

Navigating the UK Higher Education Landscape: an auto-ethnographic perspective on supporting one Syrian family

Methodology

This study was never intended to be an academic research project, it grew out of a situation that seemed impossible to ignore where, as an academic, I found myself carried along on a journey while helping a friend try to navigate the UK Higher Education system. I found myself caught up in a situation where I could not ignore my awareness of how systemic barriers hindered her progress.

The work of Elias and Adams (2014) on auto-ethnography has helped shape this poster and provided a focus for future publications of the role of the researcher in telling the story of the research subject whilst being an active 'witness' to the experience.

Background

Having qualified in 'Career Guidance' in 1987, my work was always linked to social justice. Working with 'hard to reach' clients appealed and in 2000 I graduated with an MSc in Equal Opportunities. After 12 years as a practitioner, I worked in academia, undertaking project management on national and European Projects, as well as research, focusing on increasing the number of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths).

In 2016 a friend asked me to give career guidance to a friend (for the purposes of this poster 'A') she had met through having children at the same school. 'A' is a Syrian refugee who had arrived in the UK with her 2 small children a few years previously, her husband joined her 6 months later. I had not interviewed anyone for some years but I agreed to meet for a chat. This was the beginning of a journey that was to be hopeful, illuminating and frustrating in equal measure. I realised the power of using my contacts to help my new friend and her family, was in awe of their strength and resilience, and drew on every resource I had to support 'A' in her plan to return to her career in STEM.

Over time 'A's battles became my battles, against a system that seemed unfair, unjust and obstructive. It became impossible for me to be dispassionate and objective, so I did everything in use my knowledge and networks to support this family, not just 'A', in their desire to be productive and accepted members of British society.

Context

STEM skills shortages in the UK are well known, I had worked with several initiatives (UKRC/JIVE*, WISE**, Athena SWAN***) and organisations (the Royal Air Force, Institute of Physics) to encourage qualified women to return to STEM careers.

The combination of being a 'woman returner' and a STEM specialist can create a double bind where the question of gendered work identities can affect individuals' confidence levels (Herman, 2015).

The medical field that 'A' specialises in is listed by the UK Government as a shortage occupation. (Home Office, 2019)

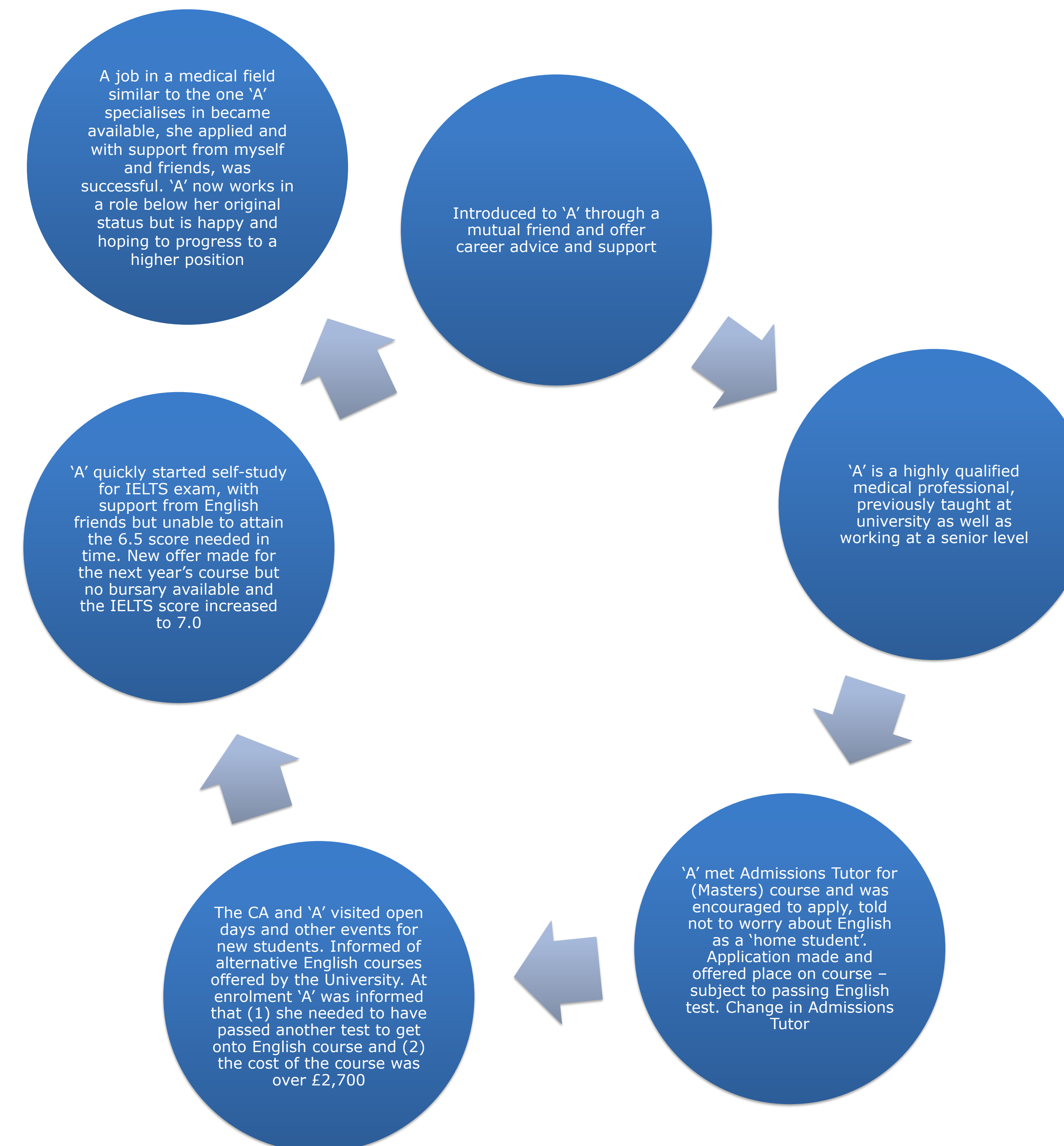
*Set up in 2008, the combined UKRC and JIVE project had approximately 23 funded partners, the aim of the UKRC was to increase the participation and position of women in science, engineering and technology (SET). In 2011 it took over the leadership of the [WISE Campaign](#) and became UKRC-WISE. In late 2012 it took on the WISE name

**The WISE Campaign (Women into Science and Engineering) encourages women and girls to value and pursue science, technology, engineering and maths-related courses in school or college and move on into related careers and progress.

***Athena SWAN Charter: Advance HE's Athena SWAN Charter was established in 2005 to encourage and recognise commitment to advancing the careers of women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM) employment in higher education and research.

Family Context

- Three young children, one early secondary school, one in primary and one in nursery. Reluctantly on Free School Meals.
- STEM Graduates: 'A' with MSc in medical field and 'B' (husband) BSc in earth sciences.
- 'B' working on zero hours contracts although family would probably be better off on benefits – important for him to be in work.
- Siblings and friends across Europe having a different experience, being retrained/returned to the workforce in the areas they were specialists in at home, for example: medicine, computing, engineering and art.



References:

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- Johnson, J.L., Bottorff, J.L., Browne, A.J., Grewal, S., Hilton, B.A. and Clarke, H., 2004. Othering and being othered in the context of health care services. *Health communication*, 16(2), pp.255-271.
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Main Issues

- Inconsistent information from university about support available.
- University staff treating 'A' as an international student when the opposite is true (e.g. no funds, limited support).
- Funding changed from being paid to take the course, to having to pay fees of £24K over two years (which is more than the £9K standard amount).
- The NARIC assessment provides an equivalent of qualification level but does not tell the whole story. 'A' was very near to completing her PhD but there is no evidence as the awarding university and all the supervisory staff are no longer there.

Key lessons learnt

- Do not assume that professionals dealing with refugees have any awareness of their special circumstances with regard to funding, qualifications and other factors.
- Be aware that refugees with skills which are in short supply in the UK are not necessarily going to get the help they need.
- Be prepared to use networks and personal contacts more than ever before, finding people who are sympathetic helps enormously.
- Maintaining a professional response when systems and poor communication appear to work against refugees who are desperate to re-establish careers is hard!
- Achieving a positive outcome can take far more time than most career guidance practitioners have available.

Personal learning

- Being a witness to someone else's journey is a powerful and potentially life-changing experience. You start to anticipate the barriers and try to alleviate any potential difficulties. This can result in undertaking a form of 'protective channeling' (Rolfe, 1999) where the researcher/practitioner tries to deflect difficult decisions and situations from the research subject.
- Being an established and experienced career development professional, working in academia, had advantages (access to decision makers, networks and systems knowledge) and disadvantages (fear of creating too much disruption on behalf of 'A'). The fact that 'A' was different and easily identifiable meant that generic questions about admissions and progression routes were hard to frame.
- Having avoided giving career advice and guidance to friends and family for years, the personal relationships that developed with 'A' and her family presented new rewards and challenges. Boundaries became blurred and it was hard not to be emotionally involved.
- Knowing the pressure the whole family were under was an additional motivator for trying to overcome the barriers.