

## **Access to higher education, language and academic literacy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Open University in Scotland's Learning Development Team's remit includes educational development and working to widen access to higher education. This paper reports on work in progress with refugees, asylum seekers and new migrants in Scotland. Over the last two years, the team has worked in partnership with other educational institutions and with agencies supporting refugees, asylum seekers and new migrants. Practical outcomes of this work include a guidance pack and website and the development of a self-diagnostic resource for individuals whose first language isn't English. The paper outlines the evolution of this activity and highlights some of the issues that have arisen. These are discussed in the context of a selective review of the literature on the creation of transnational identities. The review focuses on work, education and the importance of language skills. Based on reflection on experience and insights from the literature it is argued that a better understanding of the interaction between the development of language skills and academic literacy is important for supporting adult migrants into the education system in the 'host' country.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper provides an account of recent work undertaken by the Open University in Scotland's (OU) Learning Development Team in supporting the transition into further and higher education of refugees and new migrants. The backdrop to this activity is a rapid rise in numbers of recently arrived migrants and some of the characteristics of demographic change in Scotland are described. The paper looks briefly at the academic literature concerned with identity, transition and language skills and then describes the findings of action research carried out by the team. Finally, it combines the threads of this discussion of educational transitions for migrants with ideas from researchers and writers in the field of adult literacy and suggests avenues for future research.

### **DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN SCOTLAND**

In 1999, the Immigration and Asylum Act introduced the policy of dispersing asylum seekers across the UK. Glasgow, the largest city in Scotland, began to receive dispersed asylum seekers in March 2000. The city now has the largest number of dispersed asylum seekers in the UK and a significant population of refugees (who have been granted leave to remain in the UK) (ICAR, 2008). It is difficult to be precise about numbers because records of individuals with refugee status are not kept; however, in the context of a population that had been both declining and ageing, asylum seekers and refugees have had a significant impact on the demographics of Glasgow.

As well as asylum seekers, Scotland, in common with the rest of the UK and Ireland has also seen significant levels of migration from the new A8 accession states of the European Union in the last five years (the A8 countries are Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia). These 'new migrants', mainly young, have moved to the UK in search of employment and have tended to take up low paid jobs. The Department of Work and Pensions recorded 52,460 non-UK workers with National Insurance Registrations in Scotland in 2006/7. Nearly half of these workers were from Poland. However, these figures are likely to underestimate true numbers by at least 25% and there is evidence that numbers have continued to increase (Fife Partnership, 2008). The impact on the Scottish population is likely to be long term, since according to Spencer et al (2007) Eastern European migrants, who on arrival have no plans to permanently settle in Britain, often change their minds within months. Spencer et al found that while only 6% of those surveyed planned to remain in the UK for good when they first arrived, just under a quarter had decided to stay permanently by a year later.

## THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF MIGRANTS

Evidence collected in the course of the activity described in this paper suggests that refugees and new migrants are keen to access further and higher education in the Scotland. Both refugees and new migrants share a state of 'between-ness', in the sense that they draw on 'home' and 'host' countries to foster new 'transnational identities' (Burrell, 2003; Anderson, 2001). The ways in which new identities are constructed are complex. Extended networks of family and friends in the 'host' country may mean that the influence of 'home' may be stronger and more persistent (Burrell, 2003). Some aspects of 21<sup>st</sup> century life such as greater frequency of contact, media reports, personal communications, and cheap air travel, may also reconnect transnational identities with 'home' (Williams, 2006). However, asylum seekers and refugees, whose connection with home is often abruptly and unexpectedly severed (Kostovicova, Prestreshi, 2003), have quite different experiences from new migrants from the A8. In the context of this paper, these differences and the complexity of the construction of identity are particularly significant because they condition individual migrants' attitude to, and acceptance of, 'host' country work and education practices.

Recognition of the value of the education a migrant received in their 'home' country has an influence on occupational status (Drinkwater, Eade, Garapich, 2006; Roman, 2003). However, research suggests that proficiency in the language and cultural norms of a host country rather than educational achievement in the home country are critical (Rooth, Ekberg, 2006). For example, a study in the US found that, individuals with a lower social status in the home country, but with competent English language skills, could acquire a higher occupational status than educated individuals with low host country language skills (Mangain, Collins 2003). Thus, regardless of previous education, the best way for migrants to improve their occupational status is to engage with language and literacy programmes and formal education in the host country (Rooth, Ekberg 2006).

In Scotland (and the rest of the UK) there is substantial evidence of a demand for language (ESOL) classes among both refugees and migrant workers. In a report commissioned by the Learning and Skills Network, Sachdev and Harries (2006) examined the learning needs of the 293,000 migrant workers (A8) migrants who registered in the UK between May 2004 and September 2005 and found that:

'... the majority [...] are highly qualified and have some competency in English, but rarely at a level to enable them to access jobs commensurate with their qualifications.'

In Scotland, a Fife Partnership (2008) study of Polish workers found that almost a half are unable to communicate in English but less than 20% attend English classes because of working commitments. Even with these barriers to participation, demand for ESOL tends to exceed supply. However, the benefits of improved language skills are demonstrable. In a study of refugees and asylum seekers living in Glasgow, Charlaff et al (2004) found that English Language proficiency correlates strongly with participation in the workforce and the type of employment obtained. The importance of language skills is also noted in a study carried out by the Welsh Rural Observatory (2006).

## STAGES OF ENGAGEMENT

The Open University in Scotland is Scotland's largest provider of part-time higher education with around 15,000 undergraduate students who are located across the length and breadth of the country. The University's strategy for Widening Participation includes a focus on the participation of Black and Ethnic Minority (BEM) students. In 2005, the OU in Scotland received funding from the Scottish Wider Access Forums for a three-year project to develop advice and guidance materials for BEM students. The aim was to provide accessible and straightforward materials that would support transition into further and higher education. Although run by the OU the resources were intended to facilitate transition to all the forty-one colleges and twenty higher education institutions in Scotland. Since 2005, three iterations of a resource pack and website ([www.diverseroutes.co.uk](http://www.diverseroutes.co.uk)) have been produced. The process of development has required close collaboration with partners across the whole sector. In addition, there was a need to identify and map the provision available for EAL (English as an Additional Language) speakers. The project has coincided with the very rapid increase in numbers of migrants in Scotland and the latest version of the website includes a number of case studies reflecting the learning journeys of new migrants. There has been a strong

theme of evaluation throughout the project and one of the most striking findings has been how popular the case studies are with users of the website.

The collaborative working involved in building and disseminating the Diverse Routes material forged relationships with organisations and individuals throughout Scotland. Two organisations of particular interest, in the context of this paper, are the Bridges Programmes and Anniesland College, both in Glasgow.

Bridges Programmes is a unique work shadow/work experience scheme for refugees and asylum seekers, which provides an opportunity to gain first hand experience of a working environment. Participants 'shadow' an experienced employee at a member organisation for one or two days a week over a three-month period. Mentoring and coaching are provided throughout the scheme and a certificate is awarded on completion of the placement. Bridges clients are concerned with moving on into employment and further and higher education. Individuals have a very wide range of prior educational experience but all share the need to develop their language skills. Working in partnership with Bridges we developed a supported model where refugees study an OU access course at the Bridges centre in order to improve their language skills for academic study. This initiative has now grown into a joint approach to advice, guidance and support using OU materials with a member of OU staff working at Bridges one day a week. A key feature of this work has been recognition of the language and learning skills that Bridges clients have.

Many of the Bridges clients have studied at Anniesland College, which is one of the largest providers of ESOL in Scotland, with over 430 students enrolled for classes. This high level of demand is a result of the recent influx of asylum seekers and new migrants into the city. Initially most students were refugees and asylum seekers, more recently there has been a shift towards 'new migrants'. After studying ESOL at Anniesland College, some students sign up for up advanced and non-advanced vocational courses. Despite having a high level of English, a high proportion of these students drop out of those courses as they find the technical language too difficult, and return to ESOL classes. The issue for the many students who wish to continue their studies is not simply language proficiency but proficiency in the academic or vocational area of choice. Responding to this need and in dialogue with Bridges and Anniesland staff the Learning Development Team adapted and developed earlier work in the Open University and wrote '*Am I ready to Study in English? A self-assessment workbook for speakers of English as an additional language*'. The aim of the workbook is to enable students to assess their language skills through engagement with a range of academic materials chosen from Open University undergraduate degree courses.

The first draft of '*Am I ready to Study in English?*' was thoroughly tested and evaluated. An action research methodology was employed which engaged staff and students at Anniesland and Bridges. The data accumulated during the research comprised transcripts of focus groups, questionnaires completed by all the student participants and the students' responses to the exercises from the workbook. In total, responses from 56 students were analysed. The evaluation report (Hewitt, Thomson, 2007) found that students were extremely positive about the opportunity to work with material that combined practical language skills with an academic context and had benefited from the opportunity to reflect on their own skills.

'I have found working with the workbook very helpful. I have found out what kind of exercises I should work on. Now I know my strength and weakness, I know I should improve my grammar but I am fine with reading. However, I don't feel confident enough to start studying in English language next year. First I have to develop my language skills and work on vocabulary.'

Levels of motivation were very high and indeed students coped well with material that critical readers had suggested might be too demanding. Interestingly the benefit to students seemed to apply across a range of language levels and not just the most proficient. Students also provided detailed feedback on the material in the workbook, which enabled us to produce a revised second edition.

## **DISCUSSION**

The development of the Diverse Routes materials and the self-assessment workbook began as a pragmatic response to the perceived needs of refugees and new migrants. In the course

of developing and evaluating these resources, we have learnt a great deal about supporting transition to further and higher education in Scotland. At the same time, a number of issues have emerged that cut across research areas. College staff, who work with EAL students, report that able students may still struggle in making the transition to further academic and vocational study. The limited evidence we have accumulated suggests that a number of factors merit further exploration. There is an extensive literature concerned with 'academic literacy' (see for example Lea and Street, 1997) and the ways in which students have to adapt to a language and discourse, that is specific to a subject or discipline area. Academic literacy is an issue for all students in transition in education systems but may have specific characteristics for EAL students. Our experience suggests that there is value in exploring the matrix of issues connecting academic literacy and language proficiency. Participants in the action research at Anniesland College had a range of language skills and diverse prior experiences of formal education, which gave rise to a range of understanding and previous experience of academic discourse. Our experience suggests that a simple linear model of increasing language proficiency (as measured for example by IELTS scores) is not adequate to describe preparedness for academic study.

For refugees and new migrants the importance of language skills in finding opportunities for education and employment is not simply a technical question of improving skills. Thesen (1997) writing in the context of post-apartheid South Africa highlights the difficulties that students who have received support in English, but not in the appropriate form for the academic demands of their study, face in transition to University. However, she also notes how grappling with language and academic discourse affects concepts and awareness of identity. She argues that curricula should engage explicitly with issues of identity and transition and build on the lived experience of students (see also Peirce, 1997).

Lea (1998) argues that the cultural and social contexts of learners are a critical determinant of the learning that takes place. Ivanic (1998) considers the experience of mature learners and issues of identity and literacy practices. Haggis (2003) draws on these authors and others to suggest that an academic literacies approach can provide a way to understanding student learning that is better adapted to supporting a diverse student population. These insights resonate with the evidence gathered in our work with new migrants and suggest that further research into the relationship between language and academic literacies in the context of adult EAL learners would be of value. Such approaches might also be valuable in supporting international students, since currently academic staff in many institutions (Feast, 2002) express dissatisfaction with the language skills of their students.

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