like that”.

His initial shyness in front of elders is a common experience for students from more traditional cultures. Ac was able to take advantage of opportunities for community engagement through the QUT East West Centre (a university-funded service that aims to develop exchange and friendship between students from different backgrounds) and the Student Ambassador Program. The Student Ambassador Program employs students to represent QUT on school visits, campus tours, and recruitment events. It is a paid role and students receive training and leadership development. By participating in such programs Ac has overcome his reserve and communicates confidently with elders, and is able to switch between discursive worlds (Northedge, 2003, pp. 17-32). Being a student ambassador has boosted his self-esteem, helped him financially, and given him a sense of belonging to the school and university community.

Specific Challenges

The refugee student experience is very different to that of migrants, who “typically choose to leave their own country and are often selected for settlement because of their skills and resources” (Herman et al, 2010, p. 39) and different again to that of international students. International students’ parents typically provide both financial and moral support and direction. Skilled migrants are well-educated and successful and they bring these resources to their own further study or to supporting their children’s. In contrast, refugees may often be the first in family to go to university and have severely disrupted schooling. Refugee students often do not have strong family support and direction in their studies, and families are frequently fractured. They are often burdened with guilt about being one of the few to be resettled and are expected to support family left behind.

Look, you know I tell you back in the village people need help but they expect me to help them when they get sick. Normally they think I am educated and they have a very big expectation that I can help, that I have money. They have had the hope that I can help the kids go to school, I got this pressure.

Such pressures impact on course progression and staff need to be alert to the need for special consideration of grades.

Discussion

Marshall and Case note that ‘disadvantaged’ students bring with them “particular resources that can be mobilised to their advantage in higher education” (2010, p. 495). In Ac’s case these are resilience, personal courage and commitment in entering university and keeping going despite first weeks of feeling rejected by other students, experiencing failure in a number of early units and dealing with extreme pressures to provide for his village. Despite many setbacks, he has a strong sense of his own agency: “If you choose you will be like that that’s what I think”.

His story clearly reveals his learning strategy; the need for focus: “Here you can easily get distracted with other stuff some [other students from refugee backgrounds], they didn’t finish their grade 12 very well”. He also has long-term motivation, his ten-year plan, and short-term strategies, “Someone can come from a refugee camp and his life can change. Set yourself a goal for ten years and study everyday so at the end of the day I want to make my father proud”.

At every stage of Ac’s narrative we can see he brings to his study a strong capacity to reflect on and learn from his experience, to critically analyse situations and to ask questions. He has discovered his strengths in analysing cross-cultural situations and has learned how to work effectively in groups.

The institution has also provided opportunities for Ac to learn and engage. Earnest, Housen and Gillett argue that universities have to find new ways to impart the necessary skills and sensitivities for living successfully amid diversity (Earnest et al, 2007). Students need to be enabled to become active members of a learning community and have a sense of belonging to this culture (Earnest et al, 2010). In Ac’s case the opportunity to become a student ambassador and present his story to local schools has provided a strong sense of belonging to the university community. Ac has recently become an executive of the QUT African Association which is a truly international group committed to sharing Africa with the university community. Such engagement bodes well for his future studies, as research has shown that engagement is positively correlated with academic success, particularly among those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Northedge 2003; Gaynor 2011)

Academic staff, peer mentors and language and learning support staff have scaffolded Ac’s learning and self-reflection. Credit-bearing units that deal with cross-cultural issues have been very helpful. They have enabled him to reframe his experiences of racism and they have given him a chance to draw on and share his vast store of social,

intellectual and cultural capital. In Northedge's words, such learning has given him the opportunity to acquire the capacity to participate in the "discourses of an unfamiliar knowledge community" (Northedge, 2003). The positive learning experience in such units has also given him a sense of self-efficacy to deal with units he has had little foundation in.

Implications

While limited in its scope, this narrative enquiry confirms and adds detail and a longitudinal perspective to the literature in this area. It also responds to Gaynor's call to put a "human face on the changing profile of students and to recognise diversity at the individual level" (Gaynor, 2011). Narrative enquiry permits insight into the lived experience of one such student and how he has overcome obstacles to engage successfully with the university community.

Clearly there is a need for a holistic approach that includes language and learning advice, specialist career counselling, general life education, health and financial support, and extra tuition. Care needs to be taken to orient students to such services, and a dedicated contact person for students from refugee backgrounds could be considered. Specific orientation sessions that address cross-cultural issues and strategies for successful study should be offered similar to those in the LIFE program previously mentioned. These should be co-facilitated by university staff and experienced peers. Credit-bearing courses with cross-cultural content could be made available across faculties and flagged appropriately.

There is also a dark side to Ac's story. African students are not finding it easy to get the work experience they need to complete their degrees. While Ac has cheerfully accepted that Australians "like their personal space and if they don't want to sit next to me, that's OK", it seems likely that such behaviour reflects passive racism and University staff could benefit from training concerning the many issues facing such students in their classes. Ruth Lister (2010) cites Colley and Hodkinson's critique of the UK's 'Bridging the Gap' Report, highlighting a number of problems associated with initiatives designed to widen participation in higher education; for example, approaches that negate inequality by focusing solely on strategies that require personal agency rather than institutional reform (Gaynor, 2011). It is the university's responsibility to combat both passive and systemic racism and not to rely solely on the resilience and hardiness of exceptional students like Ac.

There are so many ways in which African students can contribute to their universities. Graduate attributes often make reference to concepts such as intercultural competence and becoming global citizens. Many African students could lead the way in this area if mentored, and their contributions rewarded and scaffolded by the institution, sharing their knowledge and cultural competence with students and staff alike.

Conclusion

A Sudanese proverb says “Education is your mother and father”. For refugee students like Ac, university education can indeed be a transformative experience if support is provided when it is needed, but also if there are opportunities for such students to engage in a meaningful way with other students and the institution. However, further research is needed into the long-term outcomes of tertiary study for African refugee students. To what extent does it really lead to greater social inclusion? Does the dream of obtaining a degree really lead to more opportunity and to meaningful employment? If graduates finish their hard won degrees only to find themselves “back at the meat factory”, in the same unskilled jobs they were doing before they started at university, then clearly there is more work to be done.

This article has considered the situation of African students from refugee backgrounds through a narrative analysis of the experience of a Sudanese university student, Ac. It has asked the question: what factors have enabled Ac to succeed at university? The analysis reveals the challenges he has faced and the personal resources he has used to successfully pursue his studies. The implications for those who provide support to such students are given, with a particular emphasis on the need to provide assistance in finding suitable graduate employment.

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