

Evaluating academic peer mentoring for refugees

1. Summary of impact

Despite their wealth of knowledge and experience, academics from refugee backgrounds can face significant hurdles if they reach Australia – both personally and professionally.

Academics from refugee backgrounds may have had long and respected careers in their fields prior to arriving in Australia yet still struggle to re-establish their professional network or find opportunities for collaboration in order to successfully navigate a university in a foreign country, explains UTS law lecturer and member of not-for-profit network Academics for Refugees (A4R), Sara Dehm.

In 2019 and 2020, A4R ran a small academic mentoring program to support refugees and asylum seekers. However, its impact was untested.

To ensure that the program was responsive to the specific needs of newly resettled academics from refugee backgrounds in Australia, Sara and PhD student, Rifaie Tammam undertook an evaluation with funding received from a Social Impact Grant.

2. The problem

Refugees with academic expertise and backgrounds can struggle to find work at Australian universities. One reason is that re-establishing stalled careers is difficult without peer support or institutional programs, says Sara.

There are also unspoken prejudices and barriers at play, says Tammam. 'Empowering academics from refugee backgrounds with opportunities and connecting them with colleagues in similar disciplines can alleviate some of these challenges,' he says.

4. Beneficiaries

The A4R program aims to benefit academics from refugee backgrounds – helping them to make connections with Australian academia. The university sector benefits from the depth of experience and knowledge mentees bring to their fields of expertise.

4. Approach to impact

Academics for Refugees received funding from the Centre for Social Justice & Inclusion through its Social Impact Grant scheme to measure the impact of the A4R mentorship program. Relying on qualitative interviews with both mentors and mentees, the evaluation found that there is an urgent need for such initiatives and for Australian universities to be more receptive towards scholars from refugee backgrounds.

Unfortunately, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic – with the associated uptick in academic workloads and downward pressure on university budgets – have put the peer mentoring program on hold for now.

‘While many program participants expressed significant appreciation at their new connections with their academic peer mentors, our evaluation made clear that the peer mentoring program would need to be reshaped in order to offer more benefits and stronger institutional support,’ Sara says.

‘Honorary fellowship positions or paid stipends to academics from refugee backgrounds at Australian universities could be options in the future.’

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

The evaluation connected the project team with other NGOs working in the refugee sector and also helped A4R identify opportunities to expand their reach in future.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

The hard work and dedication of individual academics involved in A4R in a volunteer capacity has contributed to its success raising awareness around the impacts of offshore processing. The willingness of academics in Australian universities to share their knowledge and support refugee colleagues in difficult circumstances allowed A4R to run the mentorship program in the first place.

7. Challenges

Like many plans in 2020 and 2021, the A4R mentorship program was severely interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the disruption, Sara and Rifaie still believe mentoring in some form could be part of the long-term solution to getting more academics from refugee backgrounds into Australian universities.

‘If the COVID-19 lockdowns have made anything clear, it’s that the power of collective action and relationships cannot be underestimated,’ Sara says.

‘Australian universities can and must do more in the future to be spaces for fostering connections and inclusion for students, academics and staff with diverse experiences and expertise, including academics from refugee backgrounds.’