

# Understanding and Overcoming Barriers: Learning Experiences of Undergraduate Sudanese Students at an Australian University

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## Abstract

An increase in migration of Sudanese and South Sudanese people to Australia due to civil unrest in their home country has increased the numbers of Sudanese students at university. Migrant experiences, particularly those of English as a second language, can impact negatively on education and learning. Inconsistencies between student scores on assessments and oral abilities in class prompted an exploratory project to identify barriers to success and create appropriate resources for students. The project utilised a multi-method approach to explore the experiences of the Sudanese students (n=22) enrolled at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. Two quantitative scales examined motivations for learning and English Language Confidence. Interviews or focus groups explored the students' perceptions of their learning and university experiences. The findings indicate that students are extrinsically motivated to study, confident in their language skills but required additional support to improve their written English. The barriers include socio-political factors unique to Sudanese students. Finally recommendations to assist these students are presented.

**Keywords:** Sudanese students, Learning barriers, English Language

## 1. Sudanese Students in Australia

Sudanese and South Sudanese (herein referred to as Sudanese) students' numbers are increasing in Australian tertiary institutions (Turner, 2009). In 2001, 4,900 people of Sudanese descent were residing in Australia this figure increased to 22,900 in 2011, making them one of the fastest growing demographic groups in that period (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). As numbers of domestic Sudanese students have increased, so too have many non-resident Sudanese students choosing Australia as a study destination. The result is a steady flow of Sudanese students into formalised training and education (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007). Sudanese refugees view education as a prerequisite for improving social status, socio-economic survival and human dignity, as well as a means of assisting their community (Affolter & Allaf, 2014; Turner & Fozdar, 2010). Previous studies refer to the importance given to children's education by migrant parents as a means of improving their own current situation for the next generation (Adams & Kirova, 2013; Sainsbury & Renzaho, 2011). Students who successfully complete higher education experience a wider range of personal and financial benefits that continue across their lifetime (Baum, Ma & Payea, 2010). The key to these benefits is the 'successful' completion of the higher education. However, despite the educational ambitions of Sudanese students, lecturers at Edith Cowan University (ECU) noticed that despite good attendance records, and adequate oral English language skills, many struggled with the demands of study and were not successfully completing their chosen degrees (ECU, 2015).

An analysis of the performance of Sudanese students at ECU in Perth Western Australia between 2010 and 2014 revealed poor academic results. Of all units undertaken in that period by Sudanese students the failure rate was 47.53% despite completion of assessments for 73% of the units of study involved. Most of those students who successfully completed their units achieved a pass (50-59%) or a credit (60-69%) score with very few achieving a distinction (70-79%) or above (80%+). The weighted average mark (WAM) for students of Sudanese descent was 60% (ECU, 2015). Furthermore, Sudanese students discontinued their course primarily for academic issues of which the precise nature is unknown. Given these rates, and with the growing number of Sudanese students in Australian universities it is imperative to provide supportive educational environments based on an understanding of why Sudanese students either desist or fail in ECU courses (ECU, 2015).

### *1.1 Non-traditional Students*

Retaining and assisting ‘non-traditional’ students to achieve their academic awards is a priority and a challenge for all Australian universities. Non-traditional students are less likely to complete their studies successfully compared to ‘traditional students’ (National Audit Office, 2007; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). A ‘non-traditional student’ is characterised as older, of diverse background (ethnicity, employment status, lower socio-economic status or first generation student), or as one who meets one or more risk of withdrawal factors such as studying part time, working full time, being financially independent, being a single parent, having dependents other than a spouse and/or not graduating from high school (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). Given their previous experiences as refugees or coming from war-torn areas, Sudanese students can often be in multiple risk categories.

### *1.2 Motivation*

Measures of student success are generally associated with student motivation including retention, persistence and academic performance. According to Ormond (2003), motivation, (both intrinsic and extrinsic), is the driving force behind why and how students learn as well as how they achieve their goals. Intrinsic motivation, or the desire to perform in the absence of tangible rewards (as the activity itself is rewarding and enjoyable), contrasts with extrinsic motivation, a behaviour performed for external tangible rewards such as a degree or job (Murphy & Roopchand, 2003). A student who is intrinsically motivated to master the material rather than primarily focusing on obtaining the degree, is more likely to succeed. This truism was confirmed over thirty years ago by Spence (1983), whose research compared two groups of students with equivalent abilities: those who were intrinsically motivated with those who were extrinsically motivated. Students who are interested in understanding and mastering a subject tend to succeed more often than those with extrinsic motivations, despite equivalent abilities (Spence, 1983).

Evidence suggests that differences in student achievement can be attributed to different motivational styles. King (1998) found that mature-age students were motivated because they enjoyed the learning experience, the personal growth and personal fulfilment they attained from learning. In contrast, younger students tended to be motivated by a need for qualifications. Furthermore, Hoskins and Van Hooff (2005) found that mature-age students develop a deep learning approach and display a higher level of self-determination than younger students. Other researchers suggest that in addition to cognitive and motivational factors, the socio-cultural dimensions of the learning environment are important for international students (Marini & Genereux, 1995; Volet, 1999). Marini and Genereux (1995) point to the role of the physical and social setting, the student group, the instructions provided by the teacher/lecturer and the norms and expectations that are inherent in the setting. Cultural dimensions of students such as beliefs, value systems, assumptions and social expectations are important for the transfer of learning (Marini & Genereux, 1995; Turner, 2009). This work is part of broader literature on the interaction between the individual and the social context (Boekaerts, 1997; Greeno, 1998; Rogoff, 1990; Turner, 2009).

Students’ motivation to study has been explored extensively in earlier literature (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Weiner, 2001; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Self-determination theorists believe that environments that ensure individuals feel competent, autonomous and related to others foster the better type of motivation conducive to goals and work values (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 1991). Intrinsic motivation has been associated with better educational outcomes (Bourne & Russo, 1998). Grolnick, Gurland, DeCoursey, and Jacob (2002) found that overall school performance is associated with intrinsic motivation. However, a decline in intrinsic motivation has been observed through the primary to early high school years (Lepper, Corpus, & Lyengar, 2005). Evidence suggests that this increases again in the college and university years (Sheldon & Krieger, 2004) These patterns have been well documented in longitudinal and cross-sectional studies (Gottfried, Fleming, & Gottfried, 2001; Gottfried, Marcoulides, Gottfried, Oliver, & Guerin, 2007).

### *1.3 Socio-cultural View of Learning*

Researchers who subscribe to the socio-cultural view of the transfer of learning refer to four types of learning transfer. Where there is a high degree of congruence between the past and present learning environment the learning transfer is considered appropriate (Turner, 2009; Volet, 1999). A lack of consensus on the appropriateness of the transfer of learning can contribute to ambivalent transfer. Indications of difficult transfer is where the new context is not attuned to the previous learning environment. Inappropriate transfer is where aspects of the learning which in previous setting were acceptable are unacceptable in the new learning context (Turner, 2009; Volet, 1999). Volet (1999) stresses that successful learning across cultures needs to focus on the university staff and students’ understanding of learning in home and host countries.

Cultural and socio-political factors may impact on the Sudanese students' academic outcomes. Sudanese people come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, with at least 70 different languages spoken in Sudan (Gordon, 2009). These cultural factors contribute to several challenges Sudanese students face when studying in Australia. Australian studies identified key factors affecting Sudanese students' learning: social disruption in Sudan following years of civil conflict; the predominantly oral culture with no written script in some formal languages; and limited or interrupted formal schooling (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007; Naidoo, 2009; Sainsbury & Renzaho, 2011; Turner & Fozdar, 2010).

Burgoyne and Hull (2007) examined secondary school teachers' perceptions of the needs of Sudanese learners using Indigenous Australian school students' learning needs as a point of comparison. Sudanese students were reported to work well in groups, were keen to learn, and excel in rote learning and oral skills. These authors reported that Sudanese students may experience many barriers to learning in tertiary environments due to limited experience of formal education and difficulty in moving from a highly oral culture to a print based culture. Teachers also commented on the effects of ongoing physical and/or psychological past traumas or current issues dealing with immigration and resettlement (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007). However, the findings focused on the needs of a refugee population and did not comment on whether non-refugee populations could experience a similar range and level of difficulties.

Along similar lines, Turner and Fozdar (2010) conducted an ethnographic study of 40 adult Sudanese learners in three different Australian learning environments to explore their sense of belonging to, and negotiation of, these environments. The researchers observed student-teacher and student-student interactions in the classroom and found that many students did not seek assistance when extra classes/tutorial sessions were offered because they believed these classes were not beneficial. Furthermore, although students sought teachers' advice on personal issues, they were less likely to ask for help with academic work (Turner & Fozdar, 2010). The authors concluded that building a trusting relationship was effective in communicating with and assisting Sudanese students. However, the additional time to build trust and provide more one-on-one consultation, can present difficulties for university lecturers and tutors who operate within tight time constraints.

#### *1.4 English Language Proficiency*

At university, a certain level of English language proficiency is expected (such as speaking, listening, reading and writing skills). However being proficient in an independent learning environment requires self-monitoring until the skill is mastered. Kruger and Dunning (1999) discussed the concept of being 'unskilled but unaware', which contributes to a lack of self-monitoring skills. They described a process by which the skills needed to self-assess proficiency are the very same skills required to evaluate competence, either of themselves or anyone else. Therefore, they can be confident about an ability because they cannot see when they are in error (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). They stated "...consider the ability to write grammatical English. The skills that enable one to construct a grammatical sentence are the same skills necessary to recognise a grammatical sentence, and thus are the same skills necessary to determine if a grammatical mistake has been made" (p.1121). This issue is present for many students but can be inflated in students with English as a second or subsequent language.

In summary, whilst the numbers of Sudanese students in Australian universities are rising, there is little available to guide higher education providers, with skills to assist this particular group. The available literature focusses on Sudanese secondary school student populations from the perspective of teachers and refugee populations. However, many Australian Sudanese students are already residents (through parental migration) therefore the understanding needs to be widened to university study and include non-refugee participants. This gap in research was addressed by examining the experiences of Sudanese university students. The research investigated Sudanese students' motivations to study, and whether they are confident about their learning and English language abilities. Finally, the project sought to understand the barriers to effective study in an Australian university setting.

More specifically, the research questions that informed the project were:

1. What motivates Sudanese students to study at university?
2. What are the students' confidence levels in relation to English language?
3. How are the students performing academically (via grades) and what are their views on available academic support?
4. What factors impact on Sudanese students learning experiences?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Research Design

The study used a mixed methods approach with questionnaires and focus groups or individual interviews. A semi-structured interview schedule was adopted for the qualitative component as it was best suited to identifying the subjective experiences of the individuals (Creswell, 1998). Focus groups were initially selected as they allow for the exploration of group norms, values and attitudes, in an informal group discussion setting (Neuman, 2009; Newburn, 2012). They are particularly useful for promoting discussion within discrete cultural groups and among participants with lower literacy levels (Henderson & Kendall, 2011; Walker, Weeks, McAvoy, & Demetriou, 2005). The utilisation of focus groups and interviews was practical due to the oral nature of Sudanese communication; individuals are more likely to reveal their experiences orally, and via a social gathering, which the dynamic interaction of focus groups and, to some extent, interviews allows (Caperchione, Kolt, Tennent, & Mummery, 2011). Students were also asked about their “experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns” along with any recommendations for future students and strategies for supporting Sudanese student’s learning (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999, p. 5). Surveys were mixed with the qualitative method to gather additional data about students’ motivations and confidence. Surveys were used in order to answer the research questions more fully as participants are often not able to articulate the intricacies of different motivational styles and language components.

### 2.2 Sample

At the time of data collection, 152 (male=85, female=67) self-identified Sudanese or South Sudanese students were enrolled at Edith Cowan University. It was envisaged that a purposive sample of between 6-10 participants would have composed six focus groups (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year), keeping genders separate as recommended by Henderson and Kendall (2011) to account for cultural differences specific to Sudanese (and in their research Afghani) people. A female Learning Advisor phoned female students and spoke to or was able to leave messages for 40 female students who had a useable phone number listed. Of those 19 replied or returned the call and agreed to participate. Of those 19, 10 attended for the data collection. A male Learning Advisor phoned male students and was able to speak to or leave messages for 56 male students who had a current phone number listed. Of those 36 answered or responded to the message and agreed to participate. Of those 36, 12 attended for the data collection. Overall, three focus groups were conducted with 13 participants in total. However, due to the low numbers, the groups were amenable to dispensing year levels and gender specific focus groups.

#### 2.2.1 Problems with Attendance and Participation

Other researchers who have utilised focus group methodologies note that participants may fail to attend at the allotted time (Caperchione et al., 2011; Walker et al., 2005). This was also observed in this study where, despite agreeing to attend, many students failed to attend the focus groups. Learning Advisors reminded students in the two weeks preceding the dates for the focus groups by both phone and email. When contacted most students cited work, family and study commitments as reasons for not being able to attend.

To address this issue, students were invited to be interviewed individually whilst they were on campus. Nine individual interviews were conducted. These additional interviews along with the focus groups provided an insight into students’ perceptions of university study (Punch, 2014; Senese, 1997).

### 2.3 Participants

Overall, 22 students were interviewed via a focus group or one-on-one interview. Of the 22 participants, 54.5% (n=12) were male and 45.5% (n=10) were female with an age range of 19-44 years (M=29.24, SD= 7.38). All participants reported residing in Australia for over five years, with the longest residence being 15 years.

Languages spoken at home were reported to be Dinka, Nuer, Madi, Acholi, Arabic, Kirunoli or a combination of one of these and English. Almost all participants (90.5%, n=19) reported their pathway to university was through a tertiary diploma (in Australia obtained from a College or TAFE). Furthermore, 71.4% (n=16) of participants reported being the first in their family to attend university. In addition to studying, 57.1% (n=12) had full or part time work, with a further 9.5% (n=2) looking for work. Aside from income from employment, other sources of income were government benefits (47.4%; n=9) and family support (9.1%; n=2). The courses undertaken by the students were mainly vocational (nursing, medical sciences, community work, engineering) with some students choosing business courses. When asked why they chose their courses, most students stated that they wished to help in the community through being a youth worker, nurse or town planner.

2.4 Procedure

A room was organised on campus to conduct the interviews and focus groups. Each participant was met by a researcher/facilitator who distributed information and reiterated the purpose of the research. On consent to participate they completed a short demographic survey, the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) and the English Language Confidence survey. The students were given the option of self-completion or facilitator assisted (all chose to self-complete). To ensure the materials were culturally appropriate, the research team enlisted the assistance of members of the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning (SAIL) Program who made recommendations that were subsequently incorporated. The same semi-structured interview schedule was utilised for both focus groups and individual interviews. In the focus groups the facilitator provided some parameters for the session, in individual interviews, an outline of proceedings was provided to the participant. On completion, the participants were thanked for their input and reminded to call the researchers should they have any further comments.

2.5 Materials

Students rated their English Language confidence after being asked “How confident do you feel about...” on nine constructs of English Language measured on a 5 point Likert scale from ‘not at all confident’ to ‘very confident’. These constructs were grouped into three categories as indicated in Table 1:

Table 1. Constructs of English Language Confidence

English Language Confidence								
Everyday Expression				Scholarly Expression			Study Skills	
Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing	Note taking	Essay writing	Report writing	Time management	Managing University Information

To assess students’ motivation toward education, each participant completed the AMS which asks participants to rate to what extent 28 statements corresponds to the reasons they go to university on a 7 point scale from ‘does not correspond at all’ to ‘corresponds exactly’. The AMS assesses seven constructs (intrinsic motivation [to know, to accomplish, and to experience stimulation]; three types of extrinsic motivation [external, introjected, and identified regulation]; and amotivation). The scale has been validated and has adequate cross cultural psychometric properties, allowing a finer analysis of intrinsic, extrinsic and amotivational forces in educational settings (Vallerand et al., 1992).

Table 2. Model of the Academic Motivation Scale

Motivation						
Intrinsic Motivation			Extrinsic Motivation			Amotivation
To know	towards accomplishments	to experience stimulation	external regulation	introjected	identified	
“Because I experience pleasure and satisfaction while learning new things”	“To prove to myself that I am capable of completing my university degree”	“For the intense feelings I experience when I am communicating my own ideas to others”	“Because with only a high-school degree I would not find a high-paying job later on”	“To prove to myself that I am capable of completing my university degree”	“Because I think that a university education will help me better prepare for the career I have chosen.”	“Feelings of incompetence and expectancies of uncontrollability”

(Vallerand et al., 1992)

Students were encouraged to talk freely, to share their experiences, both positive and negative, and make suggestions as to how their experiences could be improved. Students were supplied with refreshments and given a monetary gift card (AU\$25) to recognise their time and effort.

### 3. Findings and Interpretations

Sudanese student's motivations to study at university were assessed using the AMS and English language confidence levels measured in self-report surveys. The academic performance of Sudanese students at ECU is reported alongside student's experiences of the support systems available to them. Finally, socio-political factors, some unique to Sudanese students, that impact upon success at university are discussed.

#### 3.1 Motivation

The AMS was utilised to determine the style and level of the students' motivation to study. The students' responses of 'moderate' to 'highly' corresponded to the reasons why they were attending university. The construct that scored the lowest was amotivation, with males more likely to report lower levels ( $M=3.31$ ,  $SD=1.55$ ) than females ( $M=1.58$ ,  $SD=1.08$ ). The small sample sizes precluded a more sophisticated statistical analysis.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for males and females on the AMS

		Male		Female	
		M	SD	M	SD
Intrinsic Motivation	To know	5.75	1.23	5.58	1.02
	towards accomplishments	4.50	0.85	4.72	1.20
	to experience stimulation	5.14	0.85	4.25	1.49
	external regulation	5.46	0.81	5.14	1.52
Extrinsic Motivation	introjected	4.75	1.71	4.56	1.62
	identified	5.61	0.99	5.89	0.66
Amotivation		3.31	1.55	1.58	1.08

The AMS indicated that the students were motivated to attend university and they rated extrinsic factors higher than intrinsic factors with the exception of 'motivation to know'. Students provided more depth in their qualitative discussion about their future work related options as motivating factors for studying:

*I've actually had ...a couple of plans in future so you know getting my own business really that's one of the things that make me want to do this...*

*Well it was simple for because that's something I was passionate on because I wanted to be a police officer*

*Well I think first of all you want a bright future obviously...*

The consensus among the participants was that they came to university to build a better future for themselves and their families. This finding is consistent with other research where some students focus on the extrinsic motivating factors of studying such as obtaining a degree or obtaining a specific occupation (Murphy & Roopchand, 2003). The focus on extrinsic motivation is also congruent with other studies involving Sudanese refugees who report on education as a means of improving their socioeconomic status or enhancing their social status (Affolter & Allaf, 2014; Turner & Fozdar, 2010).

The students generally rated intrinsic lower than extrinsic motivation, except for the learning opportunities provided by a university education. However, in discussing the reasons for their choice of courses of study, most students stated that they wished to help in the community both within Australia as well as in Sudan by being a youth worker, a nurse, or town planner. Previous research also supports the Sudanese students' sentiments that part of their motivation to study was to assist their communities (Affolter & Allaf, 2014; Turner & Fozdar, 2010). The influence of migrant parents may also be a factor for the Sudanese students. Studies indicate that these parents place importance on children's education as a means of improving their own current situation for the next generation (Adams & Kirova, 2013; Sainsbury & Renzaho, 2011). Previous research has indicated that students in early high school experience extrinsic motivational styles, which changes to intrinsic during the early tertiary education years

(Sheldon & Krieger, 2004). However, this was not observed for this group of students who reported mainly extrinsic styles through their AMS scores and qualitative comments. This may partly explain why the academic results of these students remain low. Given intrinsic motivation has been linked to better educational outcomes, educators need to provide activities and assessments that stimulate interest and competency amongst this group of students.

### 3.2 English Language Confidence

The English Language Confidence scale measures the type and level of confidence in using the English language. The students displayed high levels of confidence across most constructs, although slightly less in writing essays and reports. Males were more likely to report higher levels of confidence ('confident' to 'very confident') ( $M=4.36$ ,  $SD=.466$ ) than females ('somewhat confident' to 'confident') ( $M=3.77$ ,  $SD=.639$ ). A further breakdown of the category showed that this difference was driven by the construct of confidence with reading English, with males more confident ( $M=4.55$ ,  $SD=.522$ ) than females ( $M=3.60$ ,  $SD=.843$ ).

Table 4. Means and standard deviations for males and females on the ELC

	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
Everyday English Expression	4.36	.466	3.78	.640
Scholarly English Expression	3.67	.760	3.40	.584
Study Skills	4.10	1.24	3.90	.738

While all participants reported at least a moderate degree of confidence in their spoken English ability, the qualitative discussion highlighted the problems they had encountered with their written work. Some raised the inconsistency between their own perceptions of their ability, and the grades and feedback they received from assessors. Some students commented that the common assessment process did not consider English language challenges. There was a noticeable difference between the younger students and the mature aged students. Some younger students commented that since English was their second language, they should be assessed differently to other students:

*I feel like maybe it's not fair for me because English is my second language and um I shouldn't be compared with other students.*

However, the older students disagreed believing that oral and written English proficiency was a key factor in successful university study and later in navigating workplace settings:

*... we cannot get marked differently, we have to be good. Our future bosses are not going to give us concessions, they will expect us to be good if we have a degree.*

However, several students did indicate that the standard of English language skills required at university was higher than they anticipated with one stating:

*I thought, well, I was good enough at English. I did it at my primary school. I interact with other South Sudanese [in English] so it shouldn't be a problem but when I came here I realised that it's my second language, you know.*

The above statements indicate the discrepancy for some students on their evaluation of their language skills. This finding corresponds to Kruger and Dunning's (1999) explanation of 'unskilled and unaware' as it is difficult to identify technical errors in writing when an individual is unskilled to do so. These students also appeared to be comparing themselves to other Sudanese students which further compounded the feelings of competence; as they

were similarly skilled. The Sudanese students maintained that university lecturers did not understand the difficulties of learning in a different language, one jokingly commented:

*Call those lecturer(s) that are here [and tell them] to go and visit China. You can learn there and they can see what it is like for us in this country.*

Students referred to a change in the learning environment and consequent cultural shifts for them. Most of the Sudanese students interviewed entered ECU via vocational education pathways (TAFE or college) where timetables follow a similar format to high schools in which the teachers are in the classroom for the duration of the day. In contrast, university schedules focus on more independent learning with weekly interactions with lecturers/tutors and academic reading and assessments. The differences indicate a lack of congruence between the past and present learning environment inhibiting appropriate learning transfer (Turner, 2009; Volet, 1999).

Students commented on the “fast-paced” learning of having to complete four units of study and the difficulty with the structure of “the syllabus”. The different structure of the learning environment from vocation education settings in which the lecturer is available for longer periods of time may have contributed to the students’ experience of having little direct or one-on-one contact with lecturers, which is consistent with the findings of Urquhart and Pooley (2007).

Students discussed their levels of English language skills, the lack of understanding of Sudanese students’ English language experience by some university lecturers and the cultural change of learning environment for students transitioning from vocational education to university. The student group was not homogenous with older students having a more developed understanding of the language requirements of tertiary study. For some the transition to university highlighted the language difficulties for them and evidence of a difficult learning transfer. Previous studies explain this position as one in which the student’s and the lecturer’s expectations of each others are not met (Turner, 2009; Volet, 1999). These findings suggest that special consideration be given to orientating students to the university learning environment and to realistically align their expectations.

### 3.3 Academic Performance and Support

The students’ academic performance was measured using their university weighted average mark (WAM). This is calculated from the total percentage mark of each unit divided by the number of units completed. The mean score of participants was between a fail and low pass ( $M=52.57$ ,  $SD=8.202$ ). The students displayed a range of scores from a fail (39%) to a maximum of a higher credit (67%). Overall, 41.2% had an aggregated score (AS) of less than 50, 41.2% had an AS of less than 59, and only 17.6% scored within the credit range. In this sample there was no evidence of a distinction (70%+) or high distinction (80%+) score.

Although students were surprised when they received their written feedback and assessment marks, they sought to address their language challenges by obtaining assistance from the Academic Skills Centre (ASC). They reported that the Learning Advisors were effective and assisted them to understand assessment requirements as one young student commented:

*... we don't understand the questions ... we have no idea what this person's asking.*

Other participants commented that they would have benefited from longer sessions with the Learning Advisors. Mostly the students spoke of assistance that they had received:

*I started knowing my weaknesses ... I say let me just take [my assignment] to a Learning Advisor so that they look into it and direct me where to go. I think that's one of the core things that help me to succeed.*

Previous research suggests that while students seek teachers’ advice on personal issues, they were less likely to ask for help with academic work (Turner & Fozdar, 2010). However, it was evident that this sample were actively seeking formal advice from the Learning Advisors. Furthermore, they reported seeking more informal advice from Sudanese peers. Between these two supports, it appeared there was a gradual building of confidence, and students planned assignments allowing time for consultation with the ASC. To fast track this process, it would be beneficial to incorporate peer mentorship programs to promote access to more experienced, successful Sudanese students to provide advice and direction.

### 3.4 Socio-political Factors

Students commented on the socio-political factors that impacted on their transition to and within Australia, thus on their learning experiences. All students reported having arrived in Australia via another African country, leaving Sudan because of the crisis of civil war. They discussed their migration, requiring them to move between countries and educational systems and the requirement to adjust to a new country.



*Whatever country you go to and you are new, you have to adapt there. You have to adapt to the culture. It is the same here, what happens to us as well here because we come as a migrant.*

For some students the transition involved the loss of one or more close family members. These losses occurred within the context of war and resulted in them having to move to other host countries prior to arriving in Australia.

*...my mum died when I was ten and then I was with my grandma and then we moved to my aunty and from there we came to Australia.*

Previous research reports on the disruption, upheaval and impact of interrupted learning for children and young people in Australia coming from war situations (Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Turner & Fozdar, 2010). The students who mentioned the war and resulting trauma compared the conditions in Australia with their time spent in refugee camps. One male participant recalled:

*In the refugees camp that you had you only have books and that's a shared book like might have a hundred students sharing like twenty copies of the book, so it's only a teacher that allocate them that today...So you can use the book for two days and once you have been given a book you spend like six, seven hours in class then after leaving a class then you had to see... Yeah read the book quick including night and like you have to buy hurricane. Hurricane lamps you know.*

Although an extreme example, it highlights the distinct difference in learning environments for some Sudanese students. So whilst some identified the barrier to learning and the inherent difficulties, the older group in particular were quick to highlight the opportunities now afforded to them, and were appreciative of the resources and facilities.

Students identified other challenges associated with socio-political factors in Australia. These included combining work and study and being the first family member to attend university. Some participants reported having to work night shifts and study during the day. The reasons given for combining working and studying full time were to support themselves or their families and to expedite the process of getting a "good job."

*I'm [working] three days a week or four sort of and I'm doing two units online this semester and one on campus. ... I go to work probably work all day, go back home and then probably come to university and do a bit of study then go to bed.*

All the students fit 'non-traditional' definition on one or more identified barriers. These include their ethnicity, employment status, being the first member of their family to attend university and not graduating from high school identified in previous literature (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). These students often have a higher rate of non-completion of tertiary study compared to traditional students and require additional support (National Audit Office, 2007; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). These factors are not unique to Sudanese students with many in university coming from various disadvantaged backgrounds, lower socio-economic and minority groups. However, these Sudanese students' issues have been compounded by loss, war, and migration without extended familial supports. Any one of these issues singularly put a student at risk of failing in higher study endeavours, collectively this puts Sudanese students at an even higher rate of non-completion (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

Despite the challenges faced, these students were motivated and keen to continue with their studies indicating that while they were aware they lacked English written skills, they did not lack ability. Many displayed a tenacious quest for completing their university courses with one commenting:

*Well I think first of all you want a bright future obviously and, you know, the reason why you are here in this, in this facility obviously you have to stick to that plan. If you don't keep going you're just going to fall apart. So definitely you have to see things in a positive way.*

#### 4. Conclusion

These Sudanese students indicated that they were motivated to pursue tertiary study. They reported more focus on the extrinsic motivational factors of university study such as future employment and community contribution. This concurs with previous research involving Sudanese people but varies from the general motivation literature which links intrinsic factors to academic success. The students indicated that they were confident about their English skills but surprised and confused when their grades and assessment feedback did not reflect their confidence. This incongruence could be the result of prior learning environments including their entry pathway to university which was mainly through TAFE (college). There is less emphasis on academic writing in TAFE qualifications compared to university. In addition, the TAFE curriculum involves more direct face-to-face teaching time than university. When considering overall university scores data revealed that despite Sudanese students completing the required

assignments the failure rates were high compared to other student groups within the university. Sudanese students were also under represented in grades scores in distinction and above levels. However, they were motivated to seek assistance and did so through formal supports such as the Academic Skills Centre and Learning Advisors, but also through informal supports such as Sudanese peers. The sociocultural literature emphasises the learning transfer process which considers the previous learning environment. Some of the students reported a difficult learning transfer in which the mutual expectations of both students and lecturers were not met. Students referred to the interplay of personal challenges such as loss of parents, and global social factors relating to trauma associated with war, migration involving host countries and disrupted education.

## 5. Recommendations

There are several recommendations that could assist in the transition and success of Sudanese students in a university setting.

1. Sudanese (or African to widen the pool) Peer Mentorship programs. Successful students can orient and support Sudanese students to the demands of university study, but also provide advice on where support can be accessed. Mentors can take into account the socio-political factors that can impact on their learning as they have cultural commonalities.
2. Establish early checkpoints for English Language Proficiency in particular for alternative entry pathways, so students who require additional English language support be identified and supported early in their studies.
3. Provide additional support to Learning Advisors to enable more frequent interactions with students and appoint specialist English as a second or subsequent language advisors to specifically assist students.

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