

# Educational barriers facing South Sudanese Refugees in Australia

## Refugees Community Advocacy Network Victoria Conference

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### Introduction

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, my name is Gabriel Yak from the South Sudanese Community. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Refugee Council of Australia for their commitment to refugees and creating a forum which gives a voice to refugees to raise their issues. Today, I am going to discuss some of the educational issues facing South Sudanese refugees in Australia. Because of time limit, I am going to focus on the following 7 points

- **Importance of education in integration of refugees**
- **Inadequate English language program**
- **Age issues and school placement**
- **Lack of information by schools support from parents**
- **High unemployment is a deterrence to learning**
- **Gender barriers – women experiencing difficulties schooling**
- **My achievements**

### Importance of Education in the Integration of Refugees

South Sudanese refugees are among many refugees in Australia who are working very hard to establish their lives, including integrating into Australian mainstream education system. The importance of education in integrating refugees has well been documented in much literature

in Australia. For instance, the provision of the English language is considered as the main starting point of integration and transition into Australian mainstream education systems and labour market for many South Sudanese refugees, because many of them came a background with very limited education due to decades of civil war (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008).

Schools also help refugees integrate into the society “by providing access to language and social networks” which assist refugees to establish a new sense of belonging in their new environment (Christine and Sidhu, 2002, p. 6). Moreover, school as a social institution united people of different background and “provides more extensive associations than either the family or the child’s intimate groups of friends can provide” (Worsley and Brown, 1991, p.191). Since many Sudanese refugees have experienced great trauma during the war, “education is expected to play a role in the psychological, cultural, economic and social adjustment of adult refugees” (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007, p. 52).

However, there are many educational barriers that are preventing some South Sudanese members to successful integrate into schools which need to be brought into public debates.

### [Inadequate English Language Program for Adults](#)

The first barrier is the issue of the English language program. The 510 free hours of tuition offered by the AMEP is not enough for many South Sudanese adults who came to this country with very limited English to learn Basic English. Since 69 percent of Sudanese refugees’ arrivals come with a very poor English background, they need more than 500 hrs in order to learn Basic English. Hatoss and Huijser (2010, p. 153) stated that “there is little research evidence to show whether the exit level of "functional English" is sufficient for successful integration into mainstream society”. This claim has been supported by the 2008 AMEP review

which found that Australian English language programs are inadequate to assist refugees to learn Basic English and transition to mainstream education (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008b).

The second barrier is the restrictions of English language program. According to AMEP, new arrivals are required to register with the AMEP within 6 months and complete 500 hrs within 12 months (Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008). Sudanese generally have very large families and many Sudanese families with large families find this very difficult to complete this course and many drop out without even completing the course. There is a need to make this program more flexible like in many other countries such as the English language programs in Canada, New Zealand and Norway, (Maher, 2006). There is no time limit to access English classes in New Zealand and Canada. In Norway, English language classes are customised to the need of each refugee and each refugee is offered up to 3000 free English class hours for two years which is well above Australia's 510 hours with a 12 month restriction (Maher, 2006).

### School Placement due to Age and Development

Many Sudanese have also issues with School placement due to age differences. Since many were born in war and even before the war, many were born in villages' life where there was no birth certificate, instead birth dates were known by an event instead of by years. Due to low literacy levels and the age of South Sudanese adults, many Sudanese who have come here are adults who cannot qualify to enter Australian education at the secondary level, neither can they go to university due to the lack of Basic English foundations. Thus, their main 'point of entry' into Australian education is TAFE, which provides basic academic foundations to learn English and trade skills to help them find employment.

Age-discrimination is not appropriate for Sudanese children's placement in schools because Sudanese children come with limited English and tend to be a little bit older than their peers. Therefore many are being placed in wrong school levels because of their age and not school level. These children can see how far they are behind in their education and find it hard to catch up. If the students cannot understand what they are being taught they may act out with their behaviour. They need appropriate placement that considers both age and prior education level.

We also thank Australia for being very understanding. In Canada, a young south Sudanese man is facing deportation after different immigration records shows different ages. A young man clearly stated that he doesn't know his exact age and he is just a normal human who is trying to get education to improve his life and help his family. Since many left their home at a young age and lived in many refugees camps where their age were estimated by different NGOs, many lost track of their ages. In my case, for instance, I was given birth date of January 1<sup>st</sup> 1983. I might not look like 33 years old but I keep it as my legal age because I don't know what else to use.

### [Lack of understanding by Schools and support from Parents](#)

Many schools are still lacking information about Sudanese refugees' students and for that reason, there is a lack of classroom support which results in isolation. Many schools are also lacking funding to hire and train culturally diverse teachers (Matthews, 2008).

Many parents have raised concerns that their children are not getting the support they need in the classroom to follow their dreams and educational careers because teachers subconsciously think they do not have the ability to do so. This means that students are actually discouraged to follow their dreams and can fall into not wanting to try new things for fear of failure or not thinking they are not good enough.

Our children are not being provided with enough support to have a good start in a new education system or support that can help them to transition from old education system in Africa to Australian education system. Supports do exist in schools, however it is a system that relies on parents finding out what supports are there and how to access them. With language barriers and cultural differences on who is responsible for the education of the children these supports are not utilised.

On the other hand, although many Sudanese parents have high expectations and hopes for their children to learn, there is a lack of support from many Sudanese parents. One reason is that many parents are working many jobs and can't get time to pay attention to the children's schools. In other families, parents have very limited educational backgrounds and are unable to provide any help to children. Other families think that school has the responsibility to make sure children learn and that is not a responsibility of the parents. The last barrier is that large Sudanese families make it difficult to pay attention to each child's educational needs and progress. To help Sudanese parents to be involved in their children learning in Canberra, I helped develop the South Sudanese section of (HIPPY) the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters, an education program for vulnerable families. This program has a multi-level aspect to helping integrate to a new education system. It empowers parents to understand how children learn and develop with activities taken to the home by a tutor and they are guided through how to do these activities with their child. This empowers parents about child development, helps connections with schools and helps the child have a love of learning.

### High Unemployment in Adults

High rate of unemployment is also discouraging many Sudanese adults from continuing education. A research we conducted in 2014 from the University of Canberra to understand the job-seeking experiences of South Sudanese who have completed tertiary education in the ACT

have found that some members of the South Sudanese community have applied for over 1500 jobs even though they achieved their tertiary qualification in Australia. One of the participants stated:

“When we first came to Australia and started looking for jobs, people told us that we didn’t have the professional skills required to complete the jobs, this forced many of us to go to school. After we finished school they said we didn’t have work experience, but nobody is born with work experience” (Semi-structured Interview, 2014).

### Gender barriers

Gender is another issue among the South Sudanese community. Australia is home to over 30,000 South Sudanese refugees and 49 percent of the South Sudanese born refugees are women (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2014; Deng, 2016). Whilst many Sudanese are embarking on education to improve their lives, Sudanese men and women are facing different educational challenges with women struggling the most to get education. Apart from cultural reasons of caring for the children and other family responsibilities, Sudanese women have a “high level of instability and disruption in their education prior to coming to Australia” (Hatoss and Huijser, 2010, p. 154). Women have difficulties completing English classes within the legal timeframe of one year due to family commitments. This discourages many women from progressing to higher levels of schooling, such as colleges and universities. This lack of education means they are in less of a position to assist their children with their educational journey.

## Conclusion

I would like to conclude with few of my achievements. As a refugee, I lived through many of these education barriers and many others refugees' challenges, and was still able to obtain two Bachelor degrees, two Masters and I am currently studying a PhD at the University of Canberra. While studying, I also work hard to support my family and I just bought my first home this year in Melbourne. However, for many South Sudanese who are still trying hard to get better education, life is still everyday struggle to make ends meet.

Thank you

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