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Student Clubs or Resettlement Frontlines? Rethinking the Role of WUSC's Local Committees: A Policy Critique

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Abstract: The combination of refugee sponsorship with access to higher education highlights World University Service of Canada's unique resettlement pathway. Local Committees (LCs) of student volunteers are established on academic campuses to support the resettlement and integration of refugee youth arriving through the Student Refugee Program (SRP). Although praised for its innovation, limited available research evaluates the effectiveness of the program's support model, nor its impact on the sponsored students. While LCs are delegated responsibilities typically reserved for resettlement organizations, student volunteers often lack the necessary training, experience, and institutional support to meet these tasks. This paper uses a phenomenological approach to examine how existing policy gaps shape the lived experiences of refugee students in terms of integration and education in Canada. Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with seven WUSC scholars. Grounded in critical theory, thematic analysis of the findings reveals inconsistencies in the quality and continuity of support across campuses as well as discrepancies between student volunteers' capacities and refugee students' expectations and needs. As concern is raised about the sustainability and equity of the current model, a policy revision is required to better structure the role of LCs. Future developments must include ensuring consistent standards of support to enhance the integration experience of refugee youth students in Canada.

Keywords: Private Sponsorship of Refugees; WUSC; student clubs; Student Refugee Program; policy and practice; education and integration

1. Introduction

This research is part of a larger study that uses descriptive phenomenology to understand refugee students' experience of integration while enrolled in university education in Canada. From the data, a separate analysis is presented in this paper to explore the role of World University Services

of Canada's (WUSC) local committee (LC) members and understand through a critical theory lens how the power-relations influence WUSC students' integration and educational pathways. What types of support do WUSC LCs in Canadian learning institutions offer under the title of a student club? How involved are the LCs of WUSC-affiliated campuses regarding SRP



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students' education and integration in Canada? The purpose is to understand SRP students' experiences and expectations, in addition to determining how supportive and adequate are the policies involved in the committees' foundation and role.

2. Literature Review

The Student Refugee Program (SRP) is offered by WUSC and falls under the Private Sponsorship program and the official Sponsorship Agreement Holders in Canada (Verberg, & MacDonald, 2023). The SRP distinguishes itself from any other scholarship program by offering university education in conjunction with permanent resettlement for refugee youth (McKee et al., 2019; Peterson, 2012). It was created in 1978 by the United Nations, WUSC-Ottawa and Immigration Canada (Plasterer, 2011; WUSC, n.d.). Local committees (LC) are put in place by WUSC at the partnered learning institutions to oversee the sponsorships and support the scholars in their educational and societal integration. These committees fall under the category of and are governed by policies related to "students clubs". They are mainly composed of and managed by local volunteer university students (WUSC, n.d.).

To better understand the structure of the LCs, one must first investigate the policies of student-led clubs from different universities, as a means of clarifying the power and decision frameworks involved. While some institutions such as McGill University refer to them as student clubs, others like the University of Toronto call them student groups (SSMU, n.d.; University of Toronto, 2025). McGill University has over 250 clubs in total, including the WUSC LC. Clubs at McGill are grouped into ten broad categories. These include sports, charity work, community volunteering, performance, health, language and publications, hobbies, networking, political, and religious clubs (SSMU, n.d.). At McGill, student clubs are described as "interest groups, representing a wide variety of hobbies, interests, and causes, all of which are run entirely by undergraduate students" (SSMU, n.d., para. 3). Each club varies in terms of time commitment and the types of activities they offer. Similarly, at the University of Toronto, they are defined as "voluntary student organizations that have been granted recognition status through the Office of Student Life" (UofT, 2023, para. 2). To

be recognized, student groups need to meet several requirements outlined in the university's policy on student groups. These include having at least five members, ensuring membership is open and inclusive, running the group democratically, and operating on a non-commercial basis. Furthermore, their activities must reflect the university's values and follow its policies (University of Toronto, 2025). On the St. George Campus of the University of Toronto alone, there are over 700 recognized student groups that meet these standards.

WUSC's LC falls under the student-led club policies and is established in 100 different Canadian learning institutions, including colleges, CEGEPs (Quebec) and universities (WUSC, n.d.). LCs offer newly arrived SRP students support in their living and studying adjustments, especially in the first academic year following their arrival to Canada (Verberg & MacDonald, 2023). This includes a wide range of social support to the newly arrived students, starting from welcoming them at the airports and helping them complete their provincial and federal landing documents (Ghomeshi & Hyman, 2018; Plasterer, 2011; Shankar et al., 2016). The local committee also supports SRP students upon arrival by introducing them to the Canadian education system, helping them access public transportation, orienting them in accessing health services, and so forth (McKee et al., 2019; Verberg, & MacDonald, 2023). Not only is the local committee responsible for directly supporting SRP students in their integration and resettlement process, but they are also responsible for advocating for WUSC to secure funding through the students' levies and the referendums (Plasterer, 2011; Verberg, & MacDonald, 2023). Financial aid can therefore greatly vary from an institution to another (Ghomeshi & Hyman, 2018; Peterson, 2012).

Under Canada's Immigration Act of 1967, refugees can be sponsored for permanent residence in Canada via volunteer-based community and resettlement organizations or groups of five (IRCC, 2024). Over 327,000 refugees have been welcomed into Canada through private sponsorship in the last 45 years (UNHCR, n.d.). This relieves the government from offering necessary financial and social services to support refugees' integration into Canadian society during the sponsorship year (IRCC, 2024a; Yousuf,

2025). Sponsor responsibilities cited in provincial and federal government websites include but are not limited to: providing financial support to cover basic living expenses such as housing, medical bills, food, and clothing, helping them complete necessary legal documentation, orienting them into accessing health services, education, language proficiency classes, and public transportation, and supporting them in building ties with the community (Government of Quebec, 2024; IRCC, 2024a). To be eligible, potential sponsors must provide not only proof of financial capabilities, but also “a settlement plan” (IRCC, 2025). Immigration Refugee Citizenship Canada (IRCC) also specifies the condition for sponsoring groups to reside in the same city of resettlement as the refugees, or for the least, have representatives present to help support said refugees and distribute the associated responsibilities over more than one individual (IRCC, 2024a). Hence, LCs serve as a representative for WUSC.

Amongst the roles expected by LCs is advocacy to university leaderships and representative bodies in terms of funding and resources, to support the beneficiaries in their educational success and integration. A potential concern would be for members to solely focus on the numerical values of financial aid, dismissing the importance of budgeting orientation and social support (WUSC, 2018). Indeed, a study found that workers in sponsorship refugee programs in German universities were mainly worried about securing appropriate funding to guarantee the continuity of the programs, rather than focusing on individual refugee students’ challenges and difficulties in their new country of resettlement (Unangst & Streitwieser, 2018). Nevertheless, one can argue that only through proper evaluation and understanding of SRP students’ integration process in conjunction with education can their needs be identified, prioritized, and ultimately addressed. Participants in a study by Verberg and MacDonald (2023) expressed that a lack of support caused refugees to leave their education to deal instead with their harsh transition, while others explained that without provision of an adequate support system, it is unethical to bring refugees; “you want to set people up to succeed, not to fail” (p. 9).

3. Theoretical Framework

Through the lens of critical theory, the study aims to

understand the power dynamics in the relationship between SRP students and the WUSC LCs: how do these dynamics shape and impact the SRP students’ integration and educational pathways in Canadian universities? Drawing on Brookfield’s (2014) conception of critical theory as a tool for challenging dominant ideologies, the study is also grounded on Marx’s proletariat in prioritizing the working force (the refugee students) and criticizing how systems (the LCs and SRP program) are built (Rasmussen, 2012). As a result, this framework will guide study findings to go beyond describing the LCs’ functionality, but also as to question its strategy in providing SRP students with the necessary support in achieving successful integration and university education. Indeed, critical theory challenges the status quo (Brookfield, 2014), where acceptance of decisions from an up-down form, described as “nudging”, is discouraged (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). The application of critical theory will help uncover how well-intentioned interventions may mask flaws in the organizational structure of the LCs, and their consequences on SRP students’ experiences of integration and higher education.

4. Methods

4.1. Recruitment

Purposive sampling was employed to seek out individuals with direct experience of the phenomena of integration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criteria of inclusion were defined as enrolment or graduation from a Canadian university along with resettlement in Canada through WUSC. Recruitment information reached WUSC students through universities’ LCs. Participants then individually reached out to the researcher via email and booked an appointment at their convenience.

4.2. Participants

Seven WUSC-sponsored youth participants were included in the research study; six males and one female. Ages at arrival in Canada were between 21 and 26 years old. Participants were selected as former WUSC students from different universities across the provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec. Former WUSC participants were defined as students whose scholarship fund had been terminated but were still enrolled in university programs or had graduated in the past five years. The

earliest year of enrollment was 2016 and the latest was 2022. Participants came from various countries: Congo, Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria. The time spent in refugee camps varied: since birth for some to a minimum of 6 years for others. Four of the seven participants had graduated by the time the interview was conducted, while three were still completing their university degree. All seven participants' first language was neither English nor French. Three participants learned English during their time in refugee camps. Three participants had their first experience with a computer after landing in Canada. One of the graduated participants had moved out of Canada to pursue better job opportunities, while another was still in the process of preparing to leave Canada at the time of the interview for the same reason.

4.3. Data Collections

Fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted with seven WUSC participants between March 2023 and June 2024. Interviews were done online via Zoom. Verbal and signed consents were obtained before the start of each interview. An honorarium of \$30 was given to each participant for each interview. For member checking, a copy of the transcript of the first interview was sent to the participants prior to their second interview. There was a pause of 2-4 months between participants' first and second interviews. For confidentiality purposes, all participants chose their preferred pseudonyms. Qualitative data was collected using an unstructured interview guide. An external device was used to audio record the interviews for verbatim transcription purposes.

4.4. Data Analysis

This study adopted a phenomenological approach and inductive thematic analysis to explore how participants' interactions with the LCs influenced their integration and experiences of university education during resettlement (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Transcripts were read multiple times for familiarity and to be able to detect all sentences connected to the WUSC students' experiences with their LCs (Sundler et al., 2019). Themes that were common to all participants were manually coded and clustered as a meaningful whole to reveal the essence of the participants' experience with WUSC LCs (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2022). I suspended my past knowledge and experience

to understand the meaning of the lived experience at a deeper level by bracketing my beliefs, feelings and perceptions (Dodgson, 2023; Gearing, 2004; Ozuem et al., 2021; Paley, 1997).

5. Results

Four themes emerged that related to the SRP students' relationship with the local committee and the policies that shaped their interactions in their assigned universities: (1) Admissions role: Who gets to come?; (2) Personal interests of committee members: Why are they interested?; (3) Refugee students' not knowing: Whose responsibility?; and (4) Committee or community? These themes highlight the extent of LCs involvement in SRP students' experiences of education and overall integration, and how despite their interventions, SRP students lacked knowledge and orientation on various interconnected aspects of life in Canada. They also show a gap between the expectations and needs of the SRP students in comparison to the limited availability and efforts from LC members. This further implies a need for more definite policies that would provide clarity on the "student club" role, with consistency in the services in addition to tailoring the committee's functioning to the SRP students' needs.

5.1. Admissions role: Who gets to come?

Unlike any other student club at Canadian universities, LCs have a say on which accepted SRP scholars should enroll in the WUSC-partnered university. In fact, WUSC sends the LC a list of potential students, from which members will create a sub-list to send to the admissions office. The university admissions office makes the final decision, but the LC still offers an initial selection step, as Pop described:

They are two different institutions. And, so, what WUSC will do, they send out the name of the student that they want to sponsor, they send out the names of the student to institutions and then the institution will select a student from there. And I think just like where the communication end and then they wait until when they're looking for universities for students.

As for program selection, according to student participants, universities just fill in the gaps. However, variability exists from one university to the other, depending on the advocacy efforts of the WUSC committee and who is handling their file. As Zahra mentioned:

WUSC sent the applications to the local committee, so if they work hard, they can do, [...] then kind of do good, as much as they can, second matching, but for us, how did I know they didn't do much, because me and two of the boys who came at the same time, we get accepted in Bachelor of Environmental Science, which the three of us, we didn't put it in our application. We have different, yeah, the others, they want to do undergrad, but they don't want to be in environmental science, but they end up in this program. That means they just, whatever gaps at the university we have here a gap.

In other words, advocating for SRP students at this stage also matters, as it can influence whether the SRP applicants are assigned to their program of choice or are randomly enrolled to a program that happens to have empty seats.

5.2. Personal interests of committee members: Why are they interested?

Given that the responsibilities of the LCs are attributed to student volunteers in the university, variability in services can be found depending on the volunteers' level of commitment. For instance, Zahra felt that the LC members were not dedicated to supporting SRP students effectively and that they should have guided her more. She wondered about the nature of the motives behind their involvement and whether it was for personal benefits such as accumulating community work hours for required courses or to look better on scholarship applications. Zahra described it this way:

Like to me, if I look back, I just, the only thing I don't like about was the committee, how they were unhelpful, where they could have done a lot and help really like in succeed, succeed the students who are coming, but they didn't, it's like them more about oh, some of them, they were kind of, they want to be in the committee so they can register it. I don't know this is like some courses you can take, and you meet you want more hours. For some of them, that was the purpose of them enrolling in the committee; others it just to get to get scholarship.

Nas linked the lack of support from the LC to the fact that members are student volunteers with their own commitments and priorities.

Nas: For me, like, I'm sure like they're all volunteers doing a good job. But did I find it helpful? No, I did not find it helpful. You know, but that could be maybe

personal. You definitely maybe already talked to others. But my year, maybe they didn't know how to, or maybe they also like, it's also difficult, right? They were going through all we were going through too. They're students as well. So, you cannot maybe expect other people, you know, to allocate their time. I think it was just the way it was.

Zahra added that it became clear to her their volunteering did not originate from dedication towards refugees' support simply because they did not seem to care. She gave an example of how she felt they did not care after losing her roommate's PR card.

Zahra: Yeah, when you don't see them caring about the student, that means they are not doing it like voluntary because if it's matter, they care about and they want to do something to help. But I didn't see that even like my friend...she's my roommate now... and she came through the same struggle and all even the year she came was more struggle was I think she lost her PR and even they lost it. Yeah, they were responsible for that.

5.3. Refugee students' not knowing: Whose responsibility?

Pop's experience with the WUSC committee was limited to some emails during his enrolment. According to him, they should have engaged more and made the effort to meet with the SRP students. Only once did the committee invite the sponsored students for an in-person gathering during their Summit at his university, but not everyone could attend. He explained the inadequacy behind their retroactive strategy, given that students will likely feel too shy to ask for support from the LC members, whom they never see or barely interact with. Instead, he proposed that the committee be proactive by engaging with the SRP students regularly and checking-in on them. Pop described what he meant by wanting "more" involvement:

I felt like once I came to Canada, I never had an opportunity and like they had this, they usually have a summit where they invite the student to come and attend it and not all the students will attend it based on things that they are doing at the time. It's usually during the school term and that's the only time they check on the student. Other times, will be like sending out email, checking if the student has graduated or like sending out the resources that they have and some of the students are shy and they will not look at the resources

or look for help so it's good for them to try to maybe call this to them maybe once a year and see how they are doing.

Pop also felt it was dishonest for the LC to reach out and ask if he had graduated, when he felt neglected by them during his entire degree.

Pop: Recently when I got an email and then they were checking on like if I had graduated or not and like, I kind of felt like at this time you were not there to support me. I did all this on my own and now you want to say you are checking on me, if I have graduated? But like, E-mail is not enough, like sending out that email once a year is not enough for me.

Although Abdi was grateful for the LC's help, he was also concerned about their limited availability as university students.

Abdi: Because they have places, I don't think I have seen a mistake they made because whenever they're free and you address your problem, they are willing to help. The problem was like when nobody was free. Let's say everyone has class, or maybe they have assignments or duties to attend to, and all you are left with is you alone.

Zahra's experience with the LC was one of dismissal. She shared the following memory:

Like one thing I remember, whenever we don't know how to deal, we have a question, and we don't know how to deal it. And then one of them kind of made fun of us. Like "you don't know this and just Google it". Like I know how to Google it, but I want to hear the experience, go through it. Like I know how to do Google stuff, but it's different when you live it, and you deal with it or you know someone who did it before so he can give me his advice how to do it.

The LC is also responsible for making sure funding is available to financially support the SRP students. However, Cosette explained a need for orientation on how to manage and plan their expenses and understand budgeting. Indeed, clarifications on the expected total amount and duration of funding in addition to guidelines on how they should distribute the funds were missing.

Cosette: you know after one year the future will come and just be on your own. Now, it depends with the local committee, because I don't think the local committees could be sending students like I'm sending you this money maybe every month. I think they could

maybe sit with their students, and try to make it clear that look, we have gathered maybe \$20,000 for you, for one year. Now we need to plan with you, how do you want to use it? [...] Then the students will know how much money that, that remains for him and telling him that you know you have just one year with us. Then the next year, is your is on you.

Even when it came to important decisions, like finding proper housing, Karam mentioned no support was offered from the LC: "No, I don't think so. I don't remember. It was us looking for an apartment. No tips were provided or something that could help you."

5.4. Committee or Community?

Despite the gaps in support faced by the SRP students, Nas emphasized the potential and powerful impact the LC could have on their wellbeing, if only the committee members would establish good contact with the SRP students and demonstrate a desire to build community.

Nas: So, what the students actually need is two things, to make them feel maybe more like welcome home, like, you know, as a community. That's really important, I think, you know, to make them feel... People understand, you know, you don't have time for sure, but like, won't be... are new here, they don't know much. So, I think it will help the students if the local committee thinks as if they were like their family as a community, like more like closer, you know.

Nas mentioned that the word committee is close to community, and that in SRP students' minds this translates to expectations from the committee to resemble that of the community support they experienced back home:

I think it goes back to the expectations; people have when they come in here. You know, social committee. The word committee maybe is closer to community. So maybe that's how we interpret in our head. So, you feel like this is your family but it's not like that. It's completely different, you know? So maybe they should change, maybe the committee different to something different, so to avoid the resemblance to community maybe.

According to Nas, students from other provinces also shared his confusion between committee and community. This misinterpretation shaped their expectations of the LC's purpose and role. Although

the committee helped them at the beginning of their sponsorship year, they later felt alone in their hardships.

Nas: Everyone I talked to, like, even the other provinces, they had the same opinion. It was almost the same. They're like, no. And yeah, everyone was just struggling. They helped you by when you come here you know they will go to the airport they receive your papers wherever they do before you come but when you come here when you're struggling, you're on your own.

6. Discussion

Themes emerged in the results providing insight on the experience of SRP students with members of the LC, in addition to exposing the gaps in the policies that led to this type of relationship. Adopting a peer-to-peer model, student clubs by definition limit involvement of academic institutions in their activities, although agreements with WUSC-Ottawa insist on the presence of one to two employees from the partnered campuses to oversee the LC (WUSC, 2020). Unfortunately, study results revealed that the employees' participation is rather limited and much more symbolic, as they were not directly involved in the SRP students' academic integration or orientation into Canadian society, in line with other study findings (Shankar et al., 2016). The policies in place negatively impact the relationships in play, as student volunteers often lack the time and expertise of addressing the needs of SRP students and struggle to meet their expectations. As a result, SRP students' academic experiences and their integration are compromised.

6.1. Limited Availability

Study results showed that the extent of the relationship after welcoming SRP students upon their arrival at the airport was limited to some emails during the sponsorship year. Because LC members are students, they have limited time availability to devote to SRP students, and, thus, there is variability of the quality of support, not only from one institution to another, but also from year to year based on members' knowledge, motivation, and commitment to the SRP students (McKee et al., 2019). Shankar et al. (2016) indicated that limited support negatively impacted SRP students' integration and academic success. As a result, SRP students had to face most of their educational and resettlement challenges on their own. Indeed, no

support was offered by the LC when passing important milestones, such as procuring housing and transferring university programs. In fact, participants vocalized needing more frequent and genuine communications with the LC, in addition to more follow-up and check-in sessions. Likewise, Macklin et al. (2018) argue that sponsors or volunteers from resettlement organizations must demonstrate flexibility, availability, and interpersonal and intercultural skills to properly support and advocate for refugees. Additionally, they must be willing to use their social position and connections, that is, their power and privilege, to the benefit of their sponsored individuals (Macklin et al., 2018). The LC must create a safe space to encourage exchanges between student volunteers and the SRP scholars, considering that some might have felt too shy to ask for support while others felt discouraged and dismissed when seeking help (Alqawasma, 2026). In fact, the SRP scholars wish for support mirroring that of a community. As their needs fluctuate throughout their academic and sponsorship year of resettlement, there is a need for a constant and stable support system to help them develop successful educational pathways and integration (Ismail, 2023). Unfortunately, even with the involvement of highly motivated volunteers, the current structure of LCs does not allow for consistent, year-round support that aligns with the specific needs of SRP scholars. Moreover, in the absence of an active WUSC LC, defined by the lack of participating volunteers, universities fail to welcome a new cohort of students (IRCC, 2024a; WUSC, n.d.).

Additionally, WUSC's LC and volunteers usually return to their cities and communities during vacations and holidays (Ghomeshi & Hyman, 2018). This translates into WUSC's LC being empty and therefore no one being present yet again to answer the questions of the SRP students. None of the available research on WUSC criticizes that, when in fact summer is a crucial time for SRP students since it marks the end of their one-year scholarship, and they must now procure housing and employment. However, with the LC members being on vacation, SRP students end up navigating their new reality once more on their own. This negatively impacts their experience of integration and can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness (Ghomeshi & Hyman, 2018; McKee et al., 2019).

6.2. Limited Expertise

Despite the fact that many of WUSC's LC volunteers want and love to help, they are not experts on refugees' integration and therefore hold limited knowledge on the conditions and needs of SRP students (Peterson, 2012; Ghomeshi & Hyman, 2018). When looking at the development of knowledge on refugees' needs by LC members and volunteers, it is hard to achieve and develop over time given the structure of the student association. First, there are no knowledge prerequisites regarding refugee affairs when aiming to affiliate to LCs, although they are offered a training session prior to the arrival of the SRP students (Verberg & MacDonald, 2023; WUSC, 2020). Second, the committee members are not involved on a long-term basis. The maximum duration of their participation is usually the number of years in which they are enrolled in the university. Depending on their interests and commitment; they leave the committee when they graduate. At that point, new students replace their positions and the cycle repeats itself (Peterson, 2012; Plasterer, 2011). Given these circumstances, by the time the LC members develop their knowledge about the program and look for important paths for improvement, they are ready to leave. They are not present for a long-enough period of time to advocate for and demand change and follow up nor are they trained to deal with the special attention required to address additional pre-migration factors that have been shown to affect academic success of refugee youth in comparison to Canadian students (Anderson, 2020). Literature discusses the consequences of pre-migration factors without proper support in the welcoming society on refugees' outcomes (Yu et al., 2007), where in the case of SRP students, it is associated to a greater risk of leaving their assigned universities and/or complaining of stress, isolation, and mental and psychological health problems (Ghomeshi & Hyman, 2018).

When considering the necessary knowledge to provide appropriate and meaningful guidance to SRP students, it is also applicable to consider power relations in play. Indeed, when members of the WUSC LC are taking on the role of a sponsor and directing refugees to certain services or providing information, they can unintentionally misuse their power or provide biased information based on their own culture, and assumptions (Alqawasma, 2026; Haugen et al., 2020).

This is especially important in the context of the committee being formed of students who decide to volunteer their time as part of their academic life or perhaps to enrich their CVs versus individuals who take an informed decision to sponsor, although the latter may also be motivated by self-image. According to Wills and Lenard, (2025) while refugees can inherently benefit from the networking and social opportunities of their private sponsors, concern is raised on the ethical use of sponsors' power over refugees by controlling the information they provide them to direct certain decisions, whether consciously or inadvertently (Wills & Lenard, 2025). Sponsors, may, in fact, emit a controlling attitude (Haugen et al., 2020).

It is important to note that not only are SRP students new to the country, but they are also vulnerable from being a visible minority, most of them being Black. Hidden power relations and oppression in the system could delay policy changes for the improvement of conditions of the SRP students. Members of the LC, university administration, and provincial policy makers are accountable to ensure safe and inclusive environment. They must be aware of intersectionality and how their own cultural contexts interact with those of SRP students and how those interactions shape how integration challenges are heard, understood, and acted upon (Smooth, 2013). A proposed approach would be to assign a case worker for the students who is available for them during their university enrollment and who has expertise on refugee integration, pre-migration factors and intersectionality.

The results also showed the absence of requirements to membership in the LC, without consideration of their prior knowledge on refugee issues. In fact, results showcased instances where SRP students were even bullied for not knowing simple information that committee members assumed to be obvious, aligned with results from Alqawasma (2026). A thesis study results by Ismail (2023) showed that 7 out of 9 participants in her study, in addition to herself as a former SRP student, were victims of discrimination by their peers, fellow students, and professors, especially when requesting information in the early phase of their resettlement.

7. Best Practices and Policy Recommendations

Despite the important role the WUSC LCs are playing

in enabling student refugees to resettle and study in Canada by stepping in where the government is stepping back (Labman & Pearlman, 2018; Yousuf, 2025), its current structure can result in negative outcomes for refugee youth's educational pathways. To optimize WUSC's role in refugees' integration and education, there needs to be a restructuring of the agreements between WUSC and academic institutions to promote stability in service delivery by the LCs. Implications of potential changes involve the presence of long-term committee members who would have the required time, energy, and expertise to understand refugees' issues and better advocate for SRP students to improve the program. As for the student volunteers, more comprehensive training and structured workshops must be provided, not only to recognize the significance of their roles in refugee students' educational journeys and integration processes to better advocate for them, but also to understand that their identity shapes their interactions with refugee students. Policies and decision making should not be part of the nudge (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009), where everyone has to agree with the conditions imposed. Working with refugees requires an understanding that one size does not fit all (Ives, 2007); what is in the best interests of one refugee student may not be in the best interests of another. Rather, policies should be based upon what can best answer the youth refugees' needs, according to the refugee students themselves. Follow-up on SRP students during their years of studies, and especially after the termination of their scholarship is crucial.

It is also important to welcome students on a yearly basis, whether local students volunteer or not. The LC must be able to run independently of student volunteers, as it is the only hope for higher education for millions of refugee youth living in camps around the world. Academic institutions must step-in and include professionals with the necessary expertise to guide the LC, ensure proper follow-up, and provide long term commitment. University policies must reconsider WUSC LCs as a resettlement organization, rather than a student club, to ameliorate the structure of the services and the support offered to the SRP students. In fact, LC members' level of involvement and motivations could have a long-term impact on refugee youth SRPs education and integration (Ismail, 2023). Moreover, when addressing the lack of proper

training and knowledge as well as the issue of seasonal availability of the student-led local committee, one might question if the solution would simply be an employee-led committee composed of experienced and knowledgeable staff on refugees' issues. The permanent positions could be assigned to former SRP students who went through the process themselves, to provide better insight on current needs and advocate for necessary change in the current gaps. In contrast, the replacement of student volunteers by professional staff would inquire about an important expense in the available funding. Would a more expensive but devoted team offer better support, advocacy, and long-term improvements of the WUSC program? Or would a more budget-friendly committee of motivated students be preferred to redirect the funding in offering longer financial support for SRP students? These questions remain unanswered, as no published studies directly evaluate how funding should be used and they are a matter of universities' internal policies. Another path to improvement would be the involvement of social work and law interns, with flexibility in their schedules allowing for summer internships to provide year-round support to the SRP students. The structure brought by field education might add more stability and consistency than the present model of volunteers, all while reducing the costs of a fully staffed committee.

Finally, this paper does not seek to diminish the value or efforts of the LCs, but rather argues for the necessity of all parties, including SRP students, WUSC-Ottawa and academic establishments, to engage in conversation and revisit the policies in place to ensure stability, consistency and improved support in their services. This population should be given the consideration, attention and care it deserves, rather than depend on busy volunteers in services that do not guarantee stability nor availability in the promised support.

8. Limitations

The purpose of this study was not to generate results that could be generalized but to explore how the construction of WUSC LCs impact the type of support they offer to SRP students during their first years of resettlement in Canada. Female participation in the research is limited to one, as an unfortunate gender gap persists in WUSC's selection of scholars (WUSC, n.d.). The participants in this research were also limited

to those who were able to continue in their assigned schools or had recently graduated, introducing a positive selection bias. In other words, results did not include refugee students who dropped out of their universities, which could alter the results in terms of the SRP students' experiences and needs. Further research is recommended for gender-based explorations of SRP student experiences as well as seeking those who were forced to drop out of the program.

It is worth mentioning that all interviews were conducted in English, which was the second, third, or even fourth language of the participants. As they originated from Congo, Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria, their mother tongues included Arabic, Dinka, Dzongkha, Somali, and Swahili. Conducting the interviews in their first languages might have enabled richer and more nuanced narratives. At the same time, the practical and ethical challenges of using interpreters, such as maintaining confidentiality, building trust, and ensuring consistent interpretation, made English the most viable shared language for data collection. Recognizing this tension is an important part of my reflexive process. It highlights how even well-intentioned research can be shaped by the same structural constraints it seeks to expose, and it reinforces the need for more inclusive, multilingual approaches in future studies involving refugee participants.

Ethics

Research Ethics Board approval was obtained from the university's research ethics board. REB File Number: 22-12-017.

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