PART II

CREATING A SUPPORT SYSTEM

CHAPTER 8

SUPPORT FOR THE TRANSITION OF REFUGEES AND VICTIMS OF TORTURE INTO THE LABOUR MARKET THROUGH ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides information on the specific programming needs of victims of torture pursuing higher education, and policy and practice guidelines which will support them in that pursuit. This is a community-based participatory action research project that brought together partners who had educational, research, practical, and real-life expertise in working with marginalized groups on this complex issue, with each partner playing an essential and a vital role in the research. A partnership between George Brown College, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, the Wellesley Institute, and the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture established this community-based participatory action research project. The project established innovative outreach for people seeking to integrate into Canadian society through education following experiences of torture and war as a means to aid in the meaningful integration

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of survivors into Canadian society. This work is scalable to other settings (e.g., universities and colleges across Canada) and groups with experiences of marginalization (e.g., Aboriginals, visible minorities, etc.).

Keywords: Refugees; torture; survivors; mental health; post-traumatic stress; integration; migration

INTRODUCTION

The impact of war is increasingly global, and results in violence, torture, and displacement (Pedersen, 2002). Over 231 million people have died in wars and conflicts in the twentieth century (Leitenberg, 2006), and many more flee to safety. As they flee to safety, many also witness and experience horrible atrocities (Citizenship Immigration Canada (CIC), 2012; Grove & Zwi, 2006). These can include pre-migration and migration experiences of trauma, torture, loss, detention, prolonged periods in refugee camps, insecurity, poverty, and malnutrition, which are unique challenges that other newcomers to Canada generally do not face (Beiser, 2005, 2009). These experiences can result in ongoing psychological challenges such as complex trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) when they arrive in Canada (Beiser, 2005, 2009; Kirmayer, Lemelsen, & Barad, 2007). The mental health distress of refugees can be further exacerbated by the ongoing experiences of discrimination, structural violence, and a lack of social and economic supports during the resettlement process (Agic, 2012; Beiser, 2005; Porter & Haslam, 2005). In spite of feeling new hope on the horizon in a safe country, barriers that result in social exclusion, lack of access to employment, language skills, education, and health make it difficult for refugees to rebuild their lives in Canada (Dow, 2010; Porter & Haslam, 2005).

One of the avenues to support successful integration for refugees into the Canadian labor market is through access to higher education. Education can play a pivotal role in the lives of refugees, as it is critical for their social and economic advancement, and is a site where integration may take place (Hyman, Beiser, & Vu, 1996). In addition to providing refugees with pertinent skills, education also offers opportunities for meaningful contributions to the wider society, and for working to find durable solutions to the problems, which affect refugee communities. Despite its importance, only 1% of the worldwide refugee population is able to access higher education in comparison to 35% of the rest of the population (United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), 2016). This chapter will outline the specific needs and barriers that refugees with experiences of war and/or torture face as they try to pursue higher education in Canada, and provide an educational-programming framework intended to meet these needs. Additionally, policy and practice recommendations, originating from the evidence-based Margins to Centre through Education research project, will be discussed.

CONTEXT

Canada's Position on Refugees

Being a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the status of refugees, Canada has a legal obligation to grant protection to persons in need. Congruent with these commitments and principles, Canada does have a history of welcoming and settling refugees fleeing war-torn countries and conditions of political torture (CIC, 2005; UNHCR, 2011). In recent years, under the current Liberal federal government's leadership, Canada has also taken a bold political stance to specifically resettle Syrian refugees, fleeing war and torture. Among industrialized nations, Canada ranked among one of the top countries as the destination for asylum seekers in 2008 and 2009 (although it is poorer developing nations which host 86% of the world's refugees) (UNHCR, 2012, 2015). However, due to the previous Conservative federal government's harsh and punitive policies toward refugees in the past decade, there was a decline in refugees seeking asylum in Canada, leading to its rank at the bottom of the world's top 15 refugee-receiving industrialized countries in 2014. On average, Canada admits anywhere between 20,000 and 35,000 individuals each year through a set of resettlement and asylum programs (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2014). In the fall of 2015, the Canadian government expanded its commitment to resettle an additional 25,000 Syrian refugees after the Liberal Party's electoral victory in 2015. This initiative has an ambitious goal to ensure the refugees' integration into the Canadian labor market so that they are able to support themselves with a sustainable wage. Canada's response to the Syrian refugee crisis is presented as a case study of changing attitudes and behavior toward refugees among members of the Canadian public (Global Affairs Canada, 2016).

Despite this goodwill and effort, refugees still struggle to access opportunities for social and economic participation within Canadian society. Olsen, El-Bialy, Mckelvie, Rauman, and Brunger (2014) provides an interesting perspective to understand the current refugee climate in Canada. They indicate that social constructs define refugees as "others," which further marginalizes this population. These social constructs contradict Canada's commitment to celebrate diversity, promote values of equity, and present as barriers to social inclusion resulting in lack of social networks, isolation, and discrimination making refugees increasingly unsafe and vulnerable (Makwarimba et al., 2013). The question is: How does this reconcile with the values Canada holds? Where, then, are these survivors of war and torture to seek safe, secure refuge?

SURVIVORS OF WAR AND/OR TORTURE

Torture is the:

> deliberate, systematic, or wanton infliction of physical or mental suffering by one or more persons acting alone or on the orders of any authority, to force another person to yield information, to make a confession, or for any other reason. (World Medical Association, 2006)

Despite the adoption of the UN Convention of Torture by the UN General Assembly in 1984, Amnesty International has reported 141 countries that have instances of torture or other ill-treatment over a five-year time span.

Trauma from torture is considered particularly insidious because of the intractability of the symptoms (Campbell, 2007). Psychological symptoms following torture include high levels of PTSD, depression, insomnia, sexual dysfunction, personality change, and anxiety (Campbell, 2007). Typically, psychological symptoms and physical pain continue for a long time after the torture has ended (Basoglu, 2001). The heart-wrenching pain associated with surviving war where torture is used has been referred to as unspeakable (Lederach & Lederach, 2010), leading to feelings of shame, self-blame, guilt, humiliation, and loss of control leaving many with bodies and minds broken (Quiroga & Jaranson, 2005).

Along with managing major physical and mental health problems due to trauma, many survivors who seek refuge as refugee claimants, are also presented with significant challenges related to integrating into a new society in the host country (Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012). When asylum seekers arrive in a host country such as Canada, they endure a challenging process of having to prove the validity of their refugee claim before the Immigration and Refugee Board; if this claim is denied, this may result in deportation. In addition, refugee claimants may face additional difficulties that can aggravate the negative impact of past trauma, including detention upon arrival (Cleveland, Dionne-Boivin, & Rousseau, 2013); lengthy refugee claim proceedings and protracted precarious status (Laban, Gernaat, Komproe, Schreuders, & De Jong, 2004); lack or limited access to health and social services (Arya, McMurray, & Rashid, 2012); limited job opportunities due to the temporary nature of their work permits; or a combination of many of these factors (Porter & Haslam, 2005).

Refugees flee their communities looking for safety and security, but researchers have found that achieving refugee status does not necessarily lead to a reduction in stress (Eisenbruch, De Jong, & Van de Put, 2004). Generally, researchers have attributed refugees' ongoing stress levels to previous exposure to traumatic events (Lindencrona, Ekblad, & Hauff, 2008). However, research has also found that resettlement stressors may compound the effects of traumatic stress for refugees (Porter & Haslam, 2005). This is consistent with meta-analysis on refugee mental health showing that favorable post-displacement or post-migratory conditions such as access to employment and adequate housing significantly reduced the negative impact of trauma exposure (Porter & Haslam, 2005). Longitudinal Canadian studies have shown that most adults and children with a secure refugee status adapt well, despite high levels of pre-migratory trauma exposure (Rousseau & Drapeau, 2003). However, negative post-migration conditions may adversely affect refugee claimants' mental health. Some post-migratory stressors, such as – language difficulties (Pottie, Ng, Spitzer, Mohammed, & Glazier, 2008), cultural differences (McKeary & Newbold, 2010), lack of recognition of educational qualifications or credentials, loss of social support (Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006), experienced discrimination (Rousseau, Hassan, Moreau, & Thombs, 2011), or a combination of such factors (Kirmayer et al., 2011) – also affect many other newly arrived migrants.

Despite the research on the educational attainment, and social and economic development of refugees and immigrants in Canada, gaps in the literature concerning the unique experiences of survivors of torture and/or war still exist.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND REFUGEES

Research shows that social and economic mobility for refugees is limited, since they access post-secondary education at a much lower rate than other newcomers (Ferede, 2010). This lack of access to higher education can contribute to downward-occupational mobility, leaving many experiencing unemployment, underemployment, lower incomes, and difficulty accessing the labor market, in comparison to other newcomer groups (Ferede, 2010; Wilkinson, 2016). The economic measures of refugee "integration" also demonstrate lower incomes than the Canadian average (Hiebert, 2009) poorer housing conditions (Sherrell & mmigrant Services Society of BC, 2009), and less competence in English or French. These barriers can be exacerbated by refugee's past experiences of trauma, and given that war and/or torture affects between 5% and 35% of all refugees, it is vital to develop an understanding of how these experiences can impact the successful integration of this population (Eisenman, Keller, & Kim, 2000).

Despite the challenges refugees face in accessing post-secondary education, education can play a pivotal role in the integration and inclusion of refugees into Canadian society, and can have "wide ramifications for individual refugees, the refugee community, and the general common good" (MacLaren, 2010), as educated populations are better able to contribute to the social and economic growth of a country (Ferede, 2010). Education can result in concrete skills, increased empowerment, increased confidence, and community building among refugee populations (Crea, 2016). These positive effects may be particularly notable for marginalized groups of refugees, such as women, who experience complex barriers to settlement (Bartolomei, Eckert, & Pittaway, 2014).

Ontario's Higher Education System

In Canada, education is within the jurisdiction of the provincial governments. In Ontario, the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development provides funding, policy directions, implementation, and enforcement to all post-secondary institutions, both public and private (Province of Ontario, 2016). People access higher education by going to a university, college, and/or private institution. Universities offer degree programs at undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels with a focus on theoretical discourse development (Province of Ontario, 2012b). Colleges offer both degree and diploma programs with a focus on practical workplace knowledge and application (Province of Ontario, 2012c). Private career colleges typically offer condensed programming for individuals to gain knowledge about a specific career, in order to transition into the workplace quickly (Province of Ontario, 2012d).

Each individual institution sets the admission requirements and application processes. With 20 public universities, 24 public colleges, and over 400 private career colleges in Ontario, it can be challenging to navigate the complex education system. For those not familiar with the Canadian post-secondary system, these options can be confusing and overwhelming. Applications for Ontario universities for undergraduate programs are submitted online through the Ontario University Application Centre (OUAC) (Province of Ontario, 2012b). Ontario Colleges also have a similar online application system through ontariocolleges.ca (Province of Ontario, 2012c). These systems allow an applicant to apply to multiple universities or colleges from a localized location for one fee. In contrast, the application process to a graduate program, doctoral program, or a private career college is more institution specific (Province of Ontario, 2012a). Given these complexities, it can be very difficult for refugees and newcomers to understand these, as they arrive from countries with markedly different educational systems.

The provincial government provides financial assistance to help students to alleviate the tuition costs. It operates under the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP). The Canada Student Financial Assistance Act restricts eligibility for this assistance to "a person who is a Canadian citizen or a permanent resident within the meaning of the Immigration Act." Thus, a refugee claimant waiting for their refugee hearing would be ineligible to apply for any grants and bursaries. They would have to pay foreign student tuition rates, that is generally three times more than the domestic student fees making it inaccessible. The project "From Margins to Centre through Education" was conceived to provide tangible solutions to address the specific needs of refugees who have experienced torture and war.

FROM MARGINS TO CENTRE THROUGH EDUCATION RESEARCH PROJECT

Relevance and Significance of Community Partners

The complex societal challenges faced by survivors of torture and war exceed the capacity of any one institution to examine sufficiently. Social Science Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) in 2015 provided funding to support the necessary multifaceted, multi-institutional approach that drew from, and was built upon, the existing knowledge of relevant issues in mental health, education, and support for survivors of torture and war. The Margins to Centre research project pursued a collaborative partnership between George Brown College (GBC), the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), Wellesley Institute, and the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT). The goal of the project was to establish innovative educational programming for people seeking to integrate into Canadian society following experiences of torture and war.

Research Methodology

A community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework was used that focuses on supporting community partners in conducting research meaningful

to them, so that the research is driven by community needs and the knowledge is mobilized within the community. CBPR is collaborative and by definition inclusive (Jones & Wells, 2007). It can enhance research, but it can also be complicated and challenging, due to the need to negotiate diverse perspectives and build trust. However, this framework also increases the capacity for both the researcher and community partners, and visibility and voice for them. Thus, mechanisms were incorporated to address any challenges in building this partnership, and to ensure that the research project was driven by CCVT's needs and goals. Regular meetings were held to allow for the time needed to engage in open and transparent discussions to overcome any imbalances in power among all the stakeholders, address any conflicts, solidify the partnership, and build trust (Minkler, 2004) in one another and in the overall goal of the research project. GBC, Wellesley, and CAMH contributed their research and evaluative competencies to the project, whereas CCVT and community members contributed cultural competency frameworks, which ensured that the research is relevant to lives of survivors. Throughout the research project, CCVT and its clients became the conscience of the research investigations, and a process marked by transparency ensured that GBC, Wellesley Institute, CAMH, and CCVT stayed on task (Freeman, Brugge, Bennett-Bradley, Levy, & Carrasco, 2006). GBC has a longstanding research partnership with CAMH that was further strengthened over the course of this research. This project also offered some unique learning opportunities on how to effectively work with partners and institutions with differential powers while ensuring inclusiveness, integrity and ethics, and nurturing a robust partnership beyond the length of the project.

This approach also allowed survivors and community members to be embedded in each stage of the research, ensuring the maximization of research knowledge mobilization to and from community members, survivors, partner organizations, and researchers. It is important to treat community agencies as more than participant access points. Failure to do so can promote resentment and make organizations wary of future partnerships. Throughout the course of this research, all partners were given an equal opportunity to provide input during each phase of the research creating equitable partnerships across disciplines. One of the ways this was accomplished was through monthly research-steering committee meetings where all agencies would come together to discuss the progress of the project, and work together to troubleshoot any identified areas for improvement.

The research was conducted in three phases: (1) exploration of the experiences, needs, barriers, and expectations of refugees who were survivors of torture and wished to pursue higher education in Canada; (2) the uptake of findings from Phase 1 to develop an innovative education program to address the higher education needs and goals of survivors; and (3) to pilot the program developed in Phase 2 and explore whether the program led to an improvement in academic skills, information seeking, social and cognitive attributes, and, ultimately, access to higher education; with the goal of exploring how partnerships between post-secondary institutions and community groups can advance the educational goals and by extension, the social inclusion, of survivors. Phase 1 of the research included a total of 51 participants, which included 10 CCVT service providers

and 41 CCVT clients (refugees who were survivors of torture), who participated in one-on-one interviews. Phase 2 of the research focused on the development of the innovative educational programming based on the findings from Phase 1 of the research.

Phase 3 of the research comprised the implementation, facilitation, and evaluation (using Self-Esteem Scale, Community Integration Scale, Life Satisfaction Scale and Psychological Capital, along with individual interviews with the participants) of the innovative program designed in Phase 2. This was done in two cohorts of participants (September 2016–December 2016 and January 2017–April 2017) who participated in 15 weeks and 56 hours (4 hours/week) of innovative educational programming. During the piloting of the programming, the participants were evaluated three times over the course of 15 weeks. Evaluations were also performed after each session where participants rated the session on both the content and the process. Cohort 1 comprised of 18 participants and Cohort 2 included 23 participants. The inclusion criteria for participation in the innovative program included refugees with experiences of war and/or torture, aged 18 years and over, who had completed high school or some equivalence, or post-secondary education in their country of origin, and had interest in attaining higher education within Canada.

Consistent with a grounded theory approach, an interview guide developed by a research-steering committee, with representatives from GBC, CAMH, CCVT, and three CCVT clients, was used for data collection. The research team made every effort to ensure that participants were comfortable during the research, including training research assistants regarding cultural sensitivity and issues faced by refugees especially trauma survivors, and flexibly scheduling in time and locations for participant interviews to accommodate participant's needs. The analysis was done using open coding to explore emerging properties and dimensions of the data. Later, axial coding then allowed for the inductive and deductive identification of salient themes across the codes generated during the open-coding phase.

Summary of Programming and Findings

Program development was based on a strengths-based perspective with content in three broad domain areas including personal/self-explorative, systemic, and career/educational. It created opportunities for participants to – identify personal goals and barriers; assess and describe their skills, assets, values, personal attributes, and areas of interest; apply personal reflections to explore self; solve a problem; synthesize self-assessments to inform career and life transition and decision making; develop familiarity with the Canadian educational culture and context to navigate it; develop comfort in college and vocational environments in Canada and utilize available college, University, and community resources to access and for success; seek reliable and accurate information; be able to network; and articulate pathways and create a personal plan of action to begin a post-secondary education program (Fig. 1). The participants found the content of the programming to be very useful in linking them with higher education.

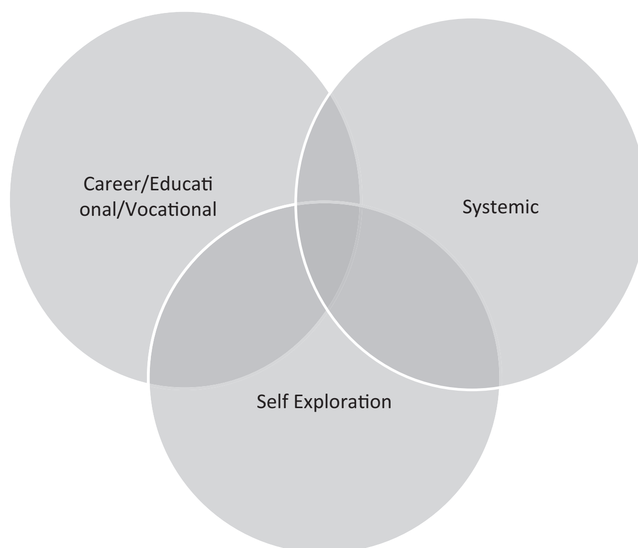

Fig. 1. Program Content Framework.

In Canada, higher educational institutions rely heavily on their websites making it difficult to navigate the complex education system with limited English-language skills. This may force refugees to get information regarding their higher education options from less reliable sources such as word of mouth, from extended family or within their cultural community. Additionally, refugees have unique and specific circumstances, such as a lack of documentation, and/or missing transcripts, which are not addressed via post-secondary institutions' websites, and this contributes to a lack of access. To help address these issues, the educational program allowed participants to speak to professionals from various higher education institutions in person in order to develop personalized action plans that considered their personal circumstances. There was also an opportunity for participants to provide regular feedback to ensure the program's content was consistent with participant's needs. As one of the participants indicated:

> when we come here, we have this vision, we want to contribute, also like other citizens here, we want to be involved in some, …, or have this power in your heart, like you want to improve things and you want to be useful for the society. (Participant 3)

Based on the research evidence (Unger & Pardee, 2002) in integrating students who have experienced serious mental illness, immigration issues, or disrupted employment, customized supports were provided to the participants. These supports were provided by the Principle Investigator, Mental Health Counselor from CCVT, and Social Work Intern who assisted the participants with personal counseling support, advocacy, educational and/or any other necessary supports, to complete the program successfully. These supports were not limited to the classroom time and extended beyond the program duration. This self-contained model of

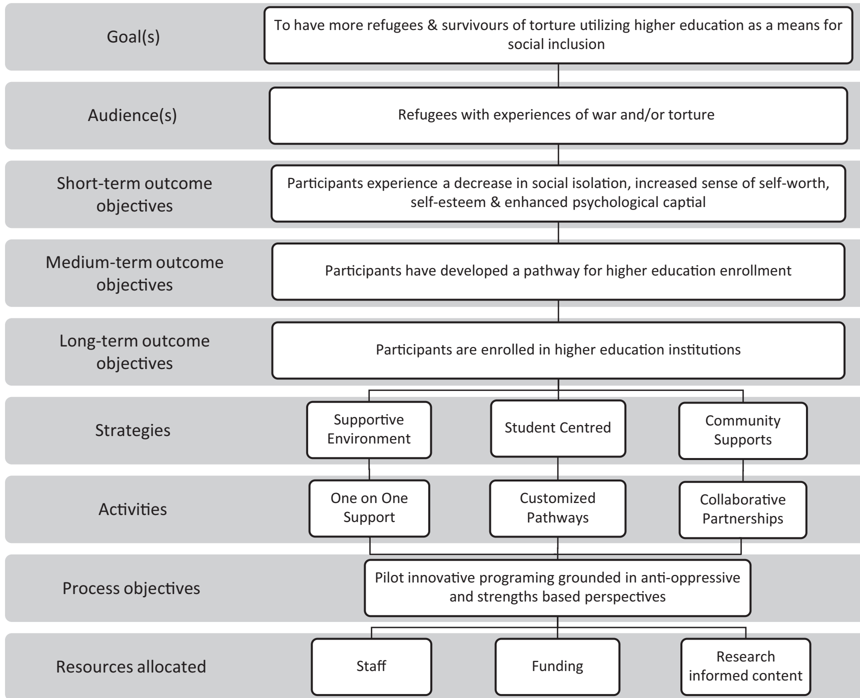

Fig. 2. Program Process Model.

support privileged the participants' time, ensuring that a counselor was available to connect with the student whenever needed. The content of the program and the support people also gave the participants an opportunity to see themselves differently.

The model not only focused on the content that was developed, but also on how it was delivered; for example, the conditions of safety in the classroom, flexibility in scheduling the classes, nonjudgmental attitudes, opportunities for creating a sense of community, developing relationships, engaging in respectful interactions, and being responsive to the needs of the participants (–Fig. 2). Although this may sound like an obvious approach, this kind of egalitarian relationship and interacting in a respectful manner was not something this group of participants had experienced in their home country in school or during interactions with other institutions where there was a power differential. Intentional efforts were made to acknowledge the power differential between the participants and the researchers. Through the relationships and through the opportunity to experience new things and find new strengths, participants had the chance to build confidence and show improvements in self-esteem. When they were treated with respect, the new experiences led to changed identity.

> We came here to learn about how to go to post-secondary but we ended up learning about life in Canada. I used to feel like I was floating on the ocean, but this program and everyone who participated in it helped me get on land. (Participant 7)

One of the fundamental findings from this project through regular evaluations, interviews and analysis of the data was the significant support participants received from building relationships with their peers, the research team, and CCVT staff. These relationships resulted in participants feeling more connected and supported. They began to believe that their peers and staff cared about them and their success, and that they mattered. Given participants' challenging experiences with various educational institutions in the past, they expressed positive feedback that the supports provided during the course of this pilot program were exceptional.

To summarize, it is extremely important to understand that refugees with experiences of war and/or torture are not a homogeneous group. They are a diverse group with multiple barriers that impact their ability to access higher education in a variety of different ways. Though the program was able to offer promising practices to help address some of the identified needs and the barriers, some of the systemic barriers related to immigration status and financial constraints were difficult to address within the scope of the program. Despite these ongoing challenges, the programming was able to work within these constraints to create pathways for all the participants regarding their higher education options. At the end of the 15 weeks of programming between both the cohorts, there were eight participants who had applied and accepted into higher education institutions, 14 participants who were in the process of applying to higher education institutions, and 19 participants who had identified pathways to higher education institutions that they plan to pursue as their life circumstances become more stable.

POLICY AND PRACTICE GUIDELINES/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Practice Framework

The Margins to Centre through Education research project offers an evidence-based practice framework that has the ability to be scaled up and adapted for other marginalized populations facing multiple barriers in accessing higher education. Examples from this project will be used to illustrate the application of this framework.

1. *Identify your population*: The refugee population is indicated as being underrepresented in higher education institutions and the research project narrowed this population to refugees with experiences of war and/or torture due to the increased challenges they face.
2. *Collaborate with agencies working with the identified population*: In order to attain comprehensive context concerning the lived experiences and barriers relevant to an identified population, it is important to collaborate with community agencies, which serve those populations. The Margins to Centre through Education project worked with each partner organization's strengths in order to address a complex issue.

3. *Include the identified population in decision-making*: In order to address the barriers to higher educational attainment, it is necessary to understand them directly from the population. The population's input is critical to ensure the programming is relevant, and this collaboration also reflects a commitment to building a trusting relationship and ensuring the empowerment of the identified group.
4. *Have a compassionate facilitator with real-life experiences:* Building a trusting relationship with an identified population is a continuous process. An effective way to support this process is to have the program facilitated by a compassionate person with real-life experiences in order to allow for authentic and genuine interactions. A facilitator with similar real-life experiences can ensure an aspirational role model who provides more than just information and psycho-education. The facilitators for the Margins to Centre through Education program were people of color who had immigrated to Canada with limited English skills, which enabled them to identify with the struggles of the participants.
5. *Create options for customization to provide support:* Have relevant and competent supports available for participants to ensure success in the program. Refugees with experiences of war and/or torture may experience psychological challenges that can impact their ability to concentrate during the program. By having access to immediate and responsive supports, participants are able to attend to and address moments of heightened psychological distress in a timely manner, and then continue in the program.
6. *Engage in formative and summative feedback:* One way to monitor participant learning, program quality, and value, is to engage in an ongoing formative and summative feedback process. This makes the program experience relevant to the participants' needs. During the Margins to Centre through Education project, the participants were evaluated three times over the course of 15 weeks. Evaluations were also performed after each session where participants rated the session on both the content and the process. This allowed the research team to reflect on the feedback to maximize the benefits to the participants.

Policy Recommendations

There were notable systemic challenges during the course of this research project. These can be alleviated through policy changes within higher education institutions and at the government level. As noted above, many refugees are unable to access documents indicating their educational credentials due to ongoing war in their country of origin. Regardless of the reasons, higher education institutions need to provide application alternatives to refugees in these circumstances. The influx of refugees in Canada is expected to continue and to successfully integrate them into Canadian society; it is recommended that higher education institutions address some of their admission policies through an alternative criterion such as Prior Learning Assessments.

Another policy recommendation for higher education institutions is to standardize English-comprehension testing. The OUACor ontariocolleges.ca, requires

submissions of credential assessment reports and English testing. Currently, there is a high cost and lack of consistency among a few organizations that provide credential assessments and English-comprehension testing. This can increase the costs for the applicants with no guarantee for acceptance by these institutions creating barriers to access and integration. It would be beneficial for the provincial government to create legislation that standardizes both credential assessments and English-comprehension testing across the province to extend the responsibility beyond individual higher education institutions.

The provincial government should also make amendments to the eligibility criteria for the OSAP. Only Canadian citizens, permanent residents, or those with the protected person's status are eligible for OSAP. Refugees under the designation of In-Canada Asylum program (ICAP), who seek asylum after entering in Canada but who have not yet had their refugee hearings, are disadvantaged when applying for post-secondary education, as they are not eligible for financial assistance. Furthermore, the processing time for refugee claim applications may sometimes be prolonged, leaving them in limbo and with precarious status. Many of the refugees participating in the research program had their hearing postponed, putting a pause on their future options. Some of the participants had been waiting for a decision on their claim for over five years. While they are awaiting decisions on their claims, refugee claimants are also not recognized as domestic students and have to apply as an International student by higher education institutions, regardless of the amount of time they have spent in Canada. The international student fees are three to four times more than domestic student fees, making this not a financially viable option. Many refugees also need to support families back home to sustain themselves, leaving them financially unstable, and unable to pay for schooling independently. Given these barriers, it is recommended that the Ontario government amend the eligibility criteria for OSAP to include refugee claimants under ICAP and allow for them to apply as domestic students.

CONCLUSION

Canada has become a place of refuge for many individuals escaping war and political persecution. Due to their experiences and systemic challenges, they face complex barriers to accessing higher education, which could potentially enhance their opportunities for gainful employment, income, housing, community, and social integration. This research project developed innovative programming for refugees who have experienced trauma, torture, or political oppression to foster pathways for upward mobility and social inclusion. Perhaps, the most significant of all in this research project was that: refugees themselves were able to share what they needed and wanted, what their barriers were, and what could facilitate furthering their goals. Their ability to voice their needs is vital, as increased access to post-secondary education for refugees will contribute to the social and economic growth of the country, enhancing the prosperity of Canadian society.

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