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UNIVERSITY**

**A NEW  
SCHOOL OF  
THOUGHT**

**FINAL REPORT**  
TO THE ADULT AND COMMUNITY  
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THE VICTORIAN MULTICULTURAL  
COMMISSION (VMC)

# **REFUGEE ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN TERTIARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

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ETHNICITY AND POLICY ALTERNATIVES  
(ICEPA), VICTORIA UNIVERSITY**

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We sincerely hope that the findings of this project will be a useful resource to education providers in the design and delivery of programs that are accessible and negotiable by refugees and asylum seekers. Ultimately, we hope that the report will contribute to the settlement of refugees in Australia through successful education and training experiences that lead to sustainable employment opportunities.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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### **Background**

Australia has a growing refugee population of about 12,000 people a year who gain entry into Australia through its humanitarian program. The motive for this research stems from the recognition that this sector of the population has distinct needs but there is little research into the experiences and needs of refugees in tertiary education and training in Australia or overseas. Although guides for teachers dealing with refugees have been produced, these are both dated and deal with classroom situations rather than policy issues. Work in this area has been undertaken overseas, but this does not take into account specific circumstances surrounding the Australian tertiary education sector. In addition, while some Victorian educational institutions have developed special programs for refugees there has been no comprehensive mapping and evaluation of these.

Common concern about the needs of refugee students was discussed between the Institute for Community, Ethnicity and Policy Alternatives (ICEPA) at Victoria University (VU), the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC), and Department of Education and Training (DET) in 2003. The need was identified to develop best practice models that could assist higher educational and training organisations in the delivery of services to refugees. In 2004, the VMC and DET contracted ICEPA to undertake the research to identify best practice in refugee access to education and training.

### **Scope and methodology**

The main research questions addressed in the research are:

- What factors assist and impede refugees from accessing and completing tertiary education programs?
- How can Higher Education and TAFE providers develop the employability of students from refugee backgrounds?
- What initiatives have facilitated and improved access and participation in education and training by refugees? How should such initiatives be evaluated?
- What policies and programs need to be developed to better advance refugee access to higher education and training?

The general approach of the research was to focus attention on Victorian tertiary institutions (TAFE and higher education) that had demonstrable experience in providing targeted programs for refugee students. The research focused on two dual-sector higher education bodies (Victoria University and RMIT) and two stand-alone TAFE institutes (Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE and Goulburn Ovens Valley TAFE, Shepparton), with data being collected in both TAFE and higher education divisions. As such, six separate case studies were conducted within the framework of these six tertiary education providers – four TAFEs and two higher education divisions. This selection of case studies also allowed collection of data on asylum seekers, through programs provided at RMIT. This was important due to the differing needs of this group compared to humanitarian entrants.

The methodology was multi-layered and predominantly qualitative, with the primary data collection processes being:

- A national and international literature review (2005);
- Consultations with a range of ethnic community leaders and tertiary education staff (2005);

- Interviews with administrative and teaching staff within the six education providers (2006); and,
- Focus group discussions with refugee and asylum seeker students from four education providers (2006).

Altogether, formal interviews were conducted with 14 tertiary education staff and four focus groups were conducted with refugee and asylum seeker students (20 students in total) from Victoria University, RMIT, NMIT and GOTAFE. This was in addition to discussions and consultations over the 2005 period with teaching and administrative staff as well as with community organisations.

A project steering group provided valuable community, educational and departmental insights that assisted the research process. The group consisted of high-level representatives from refugee communities (Bosnian, African, Vietnamese, Spanish-speaking), from Migrant Resource Centres, education providers, counsellors, advocates and government agencies.

### **Barriers for refugees accessing tertiary education**

Extensive documentation of these has been made in Section 1 which reports on the literature review. Key barriers identified include:

- *Financial barriers* – particularly for asylum seekers who had no permanent residency but also for refugee students on permanent visas. Issues arise from low income, the need to support numerous dependents while studying and difficulty accessing paid employment;
- *Access to and affordability of public transport* – this was raised by students in both urban and regional locations as a factor limiting access to classes and to preferred courses;
- *Housing problems* – while most permanent refugees reported gaining assistance in the early days of settlement, ongoing problems with private housing such as evictions, inappropriate residences and even demolition, posed major issues while attempting to maintain continuity of studies. These problems were compounded by lack of information and awareness of housing options and rights. For the asylum seekers and TPVs, accommodation was simply unaffordable. These students were more likely to be living with ‘friends’ or receiving financial assistance with accommodation such as an RMIT accommodation scholarship;
- *English language barriers* – this is the case for any new group whose first language is not English, but it is particularly frustrating for highly educated refugees who were impatient to resume paid work at a professional level. The lack of English skills necessary to pursue training or qualifications was demoralising for some refugees, and some might feel tempted to give up because the journey to English proficiency was so long;
- *Psychological barriers* – mainly associated with past traumas overseas, but also arising from the experience of extended detention in Australia, loneliness, depression, isolation from friends and families overseas, a sense of helplessness and uncertainty or anxiety about the future. These psychological states were reported to have deleterious effects on students’ ability to concentrate and persevere with their studies;
- *Childcare barriers* – inability to access appropriate childcare within reasonable time periods due to long waiting lists;
- *Citizenship barriers* – several asylum seeker students spoke passionately about the problems created for them by federal policies which failed to give them permanent residency or the same rights and entitlements as other students.

There was a strong sense of marginalisation and exclusion coming from their personal accounts;

- *Gender barriers* – a multitude of barriers, cultural, economic and social, were said to be faced by female refugees in particular, such as the uneven division of labour in the household which impacted on the ability to study;
- *Understanding systems* – a lack of familiarity with the Australian education system and information gaps in regard to training and employment pathways is exacerbated by an inability to access most publicly-funded services other than TAFE courses; and,
- *Language training* – the lack of access to 510 hours of English provision (for temporary refugees or asylum seekers) and inability to self-narrate or present a convincing self-portrait due to many years as a refugee.

### **Nature of programs provided for refugee and asylum seeker access/participation**

The nature and extent of the programs provided for refugees and asylum seekers varied across the six providers, including within institutions (RMIT and VU). However, a common feature was the extraordinary commitment and sympathy displayed by staff (program coordinators and others) within these institutions. There was strong demonstrated commitment to the concept of enhancing access to refugees in particular, and to maximise their participation in tertiary education and society in general.

Common to all the programs was the notion that student needs must be addressed holistically. It was felt that educational needs could not be separated from other social, economic and citizenship needs confronting the student, and as such, the educational services provided should complement and build on a range of human services required by the refugee. In at least two cases (GOTAFE, RMIT) this philosophy resulted in the provision of extensive counselling, referral and general life education services, over and beyond the usual remit of an education provider. However, at all the case study locations providers sought to address far more than the immediate educational needs of their refugee students, and often tailored training delivery to provide much-needed flexibility.

Section 3 provides details of the suite of measures delivered to support refugee and asylum seeker education at each of the institutions studied.

### **Best practice model**

An important focus of the case studies of the six institutions was to identify initiatives that have or should be initiated in order to improve access and participation in education and training by refugees. As discussed above, a critical element of success in supporting refugees is the adoption of an integrated approach which recognises the diversity of refugees as well as the relationships between the broader needs of refugees (such as housing, child-care, finances, etc.) and their successful participation in education and training. For example, the housing, transportation and child-care needs of participants must be considered if there is to be any chance at all of successful participation, particularly for very new arrivals. As such, specific initiatives need to be seen within an overall model of practice that includes what we have identified as four elements:

- 4.2.1 As a first priority, refugee access to higher education needs to be supported by an overall program approach that is underpinned by:

- an institutional policy framework that is endorsed and supported by the institution;
  - principles that recognise and celebrate the diversity of refugees and the specific barriers that refugees face in education access;
  - the development of links and communication between refugee support services, refugee community members and the institution; and,
  - resources for the engagement of a worker to support refugee access and to implement the strategies necessary to maximise retention and successful employment outcomes.
- 4.2.2 Specific supports have been found to support refugee retention and outcomes and these include:
- Fee relief (most refugees say they cannot participate without this);
  - Support with transport (particularly in rural and regional areas);
  - Waiver of materials costs;
  - The provision of role models and mentors (ideally this would occur with the engagement of other refugees who have now settled and can appreciate the experience of new arrivals);
  - Understanding of, and assistance with, the diverse child-care needs of refugees in order to participate in education and training.
- 4.2.3 Institutional capacity building and educational flexibility:
- The implementation of workplace learning strategies;
  - Accelerated and intensive learning – particularly for highly skilled refugees who are seeking recognition of overseas qualifications;
  - Extended English language training – it is widely recognised that the 510 hours of English language training is insufficient to acquire English language skills to a level required in the workplace;
  - The provision of ‘taster units’ in fields of study to assist refugees to understand the training system and vocational pathways;
  - The delivery of a familiarisation program that supports students in understanding how to negotiate and understand the training system;
  - Placement in articulated pathways that enable participants to map a career path;
  - The provision of cultural awareness training for both refugees (in order to better understand workplace practices and cultural mores) and for educators (in order to promote understanding of refugee diversity and needs);
- 4.2.4 Improved systems to enable monitoring, tracking and evaluation of refugee progress out employment outcomes through higher education. This should include:
- The identification of students as refugees when enrolling so that their progress can be identified and monitored;
  - The integration of data between school system, vocational education and higher education in order to be able to monitor pathways;
  - The conduct of exit interviews to enable understanding of the higher education experience, and to maintain contact into employment;
  - Vocational mapping for refugees to assist in their understanding of the possibilities and pathways in career path planning.

These program elements are derived from the case studies conducted of Victorian institutions which each demonstrated elements of good practice although none have

implemented a comprehensive approach as detailed above. Victoria University, higher education, provides an effective model of engagement between community organisations and the University which has resulted in important programs and initiatives that have facilitated refugee access to higher education. RMIT provides an excellent model of refugee support through the engagement of a dedicated worker who could provide individualised counselling, assist in making links across the organisation and who advocates on behalf of refugee groups and individuals. GOTAFE provides an example of practice that supports close connections between local refugee services and the institution. None of the case studies, for multiple reasons, covered all areas of good practice and interviewees identified priorities that are required if the needs of refugees are to be better served by higher education providers. These are discussed below.

### **Recommendations**

Following from the best practice model identified above, and drawing together needs commonly identified by educators and students, the following policy recommendations are made in order of priority.

- 4.2.5 Institutional policies that detail their approach to and support of, refugee access to further education need to be in place in order to guide a systematic approach to educational service provision for refugees. Such policies need to be based on principles of diversity and social justice and be inclusive of a community engagement approach that supports the active collaboration between the educational institution, community representatives and community services.
- 4.2.6 Resources need to be allocated to support the engagement of a dedicated worker who can coordinate and oversee the support strategies and systems required to facilitate refugee participation.
- 4.2.7 Strategies to support refugees in their successful participation in education and training need to be implemented. These include:
  - Counselling for refugees to identify needs and requirements;
  - Individual assessment of financial, housing, transport and childcare needs;
  - Coordination of role models and mentors;
  - Assessment of potential career paths and pathways available through the education and training system;
  - Liaison within the institution to support access to flexible delivery of education, accelerated learning, workplace learning;
  - Support for refugees to understanding Australian workplace practices and cultural mores to assist in their successful participation.
- 4.2.8 A program of cross-cultural training should be implemented for TAFE and higher education teachers and other staff such as librarians, to inform them of the needs of refugees and appropriate responses.
- 4.2.9 A review of participation data needs to be undertaken. Currently there is no mechanism for identifying refugees making it impossible to monitor pathways or patterns of participation. This review needs to include an examination of the possibilities for tracking refugee participation across sectors including secondary schools, community education providers, TAFE, higher education and employment.

4.2.10 Further research is required to understand the progress of refugees through the education and training system to employment. It is recommended that a longitudinal case study be undertaken of refugee cohorts to identify the extent to which refugees are achieving outcomes through their participation in education and training as well as to identify key constraints and success factors in the process of achieving a sustainable career path.

# 1. Introduction and Background

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## 1.1 Introduction

Australia has a growing refugee population of about 12,000 people a year who gain entry into Australia through its humanitarian program. The motive for this research stems from the recognition that this sector of the population has distinct needs but there is little research into the experiences and needs of refugees in tertiary education and training in Australia or overseas. Although guides for teachers dealing with refugees have been produced, these are both dated and deal with classroom situations rather than policy issues. Work in this area has been undertaken overseas, but this does not take into account specific circumstances surrounding the Australian tertiary education sector. In addition, while some Victorian educational institutions have developed special programs for refugees there has been no comprehensive mapping and evaluation of these.

Common concern about the needs of refugee students was discussed between the Institute for Community, Ethnicity and Policy Alternatives (ICEPA) at Victoria University (VU), the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC), and Department of Education and Training (DET) in 2003. The need was identified to develop best practice models that could assist higher educational and training organisations in the delivery of services to refugees. In 2004, the VMC and DET contracted ICEPA to undertake the research to identify best practice in refugee access to education and training.

## 1.2 The research context

The most relevant Australian research prior to this study examined refugees' access to and experiences in universities and colleges of further education in Sydney in the 1990s (Hannah, 1997 and 1999). In the 1980s, a number of practical guides were written for teachers working with the Indochinese refugees in Australia (Spearritt 1983; Kelly and Bennoun 1984). These guides, which tended to focus on ESL rather than vocational or professional education and training, were not updated to reflect the changing composition of Australia's refugee intake. A handbook for TAFE teachers of survivors of torture and trauma concentrates on ideas and guidelines for classroom management (Martinez 1997). These are (or have been) important resources for teachers but they did not address broader issues regarding types of programs and entry mechanisms.

Similarly, much of the international literature is focussed on English language programs (Leigel, 1991) or cultural awareness and orientation programs (Green 1994) who discuss education as a tool to advance the human rights of refugee women. Although there is a sizeable body of research (Australian and international) on migrants and people of non-English speaking backgrounds in education and training, there is little that focuses on the specific needs of refugees.

There has been considerably more research into the needs of refugees in secondary and primary school (Spearritt 1983; Rice and Rice 1993) and much of it is British (Rutter and Jones 1998). Although many of the issues are specific to the needs of school children, some aspects are relevant to older students (or aspiring students). Rutter and Jones (op cit, 1998), for example:

- Stress the need for language support to enable students to realise their potential and achieve their educational goals;

- identify the necessity of promoting an understanding among all students towards refugees, and of combating racism; and,
- Raise the importance of inducting refugees into the education system and of attending to their psychosocial and emotional needs (pp 7, 9).

With this as background, this research was concerned with undertaking a detailed study of refugee access, program design and support structures based on a Victorian case study.

### **1.3 Literature review**

The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who is “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”

Refugees are people who have undergone traumatic experiences including: “persecution, violation of human rights, imprisonment, abduction, family separation or loss, sexual abuse, extreme poverty and near starvation.” (Davies, Melendro-Galvis et al. 2002).

The refugee experience is defined as “exposure to political, religious or intercultural violence, persecution or oppression, armed conflict or civil discord that incorporates the following basic elements: a state of fearfulness for self and family members, leaving the country of origin at short notice, inability to return to the country of origin, and uncertainty about the possibility of maintaining links with family and home.” (Coventry, Guerra et al. 2002 p. 1). Young refugees who arrive without family endure an even greater amount of stress and a continuous feeling of fear and they miss out on the basic nutritional, educational and recreational activities that they would have received (Gray and Elliott 2001).

Pittaway (1991) identified the importance of the early satisfaction of basic needs (food, shelter, etc) so that refugees could progress to acquire more complex secondary goals (the acquisition of the language of the host country, training and education). Jupp (1995) noted that people with low levels of English proficiency were unlikely to gain any secondary goals and would only be able to secure basic laboring employment, if any at all. The lack of English language proficiency also deters refugee students’ ability to access appropriate community legal centers (Aplin 2002).

Between 1947 and 1995 a total of 675,000 people entered Australia through its humanitarian program (Iredale, Mitchell et al. 1996). Between 2000 and 2002 increasingly more refugees arrived from the Horn of Africa, Sierra Leone and Liberia (AMES 2002).

From 2003 to 2004 more than 13,000 visas were granted under the Humanitarian Program. The predominant countries of birth were Sudan (47.1%), Iraq (15%), Afghanistan (10.7%) and Ethiopia (4.7%). Under the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy other nationality groups included were Iranian (3.6%), Somalian (1.4%), Eritrean (1.2%), Sierra Leonese (1.1%), and Liberian (1.1%) people.

Over the years, the Humanitarian program has shifted its response to accommodate the changing international circumstances. Until 1989 the majority of arrivals from

Vietnam were refugees; in 1999 less than 30% of arrivals in Australia were refugees (Munns et al 1999). Currently, the Humanitarian program, and therefore the IHSS, is increasingly focused on Africa (DIMIA 2004). People who were identified as Dinka (Sudanese) and Sudanese ethnicities were the largest groups assisted. Some ethnic groups are decreasing, including those of Serbian ethnicity.

The proportion of people aided under the IHSS who have lived in a refugee camp is rising. In 2002-3, 15.4% of people assisted had lived in refugee camps. In 2003-04, the proportion increased to 21%, and of those who had live in refugee camps 35% had lived in a camp for ten years or more. People who have lived a large proportion of their lives in refugee camps experience significant settlement challenges (DIMIA 2004). For people assisted who were aged between 16 and 24, the average amount of schooling was 7.7 years in 2001-02, 7.8 years in 2002-03 and 6.9 years in 2003-04. For African people aged between 16 and 24, it was 6.5 years in 2001-02, 6.9 years in 2002-03 and 6.3 years in 2003-04 (Australia's Support for Humanitarian Entrants 2004: 22).

The main problems and issues faced by African Australians in accessing services, in order of importance, were noted as follows: youth issues; Centrelink; health services; discrimination; family/community; unrecognized qualifications; childcare; affordable accommodation; immigration; learning English and on-arrival accommodation. Youth issues included: educational problems derived from having moved from one national education system to another; gaps in schooling due to displacement from country of origin and refugee camp experience; English language problems; lack of appropriate English language teaching in schools and effects of this on other subjects; conflict with parents and the older generation in a context of cultural difference between them and their peer group in Australia; lack of African teen-culture; pop-music; alcohol, drugs, etc; lack of African role-models in the Australian scene; and concern on the part of the older generation that African culture should be meaningful for young people (Nsubug-Kyobe and Dimock 2002; Ramsay 2004).

There is a demand for research into the experiences and needs of refugees and their ability to access and participate in universities and TAFE institutions. There is strong evidence to suggest that the exposure to traumatic events, such as war and torture, leads to mental health issues such as depression, feelings of guilt, loss of self esteem, anxiety, sleep disorders, intrusive thoughts and flashbacks, memory and concentration problems, difficulties in social functioning and marital and family disruption (Baker 1983; Arroche 1994; Hannah 1997; Martinez 1997; Preece and Walters 1999; Travino and Davids 2001; Ramsay 2004). In addition to these factors, the statistics also show that humanitarian entrants and refugees have minimal literacy skills; under the IHSS, 18% of clients stated that they had either good or very good reading ability, compared to 27% in 2002-03 (Australia's Support for Humanitarian Entrants 2004: 24).

These are only a few of the barriers that refugee students face in attempting to access and participate in tertiary education and training programs in universities and TAFE institutions (Hannah 1997). The after-effects of torture and trauma interfere with refugee students' ability to learn, which also needs to be taken into account when assessing their ability to adapt to the host country. Acquiring a proficiency in English language is integral to adapting to a new way of life in the host country. Research has shown that English language acquisition provides refugees with a greater degree of confidence (Martin 1991; Falk, Golding et al. 2000) and education plays an important role in resettling refugee youth (Centre for multicultural youth issues 2001).

While the experiences of refugees are similar, Baker (1983) stresses the need for each refugee experience to be treated individually, noting that while there are some similarities between the migration experience and the refugee experience, refugees made the decision to leave their native country based on fear. For this reason, their cases should be treated individually in order to provide beneficial programs that will facilitate their adaptation to the host country. As Christie and Sidhu (2004) write:

The Australian education system has no overall policy framework for the education of refugees. It operates in ad hoc ways. Policy advocacy is important in this context, but another way of working towards educational change is to 'go for the gaps', of which there are many. Given that schools are such contradictory social institutions, it is always possible to engage in counter-hegemonic activities of considerable significance – though it is very difficult, if not impossible, to change the deep patterns and structures of the institutional framework (2004, p.35).

Although the authors are specifically examining mainstream education systems, their overall contention can be applied to the education system in post-compulsory settings. Podeschi (1990) and Baker (1983) further emphasise the need for sensitive education programmes that will take into account the needs of the refugees on the basis of their cultural background and language levels. A review of the literature shows that most of the studies conducted in this area have focused mainly on primary and secondary school students (Kelly & Bennoun 1984; Rice and Rice 1993; Spearritt 1983; Rutter & Jones 1998). A majority of the research literature that does focus on refugee students' access and participation factors in education systems comes from either the United States or the UK (Baker 1983; Tollefson 1989; Podeschi 1990; Holmes 1991; DuBois 1993; Green 1994; Preece and Walters 1999).

Furthermore, the varying circumstances of refugees greatly affect their rates of participation in education systems (Language Teaching Branch 1978). In addition to this, TPV holders are under the additional stress of not knowing whether they will be settling in the host country or whether they will have to leave. Women who hold TPVs are particularly disadvantaged: "Women, in particular, may not feel that they can leave an abusive situation if their spouses are sponsoring them. All these factors will affect their experience of learning." (McDonald 2000). Meeting the requirements of workloads of courses is given the least priority under these circumstances. Some refugee students also have to assist their families in adapting to their host country. The role of parent and child can often become reversed as the parent now relies on the child for help in obtaining and translating information. This can often be seen as a humiliating experience for the parents, as their previous qualifications held in their native countries are disregarded and they become dependent on their children (Banafunzi 1996; Bond 1999).

Much of the literature on refugee students is concerned with youth: how well they are able to adapt to their cultural settings and the overall resettlement process. Hannah (1997) conducted a study that looked at the barriers to access and equity in post-compulsory education systems in Sydney, Australia. The study employed interviewing methods based on a small group of refugee students in further and higher education. Official, academic and other documents were also used in the study. The sample refugee students were from Iraq, Bosnia, Romania, Afghanistan, Burundi, Russia, Vietnam, East Timor, China, Lebanon and El Salvador, 65% of

whom were male and 35% female, with ages ranging from 20 to 48. A clear finding was that there was a paucity of literature that looked at post-compulsory refugee student's experiences.

One of the problems Hannah encountered in conducting her study was the lack of background information kept on refugee students. While the author notes that information on refugees needs to be kept private due to the political risk that these refugees are faced with, this poses a significant problem in trying to employ a culturally sensitive teaching approach: an approach that will assist in the refugee's student learning process. Hannah (1999) also interviewed University and TAFE staff to investigate whether personnel had an understanding of the sorts of obstacles that refugee students faced. Due to the lack of background information on the refugee students, not one of the universities cited in her study was able to provide information on the circumstances of the refugee students. In some instances, university staff responded with surprise when told certain students were refugees. TAFE personnel were found to have a better understanding of refugee student experiences, specifically in West Sydney where many refugees were based. Hannah recommends, as do Rice & Rice (1993), that an understanding of a student's life histories and cultural backgrounds facilitate assessment of schooling performance. Information about the cultural, historical, linguistic and political backgrounds of these students would provide more effective courses for them: courses that were tailored to suit the needs of the refugees.

Studies investigating the ability of refugee students to access and participate in higher education and further training often include fact sheets on the countries that the refugees have fled. The fact sheets are included to show how varied every refugee experience is (AMES 2002). Christie and Sidhu (2004) acknowledge that the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeker students have highly varied backgrounds and educational experiences. While some students have spent the majority of their lives in refugee camps, others may have led important roles in their native countries. The authors recognise that this makes generalization difficult and they urge for more cultural awareness to be employed in education systems (Clayton 1999).

Researchers who look specifically at refugees arriving from the Horn of Africa to their host countries in the West also note that these refugees are arriving from an oral/aural tradition of education (Travino and Davids 2001; AMES 2002; Refugee Young People and Transitions Working Group 2002). This presents particular challenges for Western trained teachers who base their methods of teaching on a traditional British education system, in which the use of written materials is relied upon quite heavily. Trevino and Davis (2001) recommend an informal relaxed class that promotes rapport between teachers and students and gives the students confidence with their use of English. This would also improve African refugees' ability to become more aware of the cultural traditions that are a part of their host country (Davies, Melendro-Galvis, Pigatore & Premier 2002).

The traditional European education system also seeks to serve an ethnocentric bias that assumes a more teacher centred approach. Various authors have urged for a learner centred approach in teaching students of refugee status (Language Teaching Branch 1978; Linke 1983; Banafunzi 1996; Wheelahan 2000). This encourages the students to participate more in the classroom setting and also enables rapport to be established between teachers and students (Bereded et al 2000).

Many of the refugee students who complete the 510 hours of English tuition that is provided by the Adult Migration English Program (AMEP) are still unable to demonstrate English literacy proficiency. A number of authors have suggested that the duration of the English language course is too short and should be extended (Travino and Davids 2001; Refugee Young People and Transitions Working Group 2002; Apout 2003). Despite the studies conducted over the past ten years, which have shown a need for an increase in the duration of AMEP course, in 2005 the course duration still stands at 510 hours in total. A lack of basic English language aptitude greatly hinders refugee students' ability to participate in university and TAFE education systems.

This also leads to trouble in gaining employment and upon gaining employment can lead to racism within the workplace. Barnes (2001) suggests that in-group inclusiveness marginalizes the refugee group. An insufficient degree of familiarity with the English language serves to further marginalize and disadvantage refugee students. Resettled refugees are likely to hold on to their difference, not by choice but by necessity, and are always marginalized by the dominant culture. The lack of English language skills is restricting in that the refugee student is unable to assimilate in the host country. A lack of schooling perpetuates disadvantage and reproduces patterns of social and economic inequality (Christie & Sidhu 2004: 34-5). Research conducted in Queensland schools shows that although teachers are aware of ethnic differences and how this affects the student's learning ability, they are unable to use specific teaching methods that would accommodate these ethnic differences (Lingard et al. 2001). In university and TAFE settings this also applies, as many tutors and lecturers are unaware of the specific needs of refugee students.

A community based research project conducted in 2003 involved consultation with fifteen secondary school students and five tertiary students in order to examine the current mainstream education curriculum and its effectiveness. The project also aimed to explore new ways in which to improve the education system and set out to source opinions and recommendations from refugee students themselves (Apout 2003).

The findings showed that it was difficult for refugee students to participate in post-compulsory education and training due to the difficulties they were faced with in their homes as well as in their schools. The students also believed that they were incorrectly grouped with other students who were at their age level, when they felt it would have been beneficial to instead be grouped with students at their language level. Right from the very beginning rapport between student and teacher needs to be established. Seventy per cent of refugees have suffered some form of torture at the hands of authority figures, which consequently influences their ability to trust and confide in their tutors (Bereded-Samuel 1999). Falk, Golding and Ballatti (2000) note that without trust there is no social capital and hence no community. In Apout's (2003) investigation the refugee students showed an evident distrust for authority figures in their responses and this undoubtedly affected the relationships they had with their tutors.

In this investigation students also showed a lack of English language proficiency. Refugee students often left the language centres with low levels of English literacy and cultural understanding. The majority of students who were consulted felt that the teachers were too busy to devote the extra time that they needed. The respondents urged for a stronger relationship between students and teachers to encourage a greater degree of comfort.

A lack of familiarity with the services available also acted as a barrier for students in accessing post-compulsory education systems. Hannah (1997; Hannah 1999) has recommended a “one stop shop” to counter this problem; a central place which offers refugee students information and advice about study in further and higher education. In Apout’s (2003) research, one tertiary participant discussed the difficulties she faced in trying to undertake an apprenticeship and TAFE course while looking for accommodation, as accommodation became the primary concern and education became secondary. In agreement with Hannah’s recommendations (1997; 1999), Apout (2003) also suggests that a central place where refugee students could turn to would be beneficial. It was also noted that the AMEP course should be extended, as the 510 hours of English tuition did not seem to be enough: this has also been recommended by countless other studies.

Trevino and Davids (2001) had similar findings after conducting a small action-based research project that looked at ESL literacy and pre-linguistic African women refugees. The authors found that AMEP failed to meet the needs of the refugee women. Some of the barriers that face women refugees are sex-specific (Green 1994) such as pregnancy, childbirth, care of children, sexual violence and prostitution. The trauma of some of the pressures imposed on these women often has a strong impact on how well they participate in education programs. Trevino and Davids (2001) noted that African women refugees come from a tradition of learning that is based on interdependence. It was noted that the predominant use of worksheets, whiteboard and written texts employed in most mainstream ESL institutions excluded the pre-literate learner. As a result of these findings it was believed that an informal community setting would be non-threatening and more appropriate for these learners.

Similarly, in a project carried out by the Adult Migration Education Service (AMES) (2002), lecturers at TAFE institutes conceded that the use of print based learning materials posed a problem for the refugee students who had a background of oral/aural learning - predominantly African refugee students. Furthermore, the researchers found that the students who were interviewed either had little or no education at all, and the education that they had received in refugee camps was often informal, and class sizes would have been too big for students to receive enough attention from the teachers. In fact, one student mentioned that on one occasion there were about one hundred students in a single class.

The African refugee students interviewed for this research project had minimal understanding of Arabic as the language learning they gained in their native countries was through street talk. Often, so-called Arabic speakers would be unable to speak to each other because the spoken version is dependent on the source and the purpose for which it is learned (AMES 2002: 5). The inability to communicate with each other added to their overall sense of frustration, which led to depression and social isolation.

Bertone (2000) also identified barriers that exist for Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) migrants in the workforce to be: structural location in the labour market; greater stress on communication skills; multiskilling; teamwork and participation in the workplace; ongoing problems with recognition of overseas skills and qualifications; lack of familiarity with Australian employment systems and practices; various discriminatory processes; as well as a range of refugee related problems. The author states that the “experience of sudden dislocation and trauma,

loss of work papers, mental health issues and lack of family networks, may add further problems for those entering the country on refugee or humanitarian grounds, making adjustment to change more difficult.” (op cit, 2000 p.58). Furthermore, 50% of Africans with post-secondary qualifications who were employed in the year 2000 were occupationally mismatched based on their accredited qualification levels (Bereded et al 2000: 201).

Jobs, Placement, Employment and Training (JPET) is the only federally funded form of employment assistance that specifically recognises the needs of refugees within the program’s target group of ‘at risk’ young people. JPET provides assistance to young people up to 21 years of age who face multiple barriers to participation in education or vocational training, or to gaining and maintaining employment. There are four programs across Australia that focus on this group. Research has identified barriers to successful participation in the labour market for recent immigrants as including: language skills; education and training; labour market knowledge; access to formal and informal employment networks; poor provision of advice (including guidance and training); cultural transition and pre-arrival experiences (Kyle, MacDonald et al. 2004).

*The Changing Cultures Project* carried out by the Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE (2004) operated as a partnership between eight organisations drawn from the education, health and settlement sectors. The study found that programs targeting refugee young people needed to be built on a stable and ongoing funding base. There needs to be basic education for refugee students who have come from a background of disrupted education.

*The Good Futures Project* also carried out by NMIT (2004) was initiated in order to provide refugee students and their families with information on the education system in Victoria. It was recommended, on the basis of their findings, that English Language Schools and Centres and Secondary Schools use appropriate methods and resources to inform newly arrived students and parents about the full range of education pathways and options available. This ties in to what Hannah argued for in her reports: a ‘one-stop-shop’.

*The Homeless Twice: Refugee Young People and Homelessness in Victoria* project looked at the factors that contributed to homelessness among refugee youth. Their results showed that refugee youth are limited in their options at school and do not feel confident enough to ask for extra help at the community services level. Ransley & Drummond (2001) noted that the insufficient amount of English tuition led the refugee students to feel as though they were not bright enough to go on with further studies. Often the students would settle for low skilled jobs to cover their living expenses.

*The Pathways Project* was conducted in the Women’s Education Department of the Western Melbourne Institute of TAFE from July 1997 to December 1997. Its aim was to identify the barriers that existed for Vietnamese and African Women students and work to counter them. As a result of the work done in the Pathways Project enrolments during second semester of 1997 grew by 53.8% in the Women’s Education Department (Newcombe 1998).

The Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (2004) carried out research on rates of attrition among refugee students. A major research finding of this project was that many young people who are exiting the ESL New Arrivals Program are struggling to cope with mainstream education and are either ‘dropping out’ or achieving low outcomes. This is despite the fact that many newly arrived young people have

extremely high expectations of educational outcomes and are experiencing immense family pressure to succeed. Interviewees also highlighted the difficulties that young refugees face in finding employment in areas other than casual, low-skilled positions (Oliff 2004).

Another project targeting refugees was the SPAN project. The Brotherhood of St Laurence established the Span Community House in 1979. The Span Volunteer Program (SVTP) offered free one-on-one ESL tutoring to refugees and migrants unable to access the federally funded program delivered through AMEP. The project results showed that refugees and migrants benefited from the extra tuition and were able to better integrate into their communities as a result (Myers 2004).

In June 2003 the Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP) of the University of Brighton commissioned research into the needs of refugees in accessing Higher Education. Through interviews and questionnaires, a number of barriers were identified: finance; information and guidance; English language; recognition of qualifications; childcare/other caring responsibilities and socio-cultural influences upon attitudes and aspirations towards education. The research involved a mix of both qualitative and quantitative methods, including: semi structured interviews with three community groups and two education providers working directly with refugees.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out on eighteen individual refugees. Three versions of a short questionnaire were also carried out on stakeholders, refugees and relevant agencies. On the basis of their findings it was recommended that the university continue to build relationships with community groups and service providers, with a view to forming networks. It was also recommended that the university explore, and improve where necessary, their recording of information, in order to facilitate monitoring of the number of refugee student applications and enrolments. The university should ensure that there is a staff member with responsibility for providing guidance, from initial enquiry through to on-course support for refugees. The findings of their study showed that the younger a person is on entering the English language system, the more confident they are likely to feel about their language skills. Many of those who were aged over eighteen years on entering the UK had experienced difficulties obtaining clear and accurate information regarding recognition of prior qualifications. The refugee students' perceived lack of options in terms of refreshing or updating previous learning resulted in the lowering of their aspirations (Banks and Macdonald 2003).

Bereded et al (2000) outline a partnership model in their paper *Bridging Courses for Refugees: The Experience of the Horn of Africa Communities* that was a collaborative effort from the communities of the Horn of Africa with Victoria University to create pathways and programs designed to meet the education and training needs of refugees and other newly arrived communities. The authors recommended, on the basis of their findings, that the government should: "involve the communities, government agencies and tertiary institutions to assist in identifying the needs of communities, and developing appropriate strategies to meet those needs" (2000, p 227). These authors also deemed the 510 hours of English training with AMEP to be insufficient, finding that the students benefited more from incorporating two ESL subjects in the course.

Anderson and Vervoorn (1983) reviewed the research that had been undertaken on access and participation in education systems over the past fifty years. They concluded from their review that "higher education in general and universities in

particular remain socially elite institutions. The over-representation of students from high socio-economic backgrounds has remained constant at least since 1950, as has the under-representation of those of lower socio-economic background.” (op cit 1983, p.176). They argued that for changes in access to occur there needed to be collaboration at all levels: government, community, faculty and within the institutions. Their findings were in accordance with more recent research findings of Bereded et al (2000).

McInnis and James (1995) report that there are two aspects to the learning climate that are relevant to attempts to improve teaching and learning in the first year: the extent to which students share positive study goals (academic application and orientation) and the extent to which students share broader social and background experiences (the social mix). The authors go further to suggest that student satisfaction with their educational experience is influenced by the extent to which they think of themselves as students, feel integrated into the environment and have made social contacts; that is, the development of a sense of student identity is an important element in ongoing success and satisfaction.

In a study that investigated Australians’ attitudes to refugees, it was found that at least 20% of the respondents adopted a racist stance, ascribing negative qualities to particular ethnic groups and, in particular, to non-European people. Secondly, respondents were also noted to show ambivalence; where people show some obligation to allow migration or refugee settlement but see the economic state of the country as not permitting this. Third, some respondents were found to believe that migration was good for Australia. The most common position, despite this, is one that embodies a ‘competition for resources’ notion. Refugees and migrants have potential to act as scapegoats for great economic concerns. One cause of hostility towards refugees was noted as the supposed special benefits made available to refugees: “it is possible that better information could mitigate hostility amongst some people. It is also critical to attempt to *individuate* migrants and refugees to the public, that is, to portray them as individuals or families humanizes and renders them as less threatening.” (MSJ Keys Young Planners 1980). The attitudes of those in the host country influence the refugee students’ learning experience. Racist attitudes deter refugee students from reaching their goals and also add an increased burden on the students’ levels of stress and need for approval (AGPS 1982; Commonwealth Schools Commission 1983; Terrell M and Hassell 1994).

Furthermore, Beatie and Ward (1998) contend that a young person’s ability to adapt to Australian life will greatly depend on their: individual experience; education; background (rural or urban); exposure to other cultures; period of residency in Australia; personal attitudes; family context; and the perceived necessity to retain their own culture.

Parkinson et al (1987) conducted an investigation using a sample of TAFE students to find out why first year TAFE students withdrew from their courses. The most important variables that affected attrition rates were the mix of home, work and study, difficulties in establishing a study routine, difficulties in organising study time, teaching methods did not stimulate interest, too much difficulty meeting family commitments and study, part of course completed enabled broadening of career options, home jobs made study impossible, study skills not adequate, couldn’t cope with work and study, didn’t find course interesting, regular travel to college after work too demanding. There was a tendency for some students to enrol in courses on a ‘try and see it’ basis. Refugee students do not have the same sorts of options open to them and they often have to settle for the courses that are recommended to them and these courses are often those with places available, which might not be suitable

for the refugees themselves but suit the course coordinators and administration staff of TAFE institutions.

To conclude, a list of the main findings of the review of the literature is as follows:

- 510 Hours of English tuition is not sufficient;
- Lack of in-group inclusiveness marginalises 'at risk' refugee youth
- After-effects of torture and trauma greatly impact a refugee students' ability to learn;
- A perceived lack of options deters refugee students from achieving their aspirations;
- TPV holders are under the added stress of not knowing if and when they will be forced to leave;
- A learner centered approach needs to be adopted when teaching refugee students; and,
- Profiles on individual refugee students need to be kept and maintained so that staff is aware of the students' refugee status.

## **1.4 Refugee Visa categories, rights and numbers**

### **1.4.1 Visa categories**

The Humanitarian Program is implemented by the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMIA) (the name of the Department has since been changed to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship). The humanitarian program is designed for refugees and people in need of humanitarian assistance and is distinct from the Department's Migration Program which offers migration under skilled and family reunion streams. The Humanitarian Program comprises two components:

- Offshore resettlement for people overseas; and,
- Onshore protection for those people already in Australia who arrived on temporary visas or in an unauthorised manner, and who claim Australia's protection.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Offshore resettlement**

The Offshore Resettlement comprises two categories of permanent visa and two categories of temporary visa.

#### **Permanent offshore humanitarian visa categories**

*Refugee:* This is for people who are subject to persecution in their home country and who are in need of resettlement. The majority of applicants who are considered under this category are identified and referred by the UNHCR to Australia for resettlement. The Refugee category includes the Refugee, In-country Special Humanitarian, Emergency Rescue and Woman at Risk (WaR) sub-categories.

*Special Humanitarian Program (SHP):* This is for people outside their home country who are subject to substantial discrimination amounting to gross violation of human rights in their home country. Applications must be supported by either a proposer who is an Australian citizen, permanent resident or eligible New Zealand citizen, or

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<sup>1</sup> (See [Fact Sheet 61 Seeking Asylum Within Australia](#) and [Fact Sheet 65 New Humanitarian Visa System](#))

an organisation that is based in Australia, must support applications for entry under the SHP.

### **Temporary offshore humanitarian visa categories**

The offshore temporary humanitarian visas are for people who have bypassed or abandoned effective protection in another country and for whom humanitarian entry to Australia is appropriate. It comprises two sub-categories:

*Secondary Movement Relocation:* This offers a temporary visa to people who have moved from a safe first country of asylum to another country before applying to enter Australia. This visa is valid for five years and enables a person to gain access to a permanent protection visa after four and a half years if there is a continuing need for protection.

*Secondary Movement Offshore Entry:* This offers a Temporary Humanitarian Visa (THV) to people who arrived unlawfully in Australia at offshore excised places (Christmas Island, Naru) and have moved from a safe first country of asylum. This visa is valid for three years. Refugees are first kept at Christmas Island and once their application for asylum is approved they are given a THV to stay in the country.

### **Onshore Visas**

*Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs):* Temporary Protection Visas are given to unlawful arrivals, which gives them residence for three years.

*Permanent Protection Visa (PPV):* These are granted to individuals who have lawfully arrived in Australia. The PPV is granted onshore.

Table 1 below, details each of the visa categories and the benefits associated with each of these.

**Table 1: Rights and entitlements for newly arrived under the various visa categories<sup>2</sup>.**

<b>Rights and entitlements</b>	<b>Permanent Protection Visas (Entitlements of refugees granted a protection visa offshore) Humanitarian entry</b>	<b>Temporary Protection Visas (Entitlements of refugees arriving without visas after initial detention)</b>	<b>Bridging Visas (Entitlements of asylum seekers who cleared immigration and then claimed asylum)</b>
<b>Income Support</b>	Granted immediate access to the full range of Centrelink benefits	Access to Special Benefit only (conditions apply). Those with over \$5,000 cannot apply.	Denied Centrelink benefits. May be eligible for income support after 6 months.
<b>Work Rights</b>	Granted	Granted	Denied if they do not lodge an Asylum claim within 45 days of arriving.
<b>Job Assistance</b>	Granted employment assistance, including job network & intensive assistance programs.	Denied. Problems finding work due to visa uncertainties and lack of English.	Denied. Problems finding work due to visa uncertainties and lack of English.
<b>Medicare/ Health Care</b>	Granted Medicare and a Health Care Card	Granted Medicare, including access to torture and trauma counselling.	Denied Medicare if they do not lodge their Asylum claim within 45 days. Some are granted torture & trauma counselling.
<b>Settlement Support</b>	Access to government settlement support (torture & trauma counselling, on-arrival accommodation, household formation support, case management, early health assessment).	Denied settlement support services and accommodation after being released from detention. Denied help with house bonds.	Denied access to accommodation and other settlement support services. Denied help with house bonds.
<b>English Classes</b>	510 hrs of free English classes. Children given free intensive English classes.	Denied standard 510 hrs of free English classes. Children denied free intensive English classes.	Denied standard 510 hrs of free English classes. Children denied free intensive English classes.
<b>Education</b>	Access to education like any permanent resident, including access to HECS.	Access to intensive English & public schools. TAFE classes charged at overseas student rates. Must pay up front tertiary education fees. High cost thus prevents study.	Access to intensive English classes and public schools, but charged overseas student rates (around \$4,000 for a school year). High cost thus prevents study.
<b>Family Reunion</b>	Eligible to sponsor family members to reunite with them in Australia	Denied split-family reunion rights.	Denied split-family reunion rights while case being processed.
<b>Travel</b>	Permitted to travel abroad & return.	No right of return after leaving Australia (i.e. cannot visit family and return to Australia).	No right of return.

<sup>2</sup> [www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au), DIMA fact sheet 60. & information also presented on the national council of churches Australia.

The Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) provides intensive settlement support to newly-arrived humanitarian entrants. IHSS aims to help humanitarian entrants achieve self sufficiency as soon as possible by providing them with specialised services on a needs basis. Through a case management approach, the needs of humanitarian entrants are identified and addressed by providing them with settlement services that meet their particular circumstances. The IHSS is only offered to new arrivals for the first six months of their settlement. Upon exiting this program, humanitarian entrants are referred to Migrant Resource Centres (MRC), migrant service agencies and community organizations that receive government funding to work with settlement issues. Longer-term services provided to humanitarian entrants involve free translating and interpreting services within the first two years of their settlement. General services provided by DIMA also involve access to MRC. MRCs provide referrals to service providers and assist in helping new arrivals to connect into social and cultural networks.

#### 1.4.2 Refugee and humanitarian entrant numbers

The following charts provide information on the numbers of refugee and humanitarian entrants to arrive in Australia over several years, the countries of origin of these refugees, and the number of refugees who have recently settled in Victoria.

**Table 2: Humanitarian program – grants by category, 1998/99 – 2004/05**

Category	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Refugee	3,988	3,802	3,997	4,160	4,376	4,134	,511
Special Humanitarian	4,348	3,051	3,116	4,258	7,280	8,927**	,6755***
Special Assistance	1,190	649	879	40			
Onshore Protection	1,830	2,458	5,577	3,885	866	788	895
Safe Haven Temporary Humanitarian Concern		5,900					
			164	6	3	2	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,356</b>	<b>15,860*</b>	<b>13,733</b>	<b>12,349</b>	<b>12,525</b>	<b>13,851</b>	<b>13,178</b>

\* This includes 5,900 safe haven visas, comprising 4,000 grants to Kosovars offshore and 1900 grants to the East Timorese onshore.

\*\* This includes 1,228 grants to the East Timorese and 31 others onshore.

\*\*\*This includes 148 grants to East Timorese and 22 others onshore.

Source: ([www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/60refugee](http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/60refugee))

**Table 3: Offshore resettlement program, grants by region, 1998/99 – 2004/05**

Region	1998/99	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05
Europe	4,736	3,424	3,462	2,709	1158	354	20
Middle East & SW Asia	2,919	2,208	2,155	2,743	4,656*	2867**	3,174
Africa	1,552	1,736	2,032	2,801	5,628	8,353	8,486
Asia	295	113	316	189	201	221	415
America	24	21	27	16		7	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>9,526</b>	<b>7,502</b>	<b>7,992</b>	<b>8,458</b>	<b>11,656</b>	<b>11,802</b>	<b>12,096</b>

\*Includes 311 grants to mainly Afghan and Iraqis in the Offshore processing centres in Papua New Guinea and Nauru

\*\*Includes 90 grants to mainly Afghan and Iraqis in the Offshore Processing Centres in Papua New Guinea and Nauru.

Source: [www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/60refugee](http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/60refugee).

**Table 4: Humanitarian Visa grants**

	Onshore Protection *TPV sc785	Onshore Protection **PPV sc866	Onshore East Timorese	Onshore Others	Offshore Refugees	Offshore SHP
2003/04	185	603	1228	31	4134	7668
2004/05	233	662	148	39	5511	6585

\*TPV –Temporary protection visa

\*\*PPV-Permanent protection visa

Source of information, (<http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/60refugee>, page accessed on 06)

**Table 5: Offshore Visa grants by top ten countries of birth 2004-5**

Sudan	Iraq	Afghanistan	Liberia	Sierra Leone	Burundi	Myanmar Burma	Congo (Incl DRC)	Iran	Somalia	Others
5220	1589	1291	68	751	660	313	300	278	201	625

**Table 6: Victorian arrivals under the Humanitarian entrant program from July 04-June 05 by local government area**

LGA	Country of origin					Total	%	
	Sudan	Liberia	Ethiopia	Burundi	Somalia			
Banyule		5			8	13	0.5	
Brimbank		550	33	41	9	633	24.8	
Casey		88		7		95	3.7	
Casey -Otway		28		2		30	1.2	
Darebin		97	97	1	4	8	130	5.1
Glen Eira		13		5		18	0.7	
G. Dandenong		644	51	36	11	3	745	29.2
G. Geelong		30	1	6		2	37	1.5
Hobsons Bay		29		10			41	1.6
Kingston		32		3			35	1.4
Knox		22	5	1			28	1.1
Maribyrnong		179	7	73	16		275	10.8
Maroondah		44					44	1.7
Melbourne		11		28		10	49	1.9
Monash		32		2		2	36	1.4
Moonee Valley		38		26		9	73	2.9
Moreland		3		3		5	11	0.4
Whitehorse		48	6	6			60	2.4
Whittlesea		30	16	5	7	4	62	2.4
Wyndham		16		5		1	22	0.9
Yarra		40	10	9		9	68	2.7
Other/Unspec		26	2	7		11	46	1.8
<b>Total</b>		<b>2,005</b>	<b>151</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>2,551</b>	<b>100.1</b>

Approximately two thirds of the new arrivals have settled in three LGAs: Greater Dandenong (29.2%), Brimbank (24.8%) and Maribyrnong (10.8%). No other LGA has more than 5% of the total new arrival African settlers and most have 2% or less. The largest origin group, arrivals from Sudan, contribute to the overall pattern with more than 70% of Sudanese people choosing to settle in the three LGAs already mentioned and well over a third live in Greater Dandenong (32.1%). Liberians have settled in similar proportions to the overall trend in Greater Dandenong (33.8%), but have slightly lesser tendency to settle in the west (Brimbank and Maribyrnong together only 26.5%), whilst 30.4% have chosen to settle in the northern corridor.

## **2. SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY**

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### **2.1 Key research questions**

The main research questions addressed in the research are:

- What factors assist and impede refugees from accessing and completing tertiary education programs?
- How can Higher Education and TAFE providers develop the employability of students from refugee backgrounds?
- What initiatives have facilitated and improved access and participation in education and training by refugees? How should such initiatives be evaluated?
- What policies and programs need to be developed to better advance refugee access to higher education and training?

The general approach of the research was to focus attention on Victorian tertiary institutions (TAFE and higher education) that had demonstrable experience in providing targeted programs for refugee and in some cases, students who were asylum seekers. This considerably narrowed the field in terms of the selection of case study sites, as our preliminary investigation found that few tertiary institutions other than those in areas of high refugee populations (such as the Northern and Western metropolitan suburbs and the Goulburn Valley area) had any significant programs of this kind.

Ultimately, the research focused on two dual-sector higher education bodies (Victoria University and RMIT) and two stand-alone TAFE institutes (Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE and Goulburn Ovens Valley TAFE, Shepparton), with data being collected in both TAFE and higher education divisions. As such, six separate case studies were conducted within the framework of these six tertiary education providers – four TAFEs and two higher education divisions.

### **2.2 Methodology**

The methodology was multi-layered and predominantly qualitative, with the primary data collection processes being:

- A national and international literature review (2005);
- Consultations with a range of ethnic community leaders and tertiary education staff (2005);
- Interviews with administrative and teaching staff within the six education providers (2006); and,
- Focus group discussions with refugee and asylum seeker students from four education providers (2006).

A project steering group, established early in 2005, met five times during the course of the research project, providing valuable community, educational and departmental insights that assisted the research process. That group consisted of high-level representatives from refugee communities (Bosnian, African, Vietnamese, Spanish-speaking), from Migrant Resource Centres, education providers, counsellors, advocates and government agencies. The composition of the steering group is at Appendix 3.

Formal interviews were conducted with 14 tertiary education staff and four focus groups were conducted with refugee and asylum seeker students (20 students in

total) from Victoria University, RMIT, NMIT and GOTAFE. This was in addition to discussions and consultations over the 2005 period with countless staff from teaching, administration and community organisations.

In selecting the organizations for study, a comprehensive process was undertaken in 2005 to contact all metropolitan higher education institutions and a range of TAFEs in metropolitan and regional locations. During that phase, the research team spoke to education and teaching staff associated with admissions offices, English language programs, learning support areas, community liaison groups, student services and relevant schools/departments where significant numbers of refugees were known to study. This led to a process of identifying where significant initiatives were being undertaken that might focus on refugees and who were the key staff involved in such initiatives. Institutions were not selected for study if they lacked sufficient numbers of refugee students and indicated they had no targeted programs, whether formal or informal, aimed at the needs of those students.

Both administrative and teaching staff were interviewed. Administrative staff were generally policy or program officers who worked directly with refugee and asylum seeker students and give accurate insights into the history and development of relevant programs. Teaching staff always included those who had worked or were working directly with refugee and asylum seeker students. In some cases, these were senior staff within their departments or institutions.

All were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in accordance with ethics procedures. A semi-structured interview schedule was used in all interviews. These were conducted in person, usually at the staff member's office or in a private meeting room. All interviews were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed, and generally lasted 50 minutes to an hour.

In some interviews, the researchers had the opportunity to meet and informally talk to a number of refugee students as they attended their tertiary education classes. Contact staff at the institutions organized a focus group of refugee and asylum seeker students drawn from a range of countries who were currently enrolled in relevant tertiary courses. Discussion groups were generally held in a private room or classroom on campus and were tape-recorded. Interpreters were not used as the English language proficiency of the participants was generally sufficient as long as the facilitators spoke slowly and repeated questions where necessary. With the most-newly arrived group in Shepparton, the discussion took 2.5 hours. Other groups were held over an hour.

## **3. CASE STUDIES**

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### **3.1 RMIT**

RMIT is a dual sector institution incorporating both TAFE and higher education. This section reports separately on the findings relating to higher education and TAFE programs for refugees and asylum seekers even though the initial conceptualisation of programs in the two divisions occurred together. However, while there were program overlaps between the two sectors, for example, students in both areas could access some common services, the scope and nature of the programs differed substantially.

The data for this section came from interviews with four program staff (two teachers, two administrators) and a focus group discussion with five asylum seeker students enrolled in RMIT courses. The teaching interviewees were located within a TAFE area, the administrative staff had broader responsibility across TAFE and Higher Education areas. Of the five students interviewed, three were studying in higher education and the other two were in TAFE. Four of the students were male, one female. These students arrived from Afghanistan, Iran, Kuwait and Egypt. All were young people, with ages ranging from 18 to 27, and none were married or had dependent children. Despite their youth, all except one reported spending lengthy periods (up to four years) in Australian immigration detention centres before settling in the community.

All interviews were conducted face to face by Associate Professor Santina Bertone between May and June 2006 and were based on research instruments attached to this report.

### **3.2 RMIT Higher Education**

#### **3.2.1 Nature of programs provided for refugee access/participation**

In 2003, RMIT resolved to provide an integrated program of services to refugee and asylum seeker students, focusing in particular on asylum seekers and refugees on temporary protection visas. This decision occurred against the backdrop of wide-ranging debate within the university about the appropriateness of providing education services in immigration detention centres, and followed the establishment of a high-level university working party. This section describes only those elements of the program targeted to higher education.

Implemented from 2004, the Asylum Seeker Project (as it came to be known) was funded entirely from RMIT's budget and had three core elements:

- Provision of fee waiver scholarships for 10 full-time places in higher education over three years (total of 30 places);
- Learning support/transition services (provided by the RMIT Learning Skills Unit); and,
- The employment of a project officer (three days per week) for three years to support and liaise with refugee and asylum seeker students, community agencies and university teachers.

The original student cohort comprised mainly asylum seekers and refugees on temporary protection visas (TPVs) from Afghanistan (mainly Hazzarahs), some Iraqis and Iranians. Over time, this changed to include a significant proportion of asylum seekers from Sri Lanka, many of whom had arrived as families on temporary travel visas and subsequently settled and sent their children to local schools. Whatever

their origins, all these students had limited or no work rights, depending on their visa status, and generally little or no access to Centrelink (income support) payments or other government services such as job search assistance through JobsNetwork. For most, day-to-day survival depended on access to charitable funds and the generosity of friends and supporters.

Importantly, both asylum seekers and TPVs faced the prospect of having to pay full international student fees if they wished to participate in Australian higher education courses. Since asylum seekers are prohibited from accessing paid work and gain no government income support while their claims are being processed, while TPV holders have limited work and welfare rights, the financial barriers to educational participation at this level are virtually insurmountable. It was for this reason that RMIT established a scholarship scheme that waived the fees of asylum seeker and TPV holders for three years (the average duration of a bachelor degree). This initiative was considered by both students and staff involved in the research to be the most effective and important element in the access strategy designed for refugee and asylum seeker students. As one student observed (with others agreeing):

*The reason I'm happy is the support I got from RMIT, otherwise it would be very hard, especially for TPV holders. Legally they can't study in higher education or they pay international fees, and a refugee cannot pay that.*

Beyond this, the Asylum Seeker project provided a comprehensive range of support services, both material and personal. The appointment of an Asylum Seeker Project Officer created a focal point for the coordination of a range of support services to scholarship holders, as well as other refugees and asylum seekers who had not gained a scholarship but went onto undertake TAFE programs at RMIT. These services were grouped together under the terminology of '*facilitated access*' and '*transitional support*'. The Project Officer acted as a broker, counsellor and referral point for the range of support services on offer. Some of these services included: help with development of learning portfolios; access to English and study skills preparatory courses; counselling for psychological and other issues; referral to community and human services agencies; development of a student mentor scheme to assist refugees and asylum seekers to settle in at RMIT; information on educational transition issues; social events to reduce isolation; financial assistance such as accommodation scholarships, allowances to assist with purchase of books and materials; and general liaison and advocacy with other RMIT staff, for example, in relation to admission into courses.

Of particular relevance to refugee and asylum seekers was the capacity for this group (as one of a number of recognised equity groups) to have their admission applications considered separately from other applicants for higher education courses. This means that students classified as having particular equity issues can put forward other material for consideration, such as a capability portfolio. As one staff interviewee observed:

*Intervening in the competitive selection has been pivotal. If the student had been in a VTAC list they probably wouldn't get in (to the course).*

This interviewee explained that in 2005, approximately 4,500 applicants had been enrolled by RMIT in the equity category, with refugees and asylum seekers forming a small sub-group of these. It was estimated that 35-50 refugee and asylum seeker students had entered through the scholarship scheme, and approximately 70-80 had entered through TAFE pathways since the establishment of the Asylum Seeker Project.

The Project Officer was described by students and staff as an essential resource in assisting students to compile their capability portfolio, so that they could apply for a higher education place. Following admission, the Project Officer played a continuing role through counselling, referrals to community agencies and university services, provision of cash subsidies or other material benefits (such as accommodation scholarships) and more generalised support, such as social events and provision of student mentoring.

All the students expressed their appreciation for these services and particular regard for the role of the Project Officer, who was seen as vital to the success of the program as a whole. For most, the Project Officer was the human face of the project, the first person they met at RMIT and a continuing source of advice and support in a system that they lacked understanding and familiarity with. As one student put it:

*I've been here for less than one year in Australia, straightaway I came to RMIT to 'Jenny's' office and asked for her help. She referred me to another person to see what I could do. It was June, she suggested I do English for further studies. I did that and completed it over two months. I applied for four subjects and got in...*

Overall, the scope and breadth of services provided and the commitment of staff was impressive, with real benefits reported by the students using them. It was reported that some refugees and asylum seekers had now graduated with a bachelor degree and were working professionally in Australia and others were said to be making good progress in their studies. However, part-time studies were common due to family pressures and the need to access some income for survival.

At the time of the study, the Asylum Seeker project was drawing to a close, with some uncertainty about its future. It was acknowledged that the expense of the project over this time had been considerable, the biggest costs being the waiver of international student fees (approximately \$15,000 to \$20,000 per annum per student) for the 30 higher education students, in addition to the cost of the project officer's salary and various other, related expenses (such as waiver of TAFE fees, cash support for study materials etc.).

It was clear that students were concerned about the impending departure of the Project Officer. All students expressed their concerns about this, seeing much of their support structure as being inextricably linked with her and the project. All students emphasised the precarious nature of their existence in Australia, given their visa status, and their isolation from family and friends overseas. The assistance of the Project Officer was an important point of contact for them, both to the education system and the broader Australian society.

### **3.2.2 Programs and pathways within and between TAFE and Higher Education**

RMIT offers an extensive range of study programs from secondary school level through to PhD. These cover a broad array of vocational and higher education discipline, such as digital design, plumbing, fashion and textiles, professional writing, information technology and electro technology. As such, the university offers educational options to a diverse range of students, such as early school leavers, year 12 graduates, experienced professionals, undergraduate and postgraduate students. The dual-sector nature of the institution is well suited to cross-sectoral mobility for students within the one institution.

Introductory programs offered at RMIT range in length between five and ten days and provide a taste of study options within various vocational streams. These programs can lead students into Certificate I studies and beyond, or into the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). There are also programs leading into RMIT pathways courses designed in collaboration with schools to deliver Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) VET programs. VCAL programs are also offered at RMIT. A range of VET courses can be undertaken and provide 'block credit' towards VCE. Prevocational programs are also provided. This allows young people with a qualification at a Certificate I or II level to articulate into an apprenticeship.

Beyond these programs at school and prevocational level, RMIT offers a range of Certificate and diploma study courses up to Certificate IV across a wide range of trade and non-trade areas. Apprenticeship and traineeship training (Certificates III and IV, and Certificate II, respectively) are also offered. These in turn can articulate into studies at the Diploma and Advanced Diploma levels, including various exit points before these levels.

Within the Higher Education division, RMIT offers degrees, graduate certificates, graduate diplomas, masters and PhDs by coursework. Research programs are also available at both master and PhD level.

### **3.2.3 Barriers for refugees accessing education**

Staff and students showed considerable consistency in their responses to this question. By far the most poignant explanations came from the students themselves, some of whom articulated with great clarity the unique combination of factors that made studying particularly difficult, and arguably more difficult than for most students from culturally diverse backgrounds and certainly, those born in Australia. As one put it:

*If you are a refugee, you experienced a lot, you come from a horrible situation, you have so much in your mind, and it's hard to study.*

Most emphasised the dreadful uncertainty of their situation, of their precarious status in Australia and the potential for change in visa status at any time. Of the five students interviewed, one was reporting monthly to the immigration authorities and had no fixed tenure in Australia. Another explained:

*I can't see my family as a refugee, because I have limited rights. I feel limited and that affects my study as well.*

And a third stated:

*I'm a TPV holder, but I don't know what's going to happen in the next day. In a day or a minute, something can happen...and also being far from family, it's really hard, and you have to do a lot for yourself and adjust to a life in a new country, and deal with a second language and deal with a totally different education system.*

Another student spoke of the debilitating after-effects of detention – the depression and the struggle to acquire English. This student had spent four years in detention, followed by 18 months on a bridging visa, which gave him a precarious existence:

*Compared with native students, who have family support and knowledge of the system and language, it's different. To write a report is more natural for them. It's not that simple. It takes ages to write a report properly and make it to the point.*

Overall, there were six major barriers identified by interviewees as particularly affecting refugees and asylum seekers and their access to higher education. All of them revolved, to a greater or lesser degree, around the political situation of asylum seekers and most were in agreement that these barriers could be overcome by a change in government policy. The barriers were:

*Visa status (as a TPV holder or asylum seeker) - leading to inability to access government income support such as Newstart allowance, or provision of Special Benefit for limited periods only:*

*We're not even entitled to a health care card, my Dad works and he supports all of us (in the family).*

*I can work, but I don't have access to Jobs Network support, and I don't have Australian qualifications, so it's hard to find a job.*

The effect was to place students in a state of financial uncertainty and marginalisation, creating anxiety and a concern about where their income was to come from. This was said to impact negatively on students' capacity to study, as it caused additional worries and stress.

### **Refugee background**

Experiences of flight, dislocation, separation from family and home, torture, trauma and detention had all taken their toll and were said to create continuing difficulties for students, most of whom were alone in Australia apart from a few friends and charitable organisations they relied on. While students acknowledged the benefit they had gained from counselling services (which in some cases had enabled them to go onto study), the road to recovery was not always smooth, with anxieties and fears from the past resurfacing and affecting both their emotional state and capacity to concentrate on study. Fear of authority, fear of learning in a group or room, inability to plan and general insecurity about the future were cited as some effects of ongoing psychological stress associated with being a refugee.

### **Uncertain resident status**

Uncertainty about residential status was mentioned by all students and staff as a major barrier to study, with far-reaching practical and psychological effects. Frequent changes in visa status also meant complex adaptations by students and staff to enable them to continue studying as fees and entitlements generally changed with visa status. These changes could occur during a semester and thus disrupt the student's education. One student summed up the problem very clearly:

*The main problem for me has been being a refugee, the status as a refugee. Permanent resident status would have been better, and to have been treated like anyone else, to have the same rights....if we have a permanent visa here and we feel free in this country...we can make decisions for the future, for example, we can decide to study for four years, then you have no worries and you can do that. If you're on TPV, you're just hoping its okay, but you have lots of worries...it's hard to find the courage to do things, it's hard.*

### **Government policy**

The federal government's policy on asylum seekers and refugees was felt by students and staff to be generally hostile and to establish deliberate (*punitive*) barriers to participation by this group in higher education. The policy was also said to lead to psychological and political '*marginalisation*' of those individuals, with numerous practical effects, such as exclusion from the 510 hours of English tuition available to migrants and humanitarian visa holders, exclusion from Centrelink and other support services, concentration in arduous, low skill jobs and lack of capacity to access information about Australian systems.

### **Lack of understanding of Australian society and the education system**

This was often mentioned by student and staff interviewees, and a reason that many regarded this group as having special needs. A major reason for this was that traditional sources of advice and information (such as family, school, careers counsellors) were closed to most of them, as they had neither family or schooling in Australia and little access to Australian institutions, such as Centrelink or JobsNetwork who might have explained the structures to them.

### **3.2.4 Perceived and measured success factors in the program.**

Each of the interviewees emphasised a range of factors that they felt were most important in improving refugee and asylum seeker access to higher education, but no single factor was considered sufficient to achieve that outcome. For all of them, it was the overall package of measures contained in the Asylum Seeker Project and the coherent way these were delivered, essentially through a common reference point (the Project Officer), that was effective. Within this, interviewees emphasised different factors as being more or less effective.

For the students, the main success factors in the program were the provision of fee-relief scholarships and other material assistance, such as free accommodation, cash for books and materials and other relief (for example, from TAFE fees). As indicated previously, students were unanimous that they would not have been able to access higher education if they had been liable for fees. For two of the students (who were sharing accommodation), the provision of university housing free of charge had been important in helping them to continue their studies:

*I worked last year and lived on my savings for a few months this year, in the mid semester holidays I will work again. The main thing is that RMIT offered me a free accommodation scholarship, so that really helped. That's basically how I survived.*

The provision of financial assistance (all had received book subsidies of approximately \$500) was particularly helpful, because, as one explained it, it's very difficult to combine paid work and study when you are a refugee. This means that sources of income are limited:

*You can work and study when English is not your second language, but it is difficult to do both when it's not your language. For me, I can't study and work. There are many jobs around but I don't have enough time. Before I came to Melbourne, I worked for a restaurant for a few months and put money aside and I got help from friends too. My living expenses – basically I get help from friends, I'm not eligible for Centrelink.*

Students also frequently mentioned the great value they had gained from the advice and support of the Project Officer, particularly with preparation of their learning

portfolios and referral to other university services, such as the Learning Skills Unit. Student mentoring, while initially helpful with portfolios, was not considered to be as helpful in the long run, as mentors had their own studies and busy schedules to contend with. Counselling and study preparation courses were also reported to have been helpful in preparing the students for entry into higher education. None mentioned social events or other networking opportunities. One of the students emphasised that he had no time for socialising, as he spent all of his free time studying. The assistance of external welfare agencies was particularly mentioned by one student, who felt he would not have had the courage to proceed with his studies without the moral and material support he had received from that area.

The emphasis on material support, followed by moral and practical support by a single person (a common point of contact with the institution) are not surprising, given the financial insecurity described by all the students and their unfamiliarity with higher education structures in Australia. Material support offered practical opportunities to study in Australia, while the support of a knowledgeable and sympathetic Project Officer was vital in helping the students negotiate their way through the complex and often bureaucratic systems of a large higher education provider.

There was considerable overlap with the views of staff. They, too, emphasised the importance of the scholarship scheme, the Project Officer and other material assistance to students in assisting them to access higher education. In addition, the staff mentioned: the passion and commitment of staff (not only within the Project, but spread throughout the university), the understanding and experience some staff had in working with refugees, the links and relationships with community groups, provision of English language and study readiness courses and willingness to be available to provide assistance and support when needed. It was emphasised that refugee and asylum seeker students often require individualised attention and support that is appropriate to their particular needs, including goal setting that reflects the realities of the situation.

The dual sector nature of RMIT was mentioned as a success factor, as it provided a far greater breadth of potential courses that refugees and asylum seekers could enter and articulate through. This was particularly important for those who were not yet ready to enter higher education courses. The range of support services (counselling, learning support, social) provided by the university was also mentioned, and the opportunities offered for refugee and asylum seeker students to network with others (such as through student mentors and social events). Finally, the equity admissions scheme was said to be pivotal in ensuring that refugees and asylum seekers could gain some special consideration by having their applications assessed outside the usual admissions procedures.

The central theme emerging from these discussions was that an integrated package of measures was required if the severity and complexity of barriers facing refugee and asylum seeker students were to be effectively addressed. These measures extended across financial, educational, personal, social and administrative support in both accessing the university's programs, but also ensuring that students could continue successfully with their studies, and linking them where necessary to external community resources. While no changes were made to curriculum or delivery of courses as such – refugee and asylum seeker students were expected to adapt to the standard educational requirements once enrolled – it was clear that there was substantial flexibility and support offered to them in terms of helping them to access the 'mainstream' services on offer, both within and outside the university.

### **3.2.5 Suggested avenues for improvement**

The single overriding concern of interviewees, students and staff, was to see a change in federal government policy that would allow asylum seekers, TPVs and those on bridging visas access higher education without incurring international student fees. There was unanimity across the interviews that this single policy represented the most significant barrier confronting asylum seeker students and this was the most important area requiring improvement. Visa status and associated government policy were also of major material concern to TAFE students, given the different entitlements available, but this is matter covered in the next section.

Apart from this, there were no suggestions made – either by students or staff – for improvements needed to the Refugee Access program, although there was considerable concern about its ongoing future and how refugees and asylum seekers could continue to be serviced in the absence of fee relief measures or a Project Officer.

### **3.3 RMIT TAFE**

The commencement of the Asylum Seeker Project established program measures for both higher education and TAFE students. It was recognised that a proportion of asylum seekers would seek access to TAFE programs or be referred to TAFE to undertake preparatory study prior to entering higher education. Refugees on humanitarian visas (who are entitled to permanent residency) had long been accessing TAFE programs and indeed, higher education. The Asylum Seeker project focused support on those students who had temporary, TPV or bridging visas and who lacked the entitlements of permanent residents.

This section therefore focuses on measures particularly to assist that group (estimated at 70-80 asylum seekers since 2004) who had accessed RMIT TAFE programs. However, it is acknowledged that a significantly greater number (in the hundreds) of other refugee students would also have accessed TAFE programs during that time.

#### **3.3.1 Nature of programs provided for refugee access/participation**

According to the interviews, asylum seekers wishing to enter TAFE programs received focussed and intensive support that included:

- Waiver or reduction of TAFE fees, depending on visa and/or Centrelink status;
- Learning support/transition services (provided by the RMIT Learning Skills Unit); and,
- Access to the Asylum Seeker Project Officer (three days a week) for three years, on the same terms as higher education students.

In practice, this meant that the Project Officer provided focused brokerage, referral and counselling services to each TAFE applicant, including referral to external community agencies where appropriate. In most cases, the Project Officer would encourage the applicant to attend the Learning Skills Unit for a learning assessment that would gauge their readiness for study and learning needs, such as English as Second Language or further training needs. This would generally be followed by counselling of the student regarding their educational and vocational goals, and assistance with development of a learning pathways plan.

It was acknowledged that many asylum seekers and TPVs were seeking immediate access to higher education courses, often to complete education they had begun overseas or to meet their own aspirations and expectations of community advocates.

However, if a learning assessment found that there were not yet ready, these students would be counselled to undertake preparatory training or a vocational course in TAFE. As one interviewee explained:

*Students come to RMIT in the hope of getting a scholarship at tertiary level. Often it wasn't appropriate for them to apply for a higher ed course, so we helped them where they were, for example with their language development and actual understanding of the tertiary environment in Australia. Usually we got it right.*

Program delivery was generally the same for all students, regardless of their status. However, an example was given of a ten-week bridging course conducted specifically for asylum seekers in 2005. Standard services – such as concurrent support, pre-vocational programs and vocational programs – were generally made as flexible as possible to meet the asylum seekers' needs. This extended as far as providing individual support, varying attendance times and personalising curriculum delivery on occasion where it was warranted. Staff at the Learning Skills Unit were said to be particularly attuned to the special needs of refugees and asylum seekers. While sharing many of the problems faced by newly arrived immigrants, it was acknowledged that refugees and asylum seekers faced additional barriers such as depression, trauma, social isolation and uncertainty about their future. Services were therefore tailored to some extent to reflect this. Staff were also very aware of the complexities and shifts in entitlements or exclusions facing different categories of visa holders and the impact these could have on students' access to courses. There was usually considerable liaison with the Project Officer to gain information on these matters. For example, a TPV holder receiving a health care card would face different TAFE fees than someone without a health care card. Differing requirements by Centrelink with respect to full-time or part-time studies must also be considered. Staff showed a willingness to acknowledge and respond to these issues in a manner that ensured initial access and maintained continuity of access to education.

As with the higher education students, the TAFE students had access, through the Asylum Seeker Project Officer, to English and study skills preparation, counselling for psychological and other issues, referral to community and human service agencies, information on education transition issues, such as differences between TAFE and higher education and social events to reduce isolation and general liaison with other RMIT staff. Like the HE students, they were able to access the Project Officer for ongoing support and advice during their period at RMIT.

### **3.3.2 Barriers for refugees accessing education**

In general, the barriers reported for and by TAFE students were similar to those applying for HE students in this category. Of greatest import was the maze of policies – both governmental and administrative – relating to rights or lack of rights to certain services, including education, depending on visa status and access to Centrelink and other benefits. This could lead to considerable confusion for the asylum seeker or refugee, especially when changes in status occurred during a course of study.

Asylum seekers were not eligible to participate in traineeships or adult apprenticeships, limiting the potential pathways into vocational streams. Many lacked study skills:

*A big part of the preparatory program is helping them apply for courses, get practice sitting in lectures and take notes, using the library etc.*

It was reported that each student would have a documented pathway developed by the time they had completed their preparatory program:

*It's done by the teachers, they have individual interviews halfway through the course and then discuss it in class, they do research on it with the relevant course coordinators. It's part of putting together the learning plan as part of the project.*

Other barriers mentioned included: emotional barriers, based on their insecurity as residents in Australia and after-effects of long-term detention and trauma; difficulty learning in a room or a group; fear of authority; and general uncertainty about the future. Nevertheless, staff interviewees spoke highly of the motivation and resilience of many of the asylum seeker and refugee students.

### **3.3.3 Perceived and measured success factors in the program**

Again, the success factors in this area echoed those mentioned by staff and students in relation to higher education. Material support with the cost of TAFE fees was mentioned, although these costs were considerably less than those for HE students. Nevertheless, the barriers to asylum seekers or TPVs with no source of income could be great, even with regard to TAFE fees:

*The funding is the biggest thing. It's hard for us to constantly renegotiate about that, so there is uncertainty. \$578 or \$88 bill, they don't know sometimes which it will be.*

The preparedness of the Asylum Seeker Project to meet the cost of these fees was thought to be a great help to these students. Over and above this, staff spoke highly of the role of the Project Officer as a 'clearinghouse' for information to both staff and students, and her capacity to respond flexibly to the needs of individuals. Other staff were also prepared to adapt at short notice to accommodate the circumstances of asylum seekers and TPVs:

*Sometimes Centrelink will say they can't attend full-time classes, so we enrol them for 19 hours a week (instead of 20).*

The passion, experience and commitment of staff and the resilience/persistence of students in the face of adversity were seen to be major success factors. Overall, the Program elements that were most emphasised as contributing to its success in promoting access to education were: flexibility, intensive support, commitment, links within and outside the university and dedicated resources, such as the Project Officer and material assistance with fees. The dual sector nature of the university were again mentioned as being particularly helpful to students seeking to navigate their way through pre-vocational, vocational and higher education courses.

### **3.3.4 Suggested avenues for improvement**

Again, the single common theme for these students was the need for changes in government policy, especially a review of the education entitlements of different visa holders, such as those on bridging visas. The difficulties that were created by policy in this area have been mentioned above. Both staff and students strongly advocated the need for improvements in this area.

Beyond this, both groups were concerned to preserve the elements of the Asylum Seeker Project that had been most successful for this group: the Clearinghouse and referral functions performed by the Project Officer; the cash assistance with TAFE

fees and the assistance with development of pathways. As one interviewee commented:

*I think RMIT has been fantastic in this area. Their commitment to refugees and asylum seekers has been very good. I'm full of praise for what the university has done but I'm worried about the future....If it (the Asylum Seeker Project) disappears, we won't get any on bridging visas as they'll have to pay \$578 and I can't see any paying that. If you're on such and such a visa you're not allowed to work or have a health care card or access emergency hospital care. You depend on a relative or community service.*

### **3.4 VICTORIA UNIVERSITY**

Victoria University is one of five Australian dual sector universities offering both higher education and technical and further education courses. Overall, there are over 50,000 students and 3,000 staff. VU operates from ten campuses that are based both in Victoria and internationally. The main campus of the University is based in Footscray, an area which is one of the main destinations for refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Australia.

### **3.5 Victoria University – Higher Education**

#### **3.5.1 Programs and policy on refugee access/participation**

While there is no formal policy at the university in relation to refugee or asylum seeker students, a strong policy of access and opportunity aimed particularly at disadvantaged students from the Melbourne Western region provides considerable scope for special measures to be implemented in relation to this group.

Victoria University has employed a Community Partnerships Officer for some 9 years, whose role is to provide leadership, brokerage and facilitation in relation to refugee communities in the western region. Within that role, a number of initiatives have been undertaken, including pilot programs for Horn Africa youths in electronics and childcare, and bridging programs for overseas trained African teachers. As well, the position provides considerable referral and advice to many individual refugee students within the university. More recently, the university has introduced a limited number of scholarships for refugees to access higher education places.

As a dual sector institution, Victoria University has for several years provided structured pathways for TAFE students completing diplomas and advanced diplomas into higher education courses. These kinds of pathways have the capacity to promote educational access for the most disadvantaged students, such as refugees, who would not always be able to access degree programs directly.

Various initiatives at Victoria University have revolved around individual personalized entry methods and pathways, such as personalized access and study, learning compacts and pathways advice that enable disadvantaged students to access higher education by alternative avenues. The current Personal Portfolio Program (PPP) enables a prospective student to apply for a place by submitting a portfolio of information about themselves and their educational background. This portfolio is used by selection officers to provide early advice in December prior to selection. This method of entry has been reported to work very well.

Victoria University also has a range of partnerships with schools in the Melbourne Western Region (in some of which refugee students make up a sizeable proportion of the student population). Altogether there are 100 partnerships with schools, with 2,500 PPP applications received by the university in 2006. 20 per cent of year 12 students in those schools have this form of entry mode offered to them. Victoria University's 2006 strategic statement *Making Victoria University - a New School of Thought: Supporting Information* suggests that such strategies are likely to be strengthened and become more embedded within an overall program of differentiation. Commitment 3 of the Five Commitments listed on page 2 of that document indicates that:

*Victoria University will provide personalized learning programs that include customized course choices and learning support for both highly capable studies and those in greater need of support. These programs will allow student to*

*combine learning from TAFE and higher education, and take advantage of multiple entry and exit points and seamless transitions (October 2006).*

This suggests that provision and facilitation of pathways for less able or prepared students from school and TAFE into the University's Higher Education courses is set to continue and expand. Such pathways are very relevant and valuable for refugee students who may have had interrupted education or lower entry marks as a result of difficulties or shortfalls in their on-shore Australian education. Once in the University, programs of Concurrent Support for TAFE students and Student Assistance are available for students to gain help with study skills and adaptation to academic requirements.

### **3.6 Victoria University – TAFE**

This section of the report focuses on the access and participation issues canvassed with and data collected from both staff and students involved in Victoria University's TAFE programs with a refugee student population. The interview participants included two senior managers, one from educational programs and one from entry programs and seven students enrolled in the AMEP Settlement English Program at VU Sunshine TAFE Campus. The characteristics of the seven students interviewed were:

- Six were from South Sudan and one from Liberia;
- Six male and one female;
- Ages ranged from 20 years old to 41;
- Six participants spoke Dinka and one spoke Liberian English;
- The maximum length of stay in arrival in Australia was 21 months and the minimum was six months;
- The highest level of education of participants was the Sudan Secondary Certificate (Year 12) plus two years of medical studies in community health and nursing;
- The lowest level of education was the Sudan Primary Certificate;

All VU TAFE interviews were conducted by Associate Professor Michele Grossman between April – June 2006. The research instruments used for these interviews were the Project Questionnaires designed for staff or for students (please see **Appendix B**). Each interview was conducted according to the protocols set out in the Ethics Approval document for this project, and signed consent forms were obtained for all individual participants in the project.

#### **3.6.1 Nature of programs provided for refugee access/participants**

Victoria University TAFE currently provides a range of courses and programs that include (but are not limited to) refugee students at its Nicholson Street Campus through a number of different Departments and programs. The three TAFE departments of most relevance and significance to refugee students are the Departments of Access Education Programs, Further Education, and Vocational Education.

The Department of Access Education Programs caters for people wishing to develop their English language or literacy skills. The Department delivers programs in four main areas:

- Adult Literacy and Basic Education
- Women's Education
- English as a Second Language

- Adult Migrant Education

These programs are delivered at St Albans, Footscray Nicholson, Melton, Sunshine, Sunbury and Werribee campuses. Delivery also occurs in community and industry locations. The range of program and service delivery includes full-time and part-time programs, which range from preparatory programs to Certificate courses in the following areas:

- Adult English Language, Literacy, Numeracy and Access Programs for Women
- Certificates in General Education for Adults
- Cert 1 -111, Access courses within the ESL Frameworks
- Adult Migrant Education Program (Cert in Spoken and Written English)
- Cert 1 in Information Technology
- ANTA and DEETYA funded specific purpose projects and programs

In the Department of Further Education, refugee students also have access to the following courses of study:

- Adult English Language Programs: Certificate 3 & 4 ESL Further Studies to provide academic preparation for English as a Second Language (ESL) students intending to study in Further or Higher Education
- Liberal Arts: Certificate 4, Diploma & Dual Award- Bachelor Arts/Liberal Arts
- Adult Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE)
- Preparation for Tertiary Studies: a part time course at Certificate 1V level for adults preparing for Further Study and Higher Education.
- Literacy programs: Certificate 4 in Further Education to prepare students returning to study with academic preparation and pathways into further Study and Higher Education.
- The University Preparation Program: to prepare international students for Further Study and Higher Education courses in Australia

The Department of Vocational Education Programs also offers a range of courses that support the learning needs and goals of refugee students, including the following Vocationally Specific ESL courses:

- Certificate III in ESL (Employment) Business
- Certificate III in ESL (Employment) Children's Services
- Certificate III in ESL (Employment) Aged Care Work
- Certificate IV in ESL (Professional) English for Health Professionals

Some refugee students also enrol in the Certificate IV in ESL (Further Study) Course in Gateway to Nursing and Health Studies, particularly if they have come from nursing and health professional backgrounds in their country of origin.

### **3.6.2 Program and course pathways within TAFE and between TAFE and Higher Education at Victoria University**

Information and workshops about education pathways for both TAFE and Higher Education programs are offered to each cohort of students in all programs in all Departments. In the Access Education programs, including the AMEP programs, students are offered 'taster' classes at TAFE level for Certificate courses, for example in childcare, automotive and nursing courses.

VU has an 'articulated pathways' structure that runs across its TAFE and Higher Ed sectors as a dual-sector institution. This means that students can proceed

structurally via existing pathways through different educational degree programs within TAFE or between TAFE and Higher Ed. One staff member gave the following example of a 'hypothetical' refugee student who might pursue one of two options:

**Pathway 1:** ESL access (basic) – ESL vocational—then either onto further study (Higher Ed) or Advanced Diploma (TAFE).

**Pathway 2:** ESL access (basic) – ESL vocational – VET (e.g. childcare, aged care)

In the context of AMEP, Settlement English classes focus on equipping students with basic English and life skills for settlement in Australia. They prepare students for entry into LLNP programs at TAFE level, which in turn can lead to a variety of study and further/higher education pathways across the TAFE and Higher Education systems. However, they are very practically focused on basic skills development in English rather than assisting directly with formal modes of study and progression toward qualifications.

### **3.6.3 Policy environment**

There is no separate suite of policies for refugee students, but they are included under the general policies governing education and service provision for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students at Victoria University.

At VU TAFE, refugee students are not identified as a separate group within the general CALD cohort. They can be identified only via their visa status on the enrolment form. Measured access and also participation/retention factors are elusive, because no systematic tracking of how students progress through various educational pathways is currently conducted. At times such knowledge is informally known and applied by teachers, but the institution cannot devise specific refugee-targeted access, participation and retention strategies at present because in the absence of specific tracking systems the data are not available.

Within the School of Further Education, Arts and Employment Services, however, which runs the Access Education programs, there is an explicit, if informal, focus on the specific backgrounds, circumstances and needs of refugee students where possible. This includes, for example, the organization of fee-waiver exemptions for refugee students through the School if they voluntarily disclose their refugee status, use of bi- or multilingual classroom aides who speak at least one of the languages of the main refugee student groups in various ESL-framework programs, and the effort to offer flexible delivery of programs with respect to the scheduling of classes to accommodate childcare, employment and other family and workplace demands for students.

### **3.6.4 Barriers for refugees accessing education**

Both staff and students identified some clear barriers faced by refugee students in accessing tertiary and further education. The most commonly identified barriers were interrupted access to and participation in tertiary education for the following reasons:

#### ***Circumstantial barriers***

**Housing problems:** students whose families were in privately run accommodation often had to re-negotiate their housing needs without assistance from agencies. The need to find new accommodation at short notice or to assist family members with accommodation problems, and the interruption to continuous study this posed, was significant for at least 50% of the students interviewed at VU TAFE.

**Transport problems:** a number of students commented that they were unable to afford the public transport to their AMEP or other courses at least some of the time because once their budgets had been expended on essential items (rent, food, school materials for children, etc.) there was not enough left to cover their own transport costs to and from the university if they did not live within walking distance of the campus where their course was offered.

**Childcare problems:** this was a familiar and oft-repeated barrier cited by both students and staff at VU TAFE. While in theory AMEP programs delivering the standard 510 hours of English language tuition provide for free childcare during this course of study, in practice refugee students cited long waiting lists (up to two years), inappropriate care offered at the nearest local centre, which meant additional travel to and from a more appropriate childcare facility, and the need to juggle childcare costs and study costs on a limited budget.

Childcare within refugee communities is often assumed to be an issue primarily for women, and the case of Horn of Africa refugees supports this to a large extent, with many female refugee students who are the sole head of household because they have been granted asylum in Australia under this country's 'women at risk' humanitarian entry program.

However, childcare needs and the relationship to study access and participation in some recently arrived refugee communities, e.g. the Sudanese community, can be more complex and can cross gender lines. An example of this was the case of a 20-year-old male refugee student interviewed for this project who was the head of household in charge of a family of 4 dependent siblings for whom he is responsible because both parents were killed in the Sudanese civil war. This means that, although he is not married and has few of the parenting or domestic skills needed for his head-of-household role, he must place his dependent brothers' and sisters' needs for care and schooling above his own, and the opportunity cost for progression in his own study has been high. This means he is less able to support his dependent siblings in their own educational development than he would like to be, as well as feeling frustrated that he is not making faster progress in his own studies.

### ***Institutional barriers***

**Limited flexible delivery of courses:** Staff at VU TAFE would like to offer more and extended flexible delivery of courses to accommodate refugee needs, particularly for single mothers or fathers with young dependent children, but cannot currently offer weekend classes or do much beyond scheduling their course and unit delivery so parents or heads of household can drop off and pick up their children from school or childcare. Both staff and students noted that flexible delivery is crucial to help negotiate family demands and employment responsibilities.

**Fees and study materials costs:** the different fees charged for various courses can present a problem for some students. In 2004 at VU, across-the-board minimum fees were discontinued, but this has produced mixed results for students, some of whom are now required to pay higher fees because the minimum threshold that levelled costs to a certain extent has been abolished. Study materials were cited by some refugee students as a problem, with resources not always being available through the university's library system when they needed them most, and prohibitive to purchase if they wished to own the materials.

**Lack of coordination of pastoral and welfare services:** The absence of a designated Student Welfare Officer for refugee students limits the ability of programs at VU to cope with particular needs and problems encountered by refugee students, especially for refugee youth. While refugee students often receive dedicated and caring assistance from individual teachers and program coordinators in relation to Centrelink, community health centres, migrant resource centres and other local services, this is uncoordinated and ad hoc and as such does not benefit from the economies of scale or the 'best practice' models that would be available for implementation if a coordinated Refugee Student Welfare support centre and role were to be established.

**Culturally inappropriate/inaccessible service delivery:** VU staff pointed out that despite a high proportion of CALD students at all levels of Victoria University's programs in both the TAFE and Higher Education sectors, the delivery of services, ranging from course enrolment to cashier points to library information, is not well designed for access by students with limited English or a lack of familiarity with Australian institutions and bureaucratic structures. The increasing use of on-line service delivery for students without recognition of how this needs to be tailored for access by refugee and also other international students was cited as a particular instance of a barrier to access, with students left feeling dispirited and unable to cope with the level of technological expertise required to manage even relatively simple tasks like changing a unit of study or paying an enrolment fee.

**Lack of attitudinal flexibility:** There was a general perception amongst staff that while individual members of the teaching and program coordination staff endeavour to be as flexible as possible in meeting the needs of students whom they know to come from refugee backgrounds, there is an attitudinal barrier within this institution as a whole expressed as a general assumption that refugee students must fit in with the institution, rather than the other way around.

### ***Community barriers***

**Lack of coordinated interface with local community refugee information and support resources:** A number of students commented that they were unaware of how to source information about access to and progression through tertiary education courses from within their communities. Many were involved in a range of local community groups, ranging from church groups and formal and informal migrant resource networks to more coordinated learning and educational support programs, for example, the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning (SAIL) program, which operates out of several campuses in Melbourne's West and also in the Dandenong area. Staff at VU TAFE were similarly unaware of the full complement of local community programs and resources in which refugees and newly arrived resettlement communities are very active.

Many opportunities to take on a more pro-active role in community outreach are not being taken up due to the lack of coordination and resources sharing. Nor are opportunities for further and higher education being advertised and discussed in local community groups. This is a potential barrier insofar as individual refugee students, particularly women may need to feel supported by their communities in pursuing educational opportunities beyond the acquisition of basic English skills. It is also a potential barrier because valuable knowledge about culturally specific needs, traditions and customs that are relevant to the appropriate delivery of CALD students from refugee backgrounds is not being shared and coordinated with the involvement of local community representatives and participants.

On the positive side, however, Victoria University as a whole maintains and strives to strengthen its relationships with local migrant and refugee communities. About 50% of the staff in the Access Education programs at VU TAFE are bi or multilingual in a language relevant to new and recently arrived refugee communities. The University has an active relationship with the HACN (Horn of Africa Communities Network), which is located directly opposite the VU TAFE Nicholson Street campus. It runs a variety of training and professional development programs for staff who work in both the TAFE and Higher Education sectors on aspects of designing and delivering educational programs in the context of linguistic and cultural diversity through its Staff College. VU also maintains a Community Partnerships Officer who liaises and consults frequently with a range of local community representatives about educational programs offered at VU in both sectors, with a particular focus on the needs of emerging and new communities with significant or primarily refugee populations.

**The desire to work and study simultaneously:** Refugee students at this institution were unanimous in their wish to combine part-time study and part-time work. The desire to combine at least some part-time work with study was expressed by students at two levels; one, the imperative to earn more than the income provided by Centrelink; two, the need to feel that they were working as an important element of their identity and self-respect. The issue of self-respect and study, especially at a basic level of achievement, was an implicit theme of the discussion. One student expressed it in the following way:

*'You feel like running away when you get to the classroom because it is so hard to become independent again.'*

This is particularly the case for refugee students who have come to Australia after spending long periods – sometimes several years – as adult dependents in refugee 'transit' camps before being admitted to the host country through the humanitarian entry program.

### **3.6.5 Perceived and measured access factors in the programs provided**

Access to the programs offered by VU TAFE is good and the uptake is high, with most newly arrived refugee students moving through the system via entry through AMEP. Teachers and program coordinators are dedicated. In many cases they are experienced and aware of the need for continuously updated preparation and education about specific country-of-origin learning styles, backgrounds and needs. Because of its location in the Western suburbs of Melbourne, a 'traditional' catchment area for new and recently arrived migrant and refugee communities, VU has a long history of educational service delivery to cohorts from successive waves of migrant and refugee communities spanning over 30 years and has learned from this experience.

Most telling is their acknowledgement and responsiveness to the fact that educational strategies need to balance culturally tailored and specific approaches to pedagogy and content with the delivery of a range of generic skills in English language literacy and vocational programs. One staff member commented on how important it was to recognise that programs designed specifically for Middle Eastern or Vietnamese refugee students, for example, do not apply wholesale to African cohorts. She felt that a demonstrated strength of VU TAFE was its willingness to cater simultaneously for differences and commonalities in the learning styles and skills brought by diverse groups of refugee and migrant students over the last two decades.

VU TAFE is also notable for the 'cultural and community extension' programs it offers to its AMEP students in its Settlement English classes, for example, trips to Melbourne Zoo, cooking classes for men, an 8-week series of sessions on African women's health at the Sunshine Campus with a speaker from the Western Region Health Centre, etc. Most of the cultural and community extension programs were free of charge or charged fees at a nominal cost to students.

### **3.6.6 Suggested avenues for improvement**

A point made by both students and staff is that adequate refugee access to tertiary education requires consistent and adequate resourcing. Staff commented that refugee students cost more to teach and to support, e.g. in relation to specialized materials, additional time and one-to-one tutorial assistance. However, they are funded at the same rate as non-refugee students. Consideration should be given to the teaching and support-intensive needs of refugee students in current and future funding models.

There are significant pastoral care needs – with childcare, Centrelink, accommodation, domestic violence, employment, socialization and community interaction needs coming high on the list – but there is currently no funding for pastoral or student welfare support at VU TAFE, and the ability of the university to retain and support students throughout their educational pathways would be significantly enhanced if pastoral and student welfare services were identified, coordinated and implemented with identified staff positions in this role.

More creative programs involving community outreach and the nexus between the university and community could be pursued, which would enhance the opportunity to develop a robust community outreach and engagement model specifically for refugee students. This is particularly the case with existing community education and support resources and programs in the local region, which could be better integrated with VU TAFE programs. There is a lot going on out in the local community but the institution only occasionally gets to hear about or forge links with such programs and resources.

Priority consideration should be given to the development of a database management system that, while respecting students' needs and wishes for privacy, will as far as possible assist VU TAFE in monitoring and supporting the progress of refugee students through the various pathways within TAFE and between TAFE and Higher Education at the institution. The absence of such data means that the institution currently has no way of knowing the pattern, flow or retention rates for refugee students within the system as a specific group. Without such data it is impossible to effectively design or manage policies and structures designed to support and enhance refugee access and participation in tertiary education. At the very least, refugee students should be provided with the opportunity to complete specifically targeted 'exit' interviews at each stage of their study, from AMEP through to certificate, diploma and/or higher degree courses. Exit interview questionnaires for refugee students could be designed to collect data on student satisfaction and problems with the course they have just completed, as well as providing a rough baseline indicator of future plans and preparation for further study, and in what areas or sectors.

However, the issue of data collection for the purpose of tracking, monitoring and supporting refugee student access to and progression through the educational system and its various pathways needs to be carefully considered. There are many sensitivities in providing information that can identify them to people or institutions

perceived as authorities. Many refugee students have had highly negative experiences based on the use of personal information against them in their home country, which has resulted in persecution and trauma, and in many cases forms part of their case for seeking asylum in Australia.

One of the findings of the researchers during the conduct of this study was the high level of concern and at times fear amongst refugee students around the signing of consent forms. Considerable care and effort was required to reassure students that the interviews and the personal data collected for the purpose of demographic analysis could not be traced back to any individual participant. The significance of this for the implementation of institutional tracking and database systems of refugee students is clear, and wide and thorough consultation with refugee community groups would need to be conducted by the university before such a system was designed and established.

From the student perspective, there was a strong demand for more focus on the integration of workplace skills development and formal learning. They felt somewhat cocooned by being in English classes without the opportunity to test and develop their skills in relevant job settings where they could simultaneously gain work experience that would help them realize their educational and occupational goals and aspirations.

Another suggested improvement by refugee students was the targeted training and use of educators and other professionals from within refugee communities (in this case, Sudanese) so that new arrivals could draw on the brokerage skills and knowledge of community members who had been here longer than those freshly arrived in Australia. This was seen by participants as very important in breaking through a perceived culture of dependency on the host country and its agents – teachers, health professionals, police officers, social workers, etc. There was strong interest in becoming independent and being able to be ‘equal’ with other Australians in cultural and economic terms.

### **3.6.7 Additional comments/findings**

All the students said they were confident they would complete their studies because they were highly motivated and because the stakes for them to do so in terms of their future were high. One student said being in Australia provided peace of mind in comparison to the tensions and stresses of being at home in a country undergoing major conflict and war, and that the experience of being able to focus on study with relatively few worries was a new one for him.

This group of students was marked by the extremely high level of motivation and commitment they showed to pursuing educational opportunities despite the hardships and challenges they faced in relation to a range of circumstantial, institutional and community barriers. They were also distinguished by the vigorous nature of their belief in an ideal of self-sufficiency and social integration through the mechanism of further and higher education.

### **3.7 NORTHERN MELBOURNE INSTITUTE OF TAFE**

This section reports on the findings from NMIT, based on interviews with four teaching staff and a focus group discussion with five refugee students. These sessions were conducted in March and May 2006 respectively.

The refugee students involved in the hour-long discussion group came from Liberia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq. There were two women and three men, their ages ranging from 28 to 44, with two aged in their mid 30s. All but one was married with children, one woman had six children, three others had three children, and one had two children. None had spent any time in an Australian detention centre, and all held a humanitarian visa and were permanent residents. Both women held overseas qualifications – in nursing (with 20 years practical experience) and agriculture. One man had a theology diploma, others had no qualifications. Three others had no work experience and another had done process work. Several mentioned having interrupted or shortened schooling in their home country.

#### **3.7.1 Nature of programs provided for refugee access/participation**

NMIT provides AMEP and ESL programs to support a large number of refugees with English language skills. They also provide individual counselling to refugees to develop pathways to educational and vocational outcomes. A community building strategy is embedded in the way that education is delivered. For example, students from culturally diverse backgrounds, including refugees, are encouraged to share their cultural experiences and insights in class. Social events and cross-cultural activities are organised. Teachers often attend cultural events held within culturally diverse communities, helping to develop links between those communities and local institutions.

Teachers spoke of the strong partnerships they have developed at the community and government levels. For example, they have a close relationship with DIMA and VOMA (Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs) and some pilot programs have been developed with DIMA, such as African languages for interpreters.

Despite these activities, NMIT has no specific policies focusing on refugees. Refugees are identified through student services and through problems manifested identified in their learning processes. Staff showed a high level of commitment to understanding and responding to refugee needs and had received professional development through training delivered by the Foundation for the Survivors of Torture and Trauma.

#### **3.7.2 Program and course pathways within TAFE and between TAFE and Higher Education**

According to its website, NMIT is a multi-campus, multi-discipline TAFE that delivers diverse training to a diverse student population. It offers over 200 courses on a full-time and part-time basis, ranging from horse studies to commerce, community theatre, welfare and welding. Programs are offered in a variety of modes such as pre-apprenticeships, apprenticeships and traineeships extending across certificate, diploma and advanced diploma levels. On-line study modules and courses are also available, and some applied specialised bachelor degree programs.

#### **3.7.3 Barriers for refugees accessing tertiary education**

A very rich account of barriers was provided by the refugee students. The views expressed were entirely consistent with the major issues raised by the teachers, but embellished with personal accounts and explanations.

Teachers emphasised the issues of:

- Money – the difficulty of attending education courses when most refugees have a pressing need to earn income for their families. Having arrived in the country with few possessions or savings but often large families (including extended family and friends) to support, foregoing income generation can be a strain.
- Language barriers – the difficulty of acquiring sufficient English in a reasonable time to effectively participate in society and the workforce
- Problems with gaining recognition of overseas qualifications and experience
- The burden of social and economic responsibility for family living overseas
- Problems with meeting course entry tests to access certain programs.

Similarly, the refugee students emphasised financial barriers as the most significant barrier. As one explained:

*Money is the basic problem. My older brother and I live together in a three bedroom house. It costs \$782 a month for the house, then there are bills as well (Newstart allowance is \$477 per fortnight plus rent assistance). We can be left with nothing, we have to transport ourselves, we have to work. It can be raining but I can't afford to buy a ticket to ride here (to TAFE). This course my JobsNetwork agency is paying for it.*

Another explained:

*Money and housing (are the main problems). I live in a three bedroom house, it is rented. I put in an application for public housing three years ago, we just wait. Every year we move house. I have six children, there are problems, a three bedroom house is not enough for me.*

All the students spoke of the difficulties of managing on Centrelink payments (paying rent, supporting families) while attending classes and meeting the costs of TAFE (some had exhausted their JobsNetwork subsidies and were paying for their own tuition). Other difficulties mentioned were:

- Finding work or being expected by employment agencies to find work. One student had been told by their JobsNetwork agency that they should look for a job. After a fruitless one and a half year search for work, he realised he had to return to study. Had he been given a more realistic idea of his chances, he may have accessed education earlier.
- Transport problems – difficulties accessing preferred courses by public transport
- Missed or broken education overseas. Four of the students mentioned this as a major factor that had limited their educational opportunities and made it harder to take up education here:

*I feel I missed education already - my country was in a state of war. When I came here the government helped me here...I went to primary school, but I missed most of high school. So I've had to catch up in Australia.*

*Same thing - I missed schooling because of the war. I was a shy teenager when the war came to my country in 1990...I left my country and lived in West Africa...then war broke out there, so I went to Guinea, then Australia...I had some schooling in a refugee school in West Africa, it was run by the United Nations. It was not easy to integrate. There are different systems of schooling,*

*here it's quite different. Here some of us have no assets, like computers. Here it's compulsory you use a computer.*

*All teenagers who come from camp life, for example, in Somalia, they never had education...Children come here young after the war, they come to language school...then leave school, they can't continue because they lack basic education.*

*I was in the refugee camp when I finished high school. I wouldn't continue onto college, there was no college in the camp.*

Others spoke of the difficulties of being separated from family members overseas, the stresses and worries this caused and how that could impact on their ability to focus on studying. For the qualified nurse, there had been years of frustration in dealing with the complexities of the nurses registration system and her failed attempts to pass the English language test for registration in Australia. While she persevered with her studies, it was clear that continuing with her education sometimes hard:

*For myself, I take each day as it comes. When I didn't pass the English nursing exam, it's difficult. I felt like I can't do it sometimes, then I push myself...I've trying more than three years now, I can't reach what the nursing board wants.*

#### **3.7.4 Perceived and measured success factors in the programs provided**

The students emphasised the individualised assistance they had received from teaching staff, particularly in choosing courses and mapping future pathways into other courses. Refugee students particularly appreciated the fact that assistance was customised to their needs and credited this as a major factor in accessing and continuing with tertiary education.

Teaching staff also emphasised this aspect and the fact that regular reviews of students from the humanitarian program were undertaken to determine their status and progress in courses. They reported a sharp focus on refugees from emerging languages in Australia, with teaching being particularly geared to the needs of those newer arrivals. For example, two types of certificate course had been developed for at Certificate II and III to meet the needs of general students and these newly emerged groups. Some teachers said they provided support for students wishing to sponsor their families into Australia. It was also reported that staff generally had a good understanding of refugees and were prepared to provide individual support to those experiencing difficulties.

Overall, the main success factors identified from the NMIT case were the pastoral care, individualised support and pathways, customisation of course delivery where necessary and ongoing monitoring of refugee students as a cohort.

#### **3.7.5 Suggested avenues for improvement**

The most common aspect mentioned by students was the need for cross-cultural knowledge of Australian customs and behaviours. Students were keenly aware that they did not understand the cultural aspects of life in Australian and may be disadvantaged if they did not successfully acquire this knowledge. They seemed keen to do this in the context of their tertiary studies. They also sought more focussed career advice so that they could strategically map out their future vocational pathways.

The Somali nurse who had unsuccessfully attempted to gain registration expressed frustration with the system of professional accreditation but had no suggestions about how the tertiary education system could be improved in this respect.

Teaching staff talked about the need for special funding for refugees to be supported into apprenticeships, although the student group interviewed for this study were more interested in professional or labouring work. They were keen to see students' past learning and experience being recognised, and felt that even more emphasis should be placed on understanding the different educational and cultural backgrounds of refugees in the tertiary education system.

### **3.8 Goulburn Ovens TAFE (GOTAFE) (Shepparton)**

This section of the report focuses on the access and participation issues canvassed with and data collected from both staff and students involved in GO TAFE's programs with a refugee student population. The interview participants included three managers, both teaching and administrative, in areas working closely with refugee students and three refugee students from the Democratic Republic of Congo enrolled in the AMEP Settlement English Program at GO TAFE. The student focus group included three students in Settlement English (AMEP) classes. The students were from the Democratic Republic of Congo, two female, one male and aged between 34 and 36 years. Two of the students were a married couple with nine children and the other student is a mother of five. All three speak French and Swahili. The students had been in Australia from five to six months. The highest level of education completed by one of the students was three years of university (equivalent to a university undergraduate degree). The lowest level of education held by one of the students was the equivalent of Year 10.

All GO TAFE interviews were conducted by Associate Professor Santina Bertone and Associate Professor Michele Grossman between March – June 2006. The research instruments used for these interviews were the Project Questionnaires designed for staff or for students (please see Appendix B). Each interview was conducted according to the protocols set out in the Ethics Approval document for this project, and signed consent forms were obtained for all individual participants in the project.

#### **3.8.1 Nature of programs provided for refugee access/participants**

GO TAFE currently provides a range of courses and programs for refugee students through its Migrant Education Centre (MEC) at the Fryers St, Shepparton Campus. The programs include AMEP, LLNP, Field Officers working in outreach programs, support programs for parents returning to study and home tutoring, as well as providing pathways to a range of mainstream certificate courses of study, including Adult English Language Programs (Cert. 3 and 4), ESL Further Studies and various VET programs at certificate level.

The MEC began in 1989 as a migrant education unit with 3 staff and 5 students in the AMEP program. It now serves about 470 migrant/refugee students a year and employs approximately 40 members of staff in teaching and administration.

The original structure at GO TAFE formerly lodged the Disability Unit, the Koori Unit and the Migrant Education Unit together. However, each of these is now structured as an autonomous unit or centre, which means the MEC is charged with specific responsibilities for and focus on the educational and support needs of refugee and migrant students.

#### **3.8.2 Program and course pathways at GO TAFE**

Information and workshops about education pathways for TAFE and further study programs are offered to each cohort of students at the MEC. Programs offered by the MEC include:

- Certificate III in ESL (Access)
- Certificate I – III in Spoken and Written English

The MEC also offers, in conjunction with other centres at GOTAFE:

- Certificate I - III in General Education for Adults
- Vocational Education courses

A significant number of courses are also run on a fee-for-service basis and are customized to particular client needs. These courses and services include:

- Health promotion
- Translating and interpreting
- Cultural awareness training
- Settlement programs
- Job Network Provider-sponsored courses
- Managed Individual Pathways for Equity groups
- Community development programs
- Labour market programs for seasonal employment

The refugee students in the focus group at GO TAFE were either confused by or unaware of how the pathways and institutional structure for mainstream and further education worked. They were keen to access this information both for themselves and also to assist their children with mapping future study directions and plans.

Significant emphasis is placed at GO TAFE Shepparton on transition programs and assistance for refugee students from AMEP and ESL courses into mainstream TAFE courses. These often take the form of offering students short ‘taster’ units focusing on vocational study streams: childcare, food hygiene, welfare studies, English for welding, etc. The ‘taster’ program is tailored to the level of demand and interest from each cohort of refugee students and tries to meet the specific or majority employment goals of each group. In general, the pathways focus at the MEC is primarily from pre-vocational to vocational training.

However, the interviewees noted that the ideal transition and link between pathways, from home tutoring/distance education to AMEP, LLNP and then mainstream education, is not always a smooth one in practice for refugee students. This is largely because refugee students confront a range of issues that have an impact on retention and attrition. These include employment, finances and health needs and obstacles. Refugees are attracted to the Goulburn Valley region primarily because of the availability of seasonal employment. The Institute caters for this need by providing courses coinciding with seasonal work practices.

AMEP classes focus on equipping students with basic English and practical life skills for settlement in Australia. They also prepare students for entry into LLNP programs at TAFE level, which in turn can lead to a variety of study and further/higher education pathways across the TAFE and Higher Education systems in Victoria.

### **3.8.3 Policy environment**

GO TAFE does not have a specific policy regarding refugee students or education. The institution does, however, have a written policy that spells out principles and practices of equity in the treatment of all students regardless of background. The design of programs and the conduct of teaching and administrative staff of the MEC are guided by certain principles regarding the experience of refugee students and perceptions about their needs in a new country and a new educational environment. As one staff member said, ‘We develop our own policy approaches as (new refugee students) present.’

*‘Successful settlement for refugees is not just about refugees themselves – it’s about the whole community.’ – MEC member of staff*

Refugee students are identified via their visa status on their enrolment form. There is no systematic tracking of how students progress through various educational pathways making it difficult to measure access, participation and retention. Much of the demographic information about students is recorded and maintained by pencil-

and-paper methods, and no computerized database or data management system is available to help collate or manage this information, and analysis of the data in regard to targeting needs and future programs is thus limited.

GO TAFE does, however, engage in employment tracking of its refugee and migrant student population. Within the MEC, some country-of-birth and refugee status data are obtained either informally directly from student interviews, from the AVETMIS system maintained via VET records, through declaration of visa status in relation to AMES data for the purpose of fee scaling, and through contractual arrangements for service provision for DIMA and DEST. Because TAFE and AMES enrolments are combined at the MEC, there is an opportunity to collect data on all visa categories and gender. As noted above, this information is not currently fed into a centralized or systematic database management system, though computer records in different categories are maintained.

Interviewees noted that it is important to know the visa data so they can assist students who are permanent residents, on TPVs, or in other categories with their future plans for settlement. It is also important because in any given class or program there are people from differently funded and targeted programs, so the teaching is mixed mode and needs to account for these differences in background and educational need levels.

#### **3.8.4 Barriers for refugees accessing education**

Staff and students at GO TAFE identified various barriers faced by refugee students in accessing tertiary and further education. These included, in the words of one staff member, *'The obvious ones: culture, language, trauma, isolation'*.

##### ***Circumstantial barriers***

For the students, the overwhelming barriers to accessing tertiary education were their lack of English and the difficulties of adapting to and coping with life in a new country. Following are some of the student comments offered during the interview:

*'If you are new from one country to another, you must have some problem, because everything is new to you.'*

*'To communicate with people [is] hard. Sometimes they talk to me and I can't catch what they say.'*

*'That's the main problem we have, all of us, English problem.'*

Other factors identified by MEC staff and/or students included:

- Non or under-use of English Language services in relation to Centrelink, health and housing;
- Scoring 'too highly' on the ASPLR scale (2.2 or above) which excludes some refugee students from accessing the federally funded 510 hours of English language tuition and the associated free childcare available during this period;
- Cultural issues, such as not attending because classes are mixed-gender or because of religious differences within student cohorts (though MEC has a range of strategies to minimize these issues for students);
- Accommodation problems such as sudden moves, problems with rental agents and landlords, lack of suitable study space in the home;
- Adjustments to the climate and the environment: students from African countries stressed how hard it was for them to adapt to colder weather, and one student

mentioned family illnesses that resulted, preventing the father from continuing with study for a period of time;

- Childcare problems for students not covered by free childcare; and,
- Transport problems – public transport in Shepparton was not considered very good by students, and their choice of accommodation is dictated more by proximity to their children's schooling than their own.

### ***Institutional barriers***

There were more successes and enabling structures than barriers at the institutional level. Examples of good or best practice included:

- Good coordination with community services, e.g. Centrelink, DHS, community health centres;
- Strong community outreach programs, including seasonal workplace outreach and an impressive relationship with volunteers drawn from local community groups (e.g. Rotary, Lions Club, Kiwanis, retirees) in the community who assist refugee students at home with their studies and involve them in community social activities;
- Assistance with the costs of books and study materials from GO TAFE;
- Two-week familiarization program to assist with the new experiences of shopping, banking, driving in Australia before commencement of formal language programs;
- A designated one-to-one 'buddy' or 'mentor' system to assist with familiarization and provide a reference point for problems, questions or discussion; and,
- Students perceive the TAFE as a source of help and support that is precious in the absence of extended family, friends or the home community in Australia – this is particularly the case for students from countries with only a small cohort under the humanitarian refugee intake program.

The main institutional barrier identified by staff was the issue of recognition of prior learning (RPL) and the issue of integrated partnership models between GO TAFE and community and industry partners in the region. In relation to RPL, one interviewee noted the prevalence of language proficiency being out of kilter with intellectual training and skill levels in a refugee student's native language. A student may have 'zero' proficiency in English, for example, but achieve a 7 or 8 on a professional skills/competency basis because of education or occupational skills gained in their home country.

Staff identified the need for better mapping of overseas skills and qualifications, and a system that can readily translate these into the Australian context. This is particularly important because many refugee students do not have the necessary documentation with which they can certify their skills or degrees – but the Australian RPL system remains resolutely document-focused in its evidentiary requirements.

By contrast, one staff member noted that the British system of RPL is much more creative and flexible. RPL is assessed by administering oral, skills competency and language proficiency tests in the absence of documentary qualifications, and this helps refugees move to the next stage of their working and social lives in settlement contexts much more quickly and satisfactorily.

Refugees who come from a skilled occupational or educational background in their home country can often show dramatic uptake in English language proficiency in a very short period of time.

Some thought should be given, in the view of staff at GO TAFE, to providing an accelerated language and learning program for this cohort of students that is separate from the standard AMEP and ESL programs to help them achieve more expedient and satisfying employment outcomes.

### **Community barriers**

Again, the experience of the MEC at GO TAFE demonstrates more successes than problems in this regard. Key to this is the presence of a coordinated interface with local community refugee information and support resources. The MEC has steadily built relationships over a number of years with local employers and community groups, as well as with DHS, Centrelink and other primary service delivery agencies for newly arrived communities.

Another strength of the GO TAFE MEC approach is their continued use of former refugee students who have gone on to become successful members of the local community. Such students are brought back periodically to the MEC to serve as role models and to share their own experiences of the journey toward successful settlement and integration with newly arrived refugee students. The MEC stresses the importance of providing regular positive support for refugee students to see that their aspirations and goals are realizable.

### **3.8.5 Perceived and measured access factors in the programs provided**

Many of the perceived and measured access factors to programs at GO TAFE are discussed above. As at other institutions we have surveyed, teachers and program coordinators are dedicated, in many cases highly experienced and are aware of the need for continuously updated preparation and education about specific country-of-origin learning styles, backgrounds and needs.

In the case of GO TAFE, the institutional and community experience of previously dealing with a very large cohort (some 4,500) Iraqi refugees in the 1990s has meant that many valuable lessons learned about the specific cultural and educational needs of migrant and refugee families have been successfully adapted and tailored to successive waves of new refugee communities.

### **3.8.6 Suggested avenues for improvement**

Priority consideration should be given to the development of a database management system that will assist GO TAFE in monitoring and supporting the progress of refugee students through the various pathways within TAFE at the institution. The absence of such data means that the institution currently has no way of knowing the pattern, flow or retention rates for refugee students within the system as a specific group. It is also impossible to effectively design or manage the range of policies and structures necessary to support and enhance refugee access and participation in tertiary education.

In addition, refugee students should be provided with the opportunity to complete specifically targeted 'exit' as well as intake interviews at each stage of their study, from AMEP through to certificate or diploma courses. Exit interview questionnaires for refugee students could be designed to collect data on student satisfaction and problems with the course they have just completed, as well as providing a rough baseline indicator of future plans and preparation for further study, and in what areas or sectors.

**Key finding:** The issue of data collection for the purpose of tracking, monitoring and supporting refugee student access to and progression through the educational system and its various pathways needs to be carefully considered in light of the

sensitivities of many refugee students to providing information that can identify them to people or institutions perceived as authorities. Many refugee students have had highly negative experiences based on the use of personal information against them in their home country, which has resulted in persecution and trauma, and in many cases forms part of their case for seeking asylum in Australia.

One of the findings of the researchers during the conduct of this study was the high level of concern and at times fear amongst refugee students around the signing of consent forms. Considerable care and effort was required to reassure students that the interviews and the personal data collected for the purpose of demographic analysis could not be traced back to any individual participant. The significance of this for the implementation of institutional tracking and database systems of refugee students is clear, and wide and thorough consultation with refugee community groups would need to be conducted by the university before such a system was designed and established.

From the student perspective, there was a strong demand for more focus on the integration of workplace skills development and formal learning. They felt they were languishing to some extent in English classes without the opportunity to test and develop their skills in relevant job settings where they could simultaneously gain work experience that would help them realize their educational and occupational goals and aspirations.

Another suggested improvement by refugee students was the provision of clear and accessible information regarding future study pathways and options – they wanted to be able to see and think about what kind of future they could have through further study and education beyond their English language classes, and to consider new directions for both themselves and their children following settlement in Australia.

### **3.8.7 Additional comments/findings**

The students interviewed at the MEC were very positive about their experience at GO TAFE – they felt supported, well taught and excited about their future prospects.

*'I'm very happy to be in Australia. In the country where I come from, we had many problems, no school, our life was very bad. But here it's good. Study is an important opportunity.'* – Refugee student from the Democratic Republic of Congo

From the staff perspective, one interviewee summed up the goals of the Migrant Education Centre at GO TAFE as follows:

'The goal is how to promote independence and empowerment as well as provide a nurturing environment for learning and integration into the community. It is important to develop in refugee students the ability to stand on their own two feet – the rest of the world is not always such a supportive or nurturing environment as the MEC or GO TAFE, and students need skills in how to deal with the reality that not all...in the community will welcome or support them in the way they have been supported at the MEC.'

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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### 4.1 Key research findings

As discussed in Section 1, this research was designed to respond to four key questions. While responses to these questions have shaped the discussion throughout the report, this section draws together the findings to provide a summary response to each of these questions. Of equal importance, however, the research identifies some significant gaps in the understanding of the progress of refugees through higher education and into employment. This section highlights future priorities for research based on these identified gaps. Finally, a series of recommendations are proposed for policy development on higher education access for refugees.

### 4.3 Barriers to completion

Extensive documentation of these has been made in Section 1 which reports on the literature review. Key barriers identified include:

- *Financial barriers* – particularly for asylum seekers who had no permanent residency but also for refugee students on permanent visas. Issues arise from low income, the need to support numerous dependents while studying and difficulty accessing paid employment;
- *Access to and affordability of public transport* – this was raised by students in both urban and regional locations as a factor limiting access to classes and to preferred courses;
- *Housing problems* – while most permanent refugees reported gaining assistance in the early days of settlement, ongoing problems with private housing such as evictions, inappropriate residences and even demolition, posed major issues while attempting to maintain continuity of studies. These problems were compounded by lack of information and awareness of housing options and rights. For the asylum seekers and TPVs, accommodation was simply unaffordable. These students were more likely to be living with ‘friends’ or receiving financial assistance with accommodation such as an RMIT accommodation scholarship;
- *English language barriers* – this is the case for any new group whose first language is not English, but it is particularly frustrating for highly educated refugees who were impatient to resume paid work at a professional level. The lack of English skills necessary to pursue training or qualifications was demoralising for some refugees, and some might feel tempted to give up because the journey to English proficiency was so long;
- *Psychological barriers* – mainly associated with past traumas overseas, but also arising from the experience of extended detention in Australia, loneliness, depression, isolation from friends and families overseas, a sense of helplessness and uncertainty or anxiety about the future. These psychological states were reported to have deleterious effects on students’ ability to concentrate and persevere with their studies;
- *Childcare barriers* – inability to access appropriate childcare within reasonable time periods due to long waiting lists;
- *Citizenship barriers* – several asylum seeker students spoke passionately about the problems created for them by federal policies which failed to give them permanent residency or the same rights and entitlements as other students. There was a strong sense of marginalisation and exclusion coming from their personal accounts;

- *Gender barriers* – a multitude of barriers, cultural, economic and social, were said to be faced by female refugees in particular, such as the uneven division of labour in the household which impacted on the ability to study;
- *Understanding systems* – a lack of familiarity with the Australian education system and information gaps in regard to training and employment pathways is exacerbated by an inability to access most publicly-funded services other than TAFE courses; and,
- *Language training* – the lack of access to 510 hours of English provision (for temporary refugees or asylum seekers) and inability to self-narrate or present a convincing self-portrait due to many years as a refugee.

#### **4.4 Developing student employability**

A wealth of data was gathered about the success factors that supported refugee and asylum seeker access into tertiary education, their successful experiences and subsequent integration, in some cases, into paid work. In summary, these are:

- The importance of working with community groups and government agencies to provide seamless support services to refugee students;
- The provision of financial assistance in the forms of fee relief, accommodation assistance and other study costs.
- The provision of mentoring;
- Social networking and cross-cultural extension programs to assist in breaking down the social isolation of refugee students and celebrating their home country cultures; and,
- The importance of a dedicated project officer that refugee and asylum seeker students could go to, particularly given the time and resources required to give intensive counselling and support to some students. The need to have staff earmarked to work with refugees on their individual needs was also highlighted. Capacity to assist and advocate for students to access vocational training pathways was cited as an important factor in improving successful outcomes, including appropriate jobs, for refugees.

Overall, all participants would agree with the proposition that the main success factor in any program of support measures for refugee and asylum seeker students is to recognise the totality of their needs and situation, understand the unique features of the refugee experience (trauma, isolation, fear, anxiety, lack of political rights). Of equal importance to understand is the interaction with other features of the newcomers' experience (English language barriers, unfamiliarity with the country) and to develop strategies to meet all these needs in an integrated fashion.

#### **4.5 A model of practice**

An important focus of the case studies of the six institutions was to identify initiatives that have or should be initiated in order to improve access and participation in education and training by refugees. As discussed above, a critical element of success in supporting refugees is the adoption of an integrated approach which recognises the diversity of refugees as well as the relationships between the broader needs of refugees (such as housing, child-care, finances, etc.) and their successful participation in education and training. For example, the housing, transportation and

child-care needs of participants must be considered if there is to be any chance at all of successful participation, particularly for very new arrivals. As such, specific initiatives need to be seen within an overall model of practice that includes what we have identified as four elements:

4.5.1 As a first priority, refugee access to higher education needs to be supported by an overall program approach that is underpinned by:

- an institutional policy framework that is endorsed and supported by the institution;
- principles that recognise and celebrate the diversity of refugees and the specific barriers that refugees face in education access;
- the development of links and communication between refugee support services, refugee community members and the institution; and,
- resources for the engagement of a worker to support refugee access and to implement the strategies necessary to maximise retention and successful employment outcomes.

4.5.2 Specific supports have been found to support refugee retention and outcomes and these include:

- Fee relief (most refugees say they cannot participate without this);
- Support with transport (particularly in rural and regional areas);
- Waiver of materials costs;
- The provision of role models and mentors (ideally this would occur with the engagement of other refugees who have now settled and can appreciate the experience of new arrivals);
- Understanding of, and assistance with, the diverse child-care needs of refugees in order to participate in education and training.

4.5.3 Institutional capacity building and educational flexibility:

- The implementation of workplace learning strategies;
- Accelerated and intensive learning – particularly for highly skilled refugees who are seeking recognition of overseas qualifications;
- Extended English language training – it is widely recognised that the 510 hours of English language training is insufficient to acquire English language skills to a level required in the workplace;
- The provision of ‘taster units’ in fields of study to assist refugees to understand the training system and vocational pathways;
- The delivery of a familiarisation program that supports students in understanding how to negotiate and understand the training system;
- Placement in articulated pathways that enable participants to map a career path;
- The provision of cultural awareness training for both refugees (in order to better understand workplace practices and cultural mores) and for educators (in order to promote understanding of refugee diversity and needs);

4.5.4 Improved systems to enable monitoring, tracking and evaluation of refugee progress out employment outcomes through higher education. This should include:

- The identification of students as refugees when enrolling so that their progress can be identified and monitored:

- The integration of data between school system, vocational education and higher education in order to be able to monitor pathways;
- The conduct of exit interviews to enable understanding of the higher education experience, and to maintain contact into employment;
- Vocational mapping for refugees to assist in their understanding of the possibilities and pathways in career path planning.

These program elements are derived from the case studies conducted of Victorian institutions which each demonstrated elements of good practice although none have implemented a comprehensive approach as detailed above. Victoria University, higher education, provides an effective model of engagement between community organisations and the University which has resulted in important programs and initiatives that have facilitated refugee access to higher education. RMIT provides an excellent model of refugee support through the engagement of a dedicated worker who could provide individualised counselling, assist in making links across the organisation and who advocates on behalf of refugee groups and individuals. GOTAFE provides an example of practice that supports close connections between local refugee services and the institution. None of the case studies, for multiple reasons, covered all areas of good practice and interviewees identified priorities that are required if the needs of refugees are to be better served by higher education providers. These are discussed below.

#### **4.6 Policy and program recommendations**

Following from the best practice model identified above, and drawing together needs commonly identified by educators and students, the following policy recommendations are made in order of priority.

- 4.6.1 Institutional policies that detail their approach to and support of, refugee access to further education need to be in place in order to guide a systematic approach to educational service provision for refugees. Such policies need to be based on principles of diversity and social justice and be inclusive of a community engagement approach that supports the active collaboration between the educational institution, community representatives and community services.
- 4.6.2 Resources need to be allocated to support the engagement of a dedicated worker who can coordinate and oversee the support strategies and systems required to facilitate refugee participation.
- 4.6.3 Strategies to support refugees in their successful participation in education and training need to be implemented. These include:
  - Counselling for refugees to identify needs and requirements;
  - Individual assessment of financial, housing, transport and childcare needs;
  - Coordination of role models and mentors;
  - Assessment of potential career paths and pathways available through the education and training system;
  - Liaison within the institution to support access to flexible delivery of education, accelerated learning, workplace learning;
  - Support for refugees to understand Australian workplace practices and cultural mores to assist in their successful participation.
- 4.6.4 A program of cross-cultural training should be implemented for TAFE and higher education teachers and other staff such as librarians, to inform them of the needs of refugees and appropriate responses.

- 4.6.5 A review of participation data needs to be undertaken. Currently there is no mechanism for identifying refugees making it impossible to monitor pathways or patterns of participation. This review needs to include an examination of the possibilities for tracking refugee participation across sectors including secondary schools, community education providers, TAFE, higher education and employment.
- 4.6.6 Further research is required to understand the progress of refugees through the education and training system to employment. It is recommended that a longitudinal case study be undertaken of refugee cohorts to identify the extent to which refugees are achieving outcomes through their participation in education and training as well as to identify key constraints and success factors in the process of achieving a sustainable career path.

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## **Appendix 1: Interview questions for staff at TAFE and Universities**

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### **Refugee Access and Participation in Tertiary Education and Training Project**

#### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS For staff at TAFEs and Universities**

1. Does your University/TAFE have any specific policies relating to refugee students? If so, can you provide an outline of these policies?
2. Are country of birth data and refugee status data collected?
3. Does your University/TAFE identify and collect data on refugee students enrolled in your facilities/courses? How does it monitor such enrolments? - E.g., enrolment, period, other stages.
4. If such data are kept, how do you make such data available for purposes of course and subject design, teaching practices and support services to teaching and other staff in your organisation?
5. Do you have pathways for qualified refugee students? For those without formal qualifications? Both?
6. Are there any barriers faced by refugees in accessing your courses here? Please detail.
7. Are there any selection criteria specifically relating to refugees entering courses?
8. Has your University/TAFE carried out any measures/programs to introduce or enhance the participation of refugee students?
9. What have been the most effective ways of ensuring access and participation of refugee students here?
10. What pathways or programs are in place that you would consider most effective in this regard? If there are, could you identify what you see as the key elements of success in each pathway and/or program?
11. What needs to be done to improve access and participation for this group?

#### **ABOUT YOUR WORK**

- a. unit/branch
- b. institution
- c. period in the position
- d. classification
- e. general duties
- f. period of service at institution
- g. other relevant details

## **Appendix 2: Interview/focus group questions for students**

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### **Refugee Access to Tertiary Education Project ICEPA, Victoria University**

#### **INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS For interviewees who are currently enrolled for study:**

- i. Are you happy with the educational opportunities you've had since coming to Australia? Why?
- ii. What sorts of things have helped you to take up your studies here in Victoria?  
(Prompts for interviewer:
  - a. *family, community, friends*
  - b. *institutional policies or programs*
  - c. *financial assistance*
  - d. *personal aspirations and/or abilities*
  - e. *other factors (please explain) )*
- iii. Can you think of anything that has made it hard for you to take up your studies in Victoria? Could you please explain?
- iv. Do you think that being a refugee has created special difficulties in taking up your studies in Victoria?
- v. (If yes), what do you think they are?
- vi. How have you tried to overcome these problems?
- vii. What kind of help/support have you received from your tertiary institution to encourage you to deal with these difficulties?
- viii. Does your University/TAFE college have any special programs or assistance for helping refugee students? (If yes, please give examples).
- ix. How has this support helped you as a student and a refugee?
- x. Could anything else be done to support you more, or more effectively?
- xi. Are you confident that you will finish your studies?
- xii. Do you have any other comments about this area (or do you think I missed anything that you wish to talk about regarding your studies here)?

#### **ABOUT YOU:**

- a. name
- b. age
- c. gender
- d. single, widowed, married/partnered
- e. number of children (if any) and their ages
- f. length of time in Australia
- g. country of origin
- h. visa status
- i. years/level of education (in your home country or other countries) prior to arriving in Australia
- j. qualifications attained? If so, from where?
- k. current employment (if applicable)
- l. previous work experience (if applicable)

### **Appendix 3: Project Steering Committee Members**

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<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Associate Professor Danny Ben-Moshe	Institute for Community, Engagement and Policy Alternatives, Victoria University.
Associate Professor Santina Bertone	Faculty of Business and Law, Victoria University.
Bronwyn Hughes	Regional Director, Central Western Metropolitan Regional Council of Adult, Community and Further Education.
Pamela Rodriguez	Diversitat.
Lew Hess	Foundation for the Survivors of Trauma and Torture.
Elleni Bereded	Community Partnerships Officer, Victoria University.
Noriko Bui	Australian Vietnamese Women's Welfare Association.
Kerrie McEvoy	Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Division, Office of Training and Tertiary Education, Department of Education and Training.
Ainslee Hannan	Brotherhood of St Laurence.
Karina Marroquin	CELAS, Spanish Latin American Welfare Centre Inc.
Tiffany Overall	Victorian Schools Innovation Commission.
Sussan Khadem	ICEPA, Victoria University.

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