



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE



Lecture Series for Asylum Seekers: 2015 program evaluation

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Cover photo: Karen Block speaks to a group of lecture series participants and volunteers at the celebration event. Photo copyright Shaan Ali.

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Table of Contents

Executive summary	2
Overview and background	5
Evaluation	6
Attendance patterns	10
Demographics	12
Gender	12
Age	12
Home country	13
Year of arrival	14
Level of English	14
Home languages	15
Lecture evaluation sheets: summary	16
Interviews	21
Interviews with attendees	22
Interviews with lecturers	30
Interviews with volunteers	35
Interviews with key contacts in community organisations	40
Summary	42
Recommendations	44
Recruitment	44
Lectures	45
Volunteers	47
Conclusion	48
References	49
Appendix 1: 2015 expenses	50

Executive summary

Background

The University of Melbourne Lecture Series for Asylum Seekers is an initiative of the Melbourne Social Equity Institute and Researchers for Asylum Seekers. Its primary goal is to welcome and introduce refugees and asylum seekers living in our community to the campus, staff and students of the University of Melbourne. The lectures provide an introduction to the kind of teaching and research available at the University and focus on issues of relevance in modern and historical Australian society. The series aims to provide an opportunity for meaningful and stimulating intellectual and social engagement for the target audience in acknowledgement that prohibitive visa conditions and lack of access to fee help, among other things, can prevent asylum seekers from accessing tertiary education.

In 2015 the lecture series ran for the second time and was funded by the University of Melbourne Engagement Office and the Melbourne Social Equity Institute. It consisted of a series of six two-hour sessions held on Monday evenings in September and October and it culminated in a celebration event for participants. Each week there were two short lectures from University of Melbourne academics, a refreshment break, and small group discussions supported by student volunteers.

This report outlines findings from an evaluation of the 2015 series, funded by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute. The aim of the evaluation is to provide evidence of value and feedback for participants and stakeholders and to inform future program development, including potential expansion to other interested institutions. The evaluation data consisted of registration sheets, individual lecture evaluation sheets completed by asylum seeker attendees, and interviews with attendees, lecturers, student volunteers and representatives from partner community organisations.

Attendees

The attendance at the 2015 lecture series was low compared to numbers the previous year. In 2015 there were 12 or fewer asylum seekers in attendance at each lecture. A total of 22

people attended the series overall and 64% attended two or more lectures in the series.

Demographic information collected by the registration process describes the diversity of the group of people who attended the lecture series, including people from 12 countries who spoke at least 14 different languages between them. A majority of the attendees had arrived in Australia in the past 5 years and most were over 30 years of age.

Findings

This evaluation suggests that the experience of being involved in the 2015 Lecture Series for Asylum Seekers was overwhelmingly positive for the asylum seekers who attended, as well as for lecturers and volunteers. In addition to the positive feedback, attendees, lecturers, volunteers and community organisation representatives all made suggestions as to how the series might be improved in the future.

The low numbers of attendees at each lecture was disappointing but did not negatively affect those who did attend. Some suggestions were made as to how and where to advertise future series to increase attendance.

Attendees appreciated the opportunity to learn about Australian society, and particularly to hear from and interact with academics, professional staff and students from the University of Melbourne. This experience counteracted some of their perceptions of the University of Melbourne as an institution that was closed to them, and they reported feeling a sense of welcome and aspirations to maintain contact with the University. They were happy with the format, topics and schedule. They used the lectures and discussion groups to improve their English language skills, and all said the level of English and the support provided by volunteers and lecturers to improve their comprehension was valuable. Discussion groups also provided attendees a space to share their own experiences with attendees from other backgrounds as well as Australian students and staff members.

Lecturers spoke about their involvement as professionally and personally fulfilling. They valued the opportunity to meet people seeking asylum and were interested in the way that attendees interacted with their content. Lecturers spoke about the pressures

of time and demands impeding their preparedness, but all said that it was time that they would be willing to invest again in the future. Lecturers who had returned for a second year in 2015 recommended that the same people be engaged to present in subsequent years to build on the skill set. Tailoring content and language use for a diverse group was seen as a minor challenge that one could improve upon with experience.

Volunteers provided some nuanced and valuable feedback about their role as well as reflections on the lecture content and the attendee experience from their perspective in the audience and facilitating discussion groups. Volunteers with prior experience with refugees and asylum seekers felt able to support attendees and to do so without specific preparation or role allocation. They suggested that some less experienced volunteers may require more explicit guidance. Volunteers found the lectures themselves interesting and educative, as well as valuing the opportunity to meet and interact with people seeking asylum and learn more about the diversity of the asylum seeker experience.

The representatives from the community organisation partners gave some insight as to why numbers may have been low in 2015 compared to the first year of the series: a new focus among this cohort on employability and pathways work. Despite this, one interviewee from a community partner felt that offering something that was not a practical response to an asylum seeking issue was valuable as a point of difference and one that could have a positive influence on individual's wellbeing and sense of hope.

In light of these findings, it appears that future lecture series would be welcomed by certain asylum seekers in the community and by the organisations that cater to them, and that future lectures would be supported by University of Melbourne staff and student volunteers. Recommendations that emerged from the evaluation to support future planning and delivery concerned recruitment processes, lecture format, and the preparation of lecturers and volunteers.

Overview and background

The University of Melbourne Lecture Series for Asylum Seekers is an initiative of the Melbourne Social Equity Institute and Researchers for Asylum Seekers. Its primary goal is to welcome and introduce refugees and asylum seekers to the campus, staff and students of the University of Melbourne. The impetus for delivering a series of lectures for asylum seekers living in the community came from acknowledgement that prohibitive visa conditions and lack of access to fee help, among other things, can prevent asylum seekers from accessing tertiary education. When the first series was developed in 2014, this group had no right to work or study at all, though subsequently, limited rights have been granted. The series aims to provide an opportunity for meaningful and stimulating intellectual and social engagement and an introduction to the kind of teaching and research available at the University. Lectures focus on issues of relevance in modern and historical Australian society such as immigration, education, human rights, health equity and Indigenous cultures.

University staff from Researchers for Asylum Seekers and the Melbourne Social Equity Institute developed the lecture series in 2014 in consultation with Foundation House and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. A similar series of lectures had previously been run by Melbourne Free University (which, despite a similar name, is an unrelated organisation). It was felt that the University of Melbourne could supplement this initiative by drawing on its strengths, resources and the wealth of expertise and goodwill amongst staff and students to offer a different and complementary type of engagement opportunity to add to those already offered by other agencies and organisations, such as English classes, and practical workshops focused on issues such as employment. The organisers recognised that people seeking asylum may be highly educated and may have previously held senior professional roles in their countries of origin, and that this aspect of their identity is often subsumed by the experiences of forced migration. A secondary objective of the series was to stimulate engagement of the University community with asylum seeker issues. The Melbourne Social Equity Institute provided funding for the first series to cover the cost of catering and materials. Lecturer, organiser and volunteer time was donated and the usual fee for the lecture venue was waived.

In 2015 the lecture series ran for the second time and additional

funding was sought from the University of Melbourne Engagement Office and the Melbourne Social Equity Institute to cover some of the coordination costs and for this evaluation. The 2015 series consisted of six two-hour sessions held on Monday evenings in September and October and it culminated in a celebration event for participants. Each week there were two short lectures (approx. 25 minutes each) from University of Melbourne academics, a refreshment break, and small group discussions supported by student volunteers. Senior University staff members were invited to attend the celebratory event which included music and refreshments and at which an asylum seeker attendee and a student volunteer spoke; certificates were issued; and family and friends of attendees were welcomed.

Evaluation

This evaluation of the 2015 Lecture Series for Asylum Seekers was funded by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute. The aims of the evaluation were to:

- Identify strengths and weaknesses of current series planning and delivery
- Seek feedback from key stakeholders
- Map any outcomes and/or changes for attendees, volunteers and lecturers
- Create an evidence-base for the value of such a program
- Inform future planning
- Increase relevance and accessibility for participants
- Report to funding sources/apply for further funding
- Create resource that can be shared with other institutions to assist them to develop a similar program

For the purposes of the evaluation the key stake holders identified were:

- Attendees (Asylum seekers and refugees living in the community)
- Student volunteers
- Lecturers
- Steering committee
- Key contacts/community-based organisations

The data collected to complete the evaluation consisted of:

- Registration and attendance data
- Evaluation sheets completed by attendees at the completion of lectures 2-6
- An online survey for volunteers after the induction session
- Phone interviews with lecturers, volunteers and key contacts at community organisations after the completion of the series
- Face-to-face interviews with attendees after the completion of the series.

Ethics approval was granted by the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health Human Ethics Advisory Group to use participant quotes in this publically available report. All quoted participants provided informed consent for this purpose.

Planning process

There was a steering group made up of university staff who had previously expressed interest in the project or were identified by the organisers as having particularly relevant expertise and a smaller organising committee involved in the planning process in 2015. Based upon feedback from the 2014 series from an organisational partner, a survey for prospective participants was distributed broadly to relevant organisations to inform the topic selection. It had a list of potential topics based on the 2014 series plus suggestions from the steering committee and outside organisations, and an opportunity for respondents to suggest other topics. There was a low response to this survey, with only 4 surveys returned. Given this, another means of gaining input from asylum seekers in preparation for future lecture series may need to be considered.

The committee considered the responses received, and used this information along with the experiences from 2014 and other ideas to select topics for the series and make a list of academic staff members to approach with an invitation to deliver a lecture.

All lectures and most of the planning and organisational work were provided voluntarily as in-kind support. In 2015, funding from the University of Melbourne Engagement Office was obtained to contribute to a paid administrative position to undertake the significant amount of preparation and coordination required. The person in this role worked with the organising committee to:

- approach staff members with an invitation and information package, and negotiate and confirm lecture dates
- circulate information and advertising material to relevant agencies, organisations and locations
- invite key post-graduate student groups at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (for e.g. Teaching English as a Second Language), the Melbourne Law School and the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health to volunteer via email

- organise an induction session for staff and student volunteers
- co-ordinate staff and volunteers on lecture days
- organize the celebratory event

The schedule for the lectures in 2015 was:

Table 1: Lecture schedule

Date	Lecture topics	Lecturers
Sep 21	Languages	Jo Lo Bianco, Melbourne Graduate School of Education John Hajek, School of Languages and Linguistics
Sep 28	Australian society	Mark Wooden, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research Johanna Wyn, Melbourne Graduate School of Education Karen Villanueva, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health
Oct 5	Human rights & equal opportunity	John Tobin, Melbourne Law School Beth Gaze, Melbourne Law School
Oct 12	Australian Indigenous histories, languages and culture	Rachel Nordlinger, School of Languages and Linguistics Shaun Ewan, Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences
Oct 19	Community development, migration & resilience	Deb Warr, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health Marnie Badham, VCA
Oct 26	History of immigration to Australia	Sara Wills, Historical and Philosophical Studies Mary Tomsic, Historical and Philosophical Studies
Nov 9	Celebration	

Attendance patterns

The attendance at the 2015 lecture series was low compared to numbers the previous year which had up to 35 participants in each lecture. In 2015 there were 12 or fewer attendees at each lecture. See table below for the number of participants that attended each lecture in the series.

Table 3: Attendance

Attendee identifier	Lecture 1	Lecture 2	Lecture 3	Lecture 4	Lecture 5	Lecture 6	Number of lectures attended
1	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
2	X	X	X	X	X	X	6
3	X						1
4		X					1
5		X					1
6		X					1
7		X				X	2
8		X	X				2
9		X					1
10		X		X			2
11		X					1
12		X	X		X	X	4
13		X	X	X			3
14			X	X	X	X	4
15			X	X	X	X	4
16			X	X	X		3
17			X		X	X	3
18			X	X		X	3
19			X	X	X	X	4
20				X			1
21				X	X		2
22				X			1
Attendees per lecture	3	12	11	12	9	9	

There were a total of 22 different attendees across the six lecture series. Of these:

- 2 attended all six lectures
- 4 attended four out of six lectures
- 4 attended three out of six lectures
- 4 attended two out of six lectures
- 8 attended only once

As demonstrated in Table 3, there was greater consistency of attendance from Lecture 3 onwards.

Some suggestions as to why the numbers may have been low are made in the reporting of interview data in sections to follow, as well as some recommendations to promote attendance in future series.

Demographics

Gender

Of the 22 people who attended over the series, two thirds were men (n=15) and one third were women (n=7).

Age

A majority of the participants (77%) were aged of 30 years or older (Table 4), which is in contrast to the larger percentage of around 66% of asylum seekers and refugees arriving in Australia who are below 30 years of age (Beadle, 2014; DIBP, 2013).

Table 4: Age

Age	
18-19 years	1
20-24 years	1
25-29 years	3
30-34 years	6
35-39 years	4
40-44 years	2
45-49 years	1
50-54 years	1

Whilst the reason for this trend is not certain, the lecture series may appeal to people who have attended university before. Whilst registration forms did not collect information about the educational history of attendees, participants spoke about their experiences at university and in their professions which required undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications.

Home country

Participants came from 12 different countries, including countries across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. There were participants from countries with the highest rates of recent arrivals such as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Iran, and from other countries producing large numbers of refugees such as Burundi and Ethiopia. There were also other countries represented, including citizens of countries that would less commonly be expected in an asylum seeking cohort, such as Russia.

Some countries that have a population of recently arrived asylum seekers living in Melbourne such as Burma/Myanmar and Somalia were not represented.

Again, and without making generalisations, it may be that participants with better access to higher education in their home country were more likely to attend.

Table 5: Home country

Country	
Afghanistan	4
Iran	1
Pakistan	3
Cameroon	1
Sri Lanka	2
Tanzania	1
Burundi	1
Ethiopia	3
Russia	2
Japan	1
Iraq	1
Taiwan	1
No response	1

Year of arrival

A majority of participants were newly arrived, 77% in the past 5 years and some as recently as two months prior to the beginning of the lecture series. The series was targeted at this newly arrived cohort, especially as they were least likely to have rights to work and study.

There were a couple of exceptions, including a Japanese and a Taiwanese participant, who had lived in Australia for an extended period and were Australian citizens. There was no criterion that participants had to meet and the series was open to anyone, and these participants described a similar level of enjoyment and benefit from their participation as the more recently arrived attendees from the target audience.

Table 6: Year of arrival

Year of arrival to Australia	
2015	3
2014	6
2013	5
2012	3
2011	1
2010	1
2007	1
1994	1
No response	1

Level of English

The lecture series was conducted in English without the use of interpreters, and this information was provided in advertising material. Therefore it is unsurprising that a majority of participants described their English proficiency as intermediate or fluent. Two participants self-described as at a beginner level but both were repeat attendees and had sufficient proficiency to benefit from the lectures.

Table 7: English proficiency

Self-described level of English proficiency	
Beginner	2
Intermediate	13
Fluent	6
No response	1

Home languages

The registration form asked attendees which languages they spoke at home, which in hindsight did not capture all the languages spoken by participants, most of whom were multi-lingual. Reported languages spoken at home included:

- Dari
- Hazaragi
- Persian (Farsi)
- Arabic
- Urdu
- Pashto
- French
- Swahili
- English
- Amharic
- Russian
- Chinese
- Tamil
- English

The demographic information collected by the registration process describes the diversity of the group of people who attended the lecture series. The evaluation feedback from these participants was overwhelmingly positive, as can be seen in the following sections, and therefore it is possible to say that the series is suitable for a diverse audience. However, as mentioned previously, this group may have shared a common attribute in having prior experience with higher education and it is not possible to say from the available data whether the lecture series would be appropriate for asylum seekers without any tertiary background.

Lecture evaluation sheets: summary

At the end of Lectures 2-6 the attendees were invited to complete a short evaluation sheet which included three questions on a three point scale and three open questions. Volunteers were available to assist in the completion of these evaluations, which were anonymous. In each of the five lectures when evaluations were conducted, a majority of participants (55-100%) completed the evaluation form. Evaluations were voluntary, and overall the response rate was good. In addition, occasionally attendees left the lectures at the break or before the end and therefore were not present during the evaluation. It is possible that these attendees were less satisfied with the lectures, but their feedback was not captured by this process.

Table 8: Evaluation responses

	Number of attendees	Number of evaluations returned
Lecture 1	3	NA
Lecture 2	12	8
Lecture 3	11	8
Lecture 4	12	11
Lecture 5	9	9
Lecture 6	9	5

These evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. They suggest that participants generally understood the lecturers adequately, were interested in the topics and felt that discussions added value to the lecture. Responses to the open questions also indicated that participants were satisfied with the experience. Due to the nature of being offered a free activity it is possible that participants were grateful for the opportunity and therefore unlikely to provide negative feedback. However, when asked how the series may be improved in the future some interesting suggestions were made, such as whom to invite to present, what practical resources to have on hand, and suggestions about the number and duration of the sessions.

Question 1: Language

In each lecture, three quarters or more of the respondents found the level of English suitable for them, and the remaining participants were able to follow most of the lecture even if some of the language was difficult.

Table 9: Language

	Lecture 2	Lecture 3	Lecture 4	Lecture 5	Lecture 6
The level of English was not right for me. I had trouble understanding the lecture	0	0	0	0	0
Some of the language was difficult but I could understand most of the lecture.	25% (2)	25% (2)	20% (2)	22.2% (2)	20% (1)
The level of English was good for me. I could understand everything in the lecture.	75% (6)	75% (6)	80% (8)	77.8% (7)	80% (4)

Question 2: Lecture topic

A majority of participants in the survey said that the topic was very interesting to them. In lectures 2, 4 and 6 a single participant reported that only some of the lecture was interesting. No one said that the topics were uninteresting to them in any of the lectures in the series.

Table 10: Topic

	Lecture 2	Lecture 3	Lecture 4	Lecture 5	Lecture 6
The lecture topics did not interest me.	0	0	0	0	0
Some of the lecture was interesting to me.	12.5% (1)	0	9.1% (1)	0	20% (1)
I found this lecture very interesting.	87.5% (7)	100% (8)	90.9% (10)	100% (9)	80% (4)

Question 3: Discussion group

Most participants reported that the discussion group was beneficial in helping them to understand and that they were able to participate in group discussion if they wished. In lectures 2 and 3 a single participant said that the discussion was okay rather than good. No one found the discussion group unhelpful or felt unable to join in.

Table 11: Discussion

	Lecture 2	Lecture 3	Lecture 4	Lecture 5	Lecture 6
I did not find the discussion group helped me to understand. I did not feel like I could join in.	0	0	0	0	0
The discussion group was okay. I felt I could join in if I wanted.	12.5% (1)	12.5% (1)	0	0	0
The discussion group was good. It helped me to understand more. I was able to join in and share my opinions if I wanted.	87.5% (7)	87.5% (7)	100% (11)	100% (9)	100% (5)

Question 4: What did you like best about tonight?

Responses to this question fell into one of four categories:

- I like everything, it was all good
- One topic in particular was the best
- The lectures over all were the best
- The discussion group was the best

As the lecture series went on there were more comments about specific aspects of the evening rather than simply saying that they enjoyed it all. This may have been due to having a point of comparison in later lectures. In particular, in lectures 4 and 5 there was one topic that was mentioned repeatedly as the best thing about the night. In Lecture 4, the topic was Indigenous languages and in Lecture 5, the topic of superdiversity. In addition to the responses that said everything was good, it there were generally positive feelings about all aspects of the series.

In Lecture 5 there was one response that did not fit into these categories, one participant commented that the ability to network with a diverse group of people was the best part of the lecture.

Question 5: What did you like least about tonight?

Responses to this question covered the following themes:

- There was nothing I liked least, it was all good, N/A
- One aspect of the content was displeasing
- I still have gaps in my understanding of these topics at the end of the night
- The discussion

Out of a total of 41 evaluation surveys collected across five lectures, there were only 21 responses to this question and 12 of these said that there was nothing that they liked least.

Of the remaining 9 responses, in some cases the reason was for the response was unclear or it seemed that the respondent may not have understood the question.

Other responses showed that participants would have liked to know more about the content, which was introductory and constrained to a 20-minute lecture and discussion time. However, in Lecture 5 one response also showed that participants understood these constraints and were willing to follow up on these gaps in their knowledge in the area by following the links provided in the lecture slides.

There were a couple of responses that suggest that the information given in the lecture was displeasing to the participant, for example, in Lecture 2 one participant mentioned that the thing they liked least was learning about gender inequality in the Australian workforce.

Finally, one participant in Lecture 6 wrote that the duration of the discussion time was inadequate and that more time should be provided for discussion.

Question 6: How can we make the lectures better for next year?

The suggestions made to improve future lecture series were more diverse. Some of the themes included:

- No need to change anything
- Style of the presentation, for example including more video and interaction and slowing the delivery
- Suggestions to support English language learning
- Suggestions about recruitment and accessibility, including location
- Providing more lectures

From these responses it is clear that those who attended, particularly from lecture 3 onwards were keen to have more lectures in the series and for more people to benefit from these. Suggestions for improving the style of the presentation included using more examples, using videos, speaking slowly and being more interactive.

Interviews

At the completion of the series follow-up interviews were conducted with a number of key stakeholders. These took place face-to-face, by phone or via email.

Because the pools of potential participants were small, most or all of each group of those involved were invited to participate via email. The 12 attendees who came to more than one lecture and who were current asylum seekers were sent an email (to the address they supplied on the registration form) inviting them to participate in an interview, however some of these bounced back. Five of the six that responded were interviewed. The sixth was not able to find a mutually agreeable time to be interviewed. The contact details of other stakeholder groups were supplied by the administrator of the series. All 13 lecturers were invited, and five responded and were interviewed. Representatives from the two main organisations that assisted with recruitment were contacted. One was interviewed, and another declined to be interviewed but provided some information in her email. A list of volunteers was provided by the administrator, with a recommendation of 10 volunteers to contact based on who had actually contributed to the series. In addition to the volunteer interviews, 5 online survey responses completed by volunteers after the induction session are also included in this evaluation.

Table 12: Interview participants

Attendees	5
Lecturers	5
Volunteers	3 interviews 5 induction evaluation surveys
Community organisation representatives	2
Total	14

Each group were asked about their overall experience and their thoughts on the structure and format. They were asked questions specific to their role and for suggestions to improve the experience for others in the future. All participants in these interviews were committed to the series and very positive about the experience. Most had constructive feedback and useful suggestions to share.

Interviews with attendees

Five participants who attended between four and six of the lectures in the series took part in an evaluation interview. These took place face-to-face with three individuals and one pair of participants interviewed together.

Participants were asked about how they found out about the lectures, about the format of the sessions, the lecture topic, the discussion groups and volunteers. They were asked to make suggestions about what lecturers and volunteers need to know, as well as any topics they would be interested in and their ideas about how and where people could be recruited to attend in the future.

Information about the lectures

Each of these participants found out about the lectures in a different way, from mere chance to receiving a targeted email about the series. One participant stumbled across the information on the website after “googling” education opportunities for asylum seekers. Two picked up a flier at their casework agency and two received information through the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre – one via email through the mentoring program and other saw it on the website.

This suggests that the information reached people who are actively seeking education and opportunities. One participant remarked :

People who are looking for education and classes will go to organisations and case workers. Others will not go, but they are probably not going to come to the lectures.(A2)

This demonstrates the need to forge strong links with organisations and ensure that the series is advertised in places where people regularly look for classes and activities.

From the information they found on the web or the flier, participants had mixed reactions as to whether they had a sense of what the lectures would be like. Three thought that they had a good understanding of what would happen. Two were unsure and found that it was different from what they imagined, and unlike anything else that they had attended since arriving in Australia. For one participant this difference was very significant,

and he was enthusiastic about the series from the first lecture he attended.

I was thinking that the class would be about asylum seekers and the Australian community because I had been in other classes like that at the ASRC. It was very different because of all the professors, because of the high level of English. My dream is to be with high level people. I was really crazy about it [the lecture series]. One day I messaged Sophie to say I couldn't come but then I saw the time I could drive instead [of catch the train] and I came because I didn't want to miss any. (A2)

Structure

Participants agreed that having the lectures in the evenings was suitable and that it was straight forward to find the venue using the address provided and their smart phone.

All participants agreed that the structure of the evening, starting with the lectures followed by a refreshment break and then a group discussion was suitable. One participant suggested that having the break between lecture presentations may work better and retain participants:

A 15 minute break between speakers might be better – people wouldn't leave and it helps to keep the focus in the evening. (A1)

Lectures

Participants were asked which lectures they liked most and least and why, and whether they had any suggestions for future lecture topics.

A few different lectures were mentioned as favourites. The reasons seemed to be that the concepts were brand new and/or relevant and resonant to the individual. For example, one of the popular lectures on the evaluation surveys was about superdiversity. One interview participant elaborated on why this was his favourite:

The superdiversity lecture. It confirmed to me that diversity makes society stronger. It made me think about Iraq – in the past there was a lot of religions and it was strong. After Saddam, very weak. (A1)

As also noted in the evaluation surveys, the Indigenous languages lecture was mentioned as the best of the series by four out of five participants in the interviews.

Aboriginal languages. Different communities. I really like the idea of people living traditional ways on the land, that is very interesting to me. (A2)

I liked the languages/linguistics lecture. That there are more than 300 languages in Australia – I had never heard that and I was amazed (A1).

Indigenous culture and language. It was interesting because we had no information about Indigenous Australians. We are now interested in it. (A3)

For these participants, this lecture provided their first opportunity to learn about Indigenous Australians and was of great interest. Similarly two participants mentioned the lecture on Law was their favourite, because they had little background in Australian law but that it is important to know.

The one about law was interesting because we know nothing. We came without any knowledge. (A3)

About Australian law. I think It is really important if you are living in Australia to know about the law. (A4)

However, one participant found the topic of Australian Human Rights Law and Equal Opportunity difficult to attend because of his experience of Australia's immigration policy:

Human rights. It was not boring but it is not applied 100% anywhere. Because I am so worried about the migration process I am a part of, I hate the politics so the lecture was a bit hard to listen to. (A1)

Inclusion of this topic has been a carefully measured risk in the two years of the series for this exact reason. As mentioned, some participants found it valuable to receive this information and did not seem discomforted. It may be worth keeping this participant's words in mind to inform the way this topic is delivered if it is part of future series. No other participants said they had a 'least favourite' lecture, however three did mention that their ability to

understand the lecturer, including the speed of their speech and the accent, did impact their enjoyment of particular lectures.

All were good. Sometimes someone was talking very fast but it is okay. It is hard if someone talks fast (A4)

No all good. [Our] first lecture was difficult for us because we did not speak or understand anything about the accent. We got better at understanding over time. (A3)

This demonstrates that it is not only the topic, but the person delivering the lecture and their willingness to modify their delivery that is important when selecting lecturers in the future. One of few things that attendees felt that the lecturers may benefit from was information about the level of English spoken by people in attendance:

I think they need to know about English level – sometimes they speak very fast. If people do not understand they may not come back. Maybe make the lectures longer and the presenter speak slower. At the beginning of each class ask the class about their background on the topic. (A2)

They need to know about English level – maybe not suitable for a beginner level. (A1)

However, not all participants felt that they needed to modify their style to accommodate different English levels, putting the onus on individuals to listen and improve their English.

I think nothing. Asylum seekers are just people, not special. Level of English – lecturer doesn't need to change, participants can just listen and learn. (A3)

Two participants suggested that beginning each lecture with a quick survey about people's background in the area and to introduce themselves.

At the beginning of each class ask the class about their background on the topic. (A2)

In any workshop or conference in the first lecture everyone should introduce themselves to give lecturers and volunteers an opportunity to know who is there. That is a good thing (A1)

Suggestions for future topics included: medical research findings; Australian regulations and laws; Australian systems such as healthcare, tax and education, and; economics. This indicates that participants were satisfied with the aim of the series to introduce topics relevant to Australian society. However, it also suggests that including accessible lectures from outside of the humanities may also be of interest to potential attendees.

Discussion groups and volunteers

Attendees were asked about the duration and format of the discussion groups, whether it was useful to have volunteers supporting the discussion and what volunteers needed to know prior to volunteering in the lecture series.

All five said that the time for the discussion was adequate, though one also thought it could have been longer because he found it went very quickly:

It was good. I think it could have been longer because sometimes we were discussing together and it was very short (A4).

All agreed that it was useful to have the discussion questions available, but that the discussion did not always stick to the questions provided. The discussion groups were an opportunity to share information about one's life and experiences as relevant to the lecture, as well as give opinions.

We talked about the questions and about something else. Sometimes we were talking about our opinions about the topics for example whether you should talk about things with children (A4)

Sometimes we discussed our lives with other students because we had different experiences. (A3)

This suggests that the discussion groups were a comfortable and facilitative space for these participants as they felt able to share personal histories and diverse opinions. The use of volunteers to support the discussion was viewed positively. The volunteers were drawn upon to support understanding of English and of concepts.

The volunteers were great. They spoke with us about the

questions. They tried to explain to us about the lectures if we didn't understand. (A3)

The volunteers were helping to answer questions. [Volunteer] was good, others as well. His English was good and he could explain well. (A2)

One participant also mentioned that it was good to have the opportunity to discuss and ask questions of the lecturers during discussion time:

We used the questions. We could ask questions directly to the speaker and that was important to help me understand. (A1)

The volunteers were also valued for being encouraging, friendly and fun:

They were friendly. I was networking with them at the celebration. They encouraged me to attend things. The volunteers added fun and jokes to make it better. (A1)

A handful of volunteers were singled out and named numerous times in regard to these qualities, as well as their ability to provide English comprehension support. Only two participants gave a response as to what volunteers need to know, and this included English proficiency and ability to help with comprehension. Content knowledge was not seen as necessary:

Must speak English! They were not very difficult topics – they do not need to have a background in the content. Just listen and be able to explain what they heard. (A3)

Help people understand when their English isn't good. (A4)

Sense of welcome

All five interview participants had attended the celebration at the end of the series. They all spoke positively about the experience, including the food, music, the speeches and the presence of university staff in senior leadership positions. Two participants invited guests to the celebration and spoke about this event as enabling a sense of pride in themselves:

Good to bring the family, it made my kids proud of me. I have

been talking to my oldest son, telling him to study hard and we hope he can attend Melbourne University. (A1)

It was pretty exciting for me and I invited some friends. I did a speech, it was very good for me. My friends enjoyed it. I can use the certificate in my résumé, it will be good for me. (A2)

Based on this feedback, the celebration was significant to those who attended and should be maintained in future series. This acknowledgement and celebration of participants may also communicate to them that the University is committed to people seeking asylum and is a place of welcome. This is an important aim given the understandings that individuals brought with them, such as this example:

Before the lectures I heard that the University of Melbourne was very closed, no one can get in there. Afterwards I felt that everyone is friendly, so that was different than before. The University of Melbourne want to assist asylum seekers – good steps from Melbourne. (A1)

Some participants aspired to being able to study at university in the future, but implied that they would be grateful to be admitted to any institution and that the University of Melbourne may be out of reach:

Everything was good. I hope I can come again. ... I would like to be with people so I would come even if the lectures were the same. I hope it would open a door for me to study at Melbourne or another university. (A2)

I do want to go to university, but any university (A4)

Recruitment

Participants were puzzled about the low numbers of asylum seekers attending, since they felt it had been such a great opportunity for them. Some speculated that people's English and education background was the reason they chose not to come:

15 people is not very many. I don't understand why – it is free, and most of us have lots of time. Maybe the level of English? (A3)

... not all asylum seekers have the educational background and an interest in academic learning. ... People said “we’re so tired, we’re not interested in going to class. We don’t have enough English”. It is possible to get the message a different way. AMES, all asylum seekers [in community detention or on Bridging Visa E] get 45 hours English, it is not enough if you have no education. (A2)

I have a friend who I discuss Australia with and I had a lot of things to tell him after attending the lectures. He was very interested but his English is not good so it wasn’t good for him. (A4)

One of our classmates came and couldn’t understand so he didn’t return... Maybe time, interest. Maybe difficult themes, for example law. When the topic is written it sounds difficult. We spoke to people in the Red Cross English class and they think level is too high – even when we told them it was okay. (A3)

This final quote illustrates that generally people select themselves out based on their perception of their English level and the topics. However, they also acknowledged that the person who was unable to follow did not return after the initial lecture. So on one hand it is necessary to encourage people to come and try it out, but it is also true that there is a level of English required to be able to benefit from the lectures. Some of the other barriers mentioned included the fact that people work and may have families.

Participants had the following suggestions of places to advertise and reach potential attendees:

- Agencies such as the Red Cross, AMES and the ASRC.
- Libraries
- English classes
- Advertise in areas where asylum seekers live
- Get caseworkers to tell people.
- Facebook pages.
- Volunteer organisations such as Friends of Refugees.

Suggestions

Overall participants spoke very positively about their experience of the lecture series. The main suggestion was to offer the series more often, for example twice per year, or as a longer or ongoing series.

More lectures. We would keep coming every week if they were offered. We have a lot to learn about Australia and the more lectures is better. (A3)

Have them running more than once per year – every semester or every 6 months.

Balance between scientific and the humanities. Language and society important.

Give people more time to get organized to attend, advertise earlier. (A1)

All five participants interviewed said that they would attend again in 2016, even if the lectures were the same. This speaks to the significance of the series for these participants, as something different from the other opportunities that they are offered. As one participant said:

Sometimes highly educated people like myself need opportunities to prove themselves. I get depressed because I am not working. (A1)

Interviews with lecturers

Five of the 12 lecturers that presented during the series completed a phone interview at the completion of the series. Two of the five had been involved in the 2014 series as well and brought that perspective to their reflections. Lecturers were asked for feedback about their experience overall, their feelings of preparedness and understanding of their role, the format of the lectures, their participation in discussion groups and whether anything surprised them. They were also asked to make suggestions for the future of the series.

All five participants had positive things to say about the series overall, and most talked about the personal enjoyment and benefit that came from their involvement. The two lecturers who had

been involved in 2014 were more inclined to reflect on the low numbers than the others, but also had positive feedback about the organisation and running of the series in 2015 compared to the previous year.

Preparedness

All five participants said that the information and support was available for them to prepare for their lecture, though three felt they could have prepared themselves more but due to their own busy schedules and inability to attend the induction they were a little underprepared. For example, one participant commented:

I felt slightly underprepared but it was my fault because I could not attend the induction. (L3)

The two participants who had been involved in 2014 felt that this experience made them better prepared. As a result one had the following advice for choosing and supporting lecturers in future series, including repeat lectures and providing mentoring:

- keep lecturers engaged into future series, they can improve based on experience.
- For new lecturers, provide some kind of mentoring with another academic who has been involved – an informal experience-sharing exercise.
- Having the TESOL team modifying presentation is useful, but alone it is not enough. People need to hear from experience. (L1)

These more experienced participants were also able to modify their delivery based on what they knew of the attendees in 2014, including the diversity of English proficiency and educational background. Three participants suggested that having more information about the attendees would be beneficial to lecturers. One lecturer had sought that information prior to her lecture in this series, and was able to do so due to her lecture coming later in the schedule.

I rang [administrator] for clarity about the demographic – English level, pitch, background of knowledge. In the end I had enough. I couldn't make the induction so I had to follow up. The more you can know your audience the better. Recognise

the difficulty with enrolment but good to know at least home country. (L2)

Both this participant and another who suggested having more information available to lecturers recognised that collecting registration information had to be done carefully

More information about the cohort would help. Some kind of registration process – needs to be enabling, voluntary, could be anonymous, not forcing people to disclose. Information about their language and educational background, any disabilities that we can cater for. (L1)

On the other hand, one lecturer felt that not having too much information about the audience was beneficial to her. She knew that they were asylum seekers and may have varying levels of English and this was adequate.

I didn't have any information beyond that they were asylum seekers. So no. But I had information that they may not have strong English language skills. Assumed no prior knowledge for my topic and gave a general overview and that was adequate. Less onerous a task for me to not know and not have to tailor to specificity, it may be better (L3).

In 2015 registration information was collected, as outlined in previous sections. Given the feedback from lecturers, some thought should be applied as to how this is used and who it is shared with in future lecture series.

Lecture format

All but one of the lecturers felt that the time they had was adequate, and this participant recognised that the time allowed may be suitable for participants but was challenging for her to fit the content in:

I struggled to fit the content in. I felt I could have had more time – maybe it was okay for the audience but it challenged me to approach the material in a different way and be concise. (L2)

The format had changed from a single lecture in 2014 to two lecturers sharing the timeslot in 2015. Both participants who had experienced both formats felt that this new format worked better.

For example:

The time was adequate. The split lecture with two presentations worked really well. 25 minutes is enough time – anything less than 20 minutes is hard – but this allowed for short, concise, well organised presentations. I communicated with co-presenter prior to lecture and tried to align content. (L1)

This participant also suggested that lecturers collaborate with their co-presenter in future series.

Discussion group

All lecturers were encouraged to stay and participate in discussion groups after their lecture, and most did so, including these five participants. All five had positive things to say about the experience of taking part in discussions. They described their enjoyment in talking with people, as well as a valuable opportunity to measure the level of engagement with their presentation:

I think they are always really interesting. If you don't stay you don't get a sense of how people engage. Volunteers in discussion worked well. (L4)

Each lecturer had been asked to include some discussion questions at the end of their lecture to guide the groups. There was general consensus among the five responses that the questions were useful to have, but that they were not always used by the discussion groups, either because they focused on the content overall, they answered questions from the other presentation or they had their own questions. For example one lecturer responded:

They [the questions] were a good jumping off point, but the participants were more than capable of raising key issues themselves, and the discussion was more guided by their interests than the questions. (L5)

Experience

These participants were happy with their lecture and did not think they would do anything differently. Two described their surprise about how enjoyable it was for them:

How much I enjoyed it! I'd had a difficult few weeks. I thought

because I was really busy, as it got close you feel pressured, but I was really glad I was involved (L2)

Really interesting. I actually quite enjoyed the experience. It is a type of lecture I have given quite a bit – what was interesting was that this group was so different from other audiences. It was quite a small group, which surprised me, but they were really engaged. They didn't have the same political baggage as an Australian audience which was refreshing because they asked questions that I would never usually hear. It was quite fun for me! They were reasonable questions but they were asked in a way that may not come up. (L3)

This participant was bemused and delighted by the difference in the type of questions that she was asked that an Australian audience would not ask. However, she was also surprised by the position that the attendees took which differed to her assumptions.

The questions that people asked [surprised me] – I hadn't anticipated that aspect of it. It was different to usual and that was really interesting to me. I had imagined that people would identify the concept of keeping their own language but in fact people didn't necessarily feel that way – didn't relate necessarily with a resistance to engage with English when you live in Australia. (L3)

Having an opportunity to meet and learn about people seeking asylum as individuals was also mentioned as a positive aspect of being involved, and cause for reflection.

I felt really lucky and privileged to meet these people and to meet their families at the celebration. Gave me a sense of my own security and privilege, a self awareness that is of great value. (L2)

I learned something about the participants – not surprising but enlightening. (L5)

As a result of these positive experiences, all five lecturers said they would be willing to be involved again in future lecture series. Some said that they had been speaking with colleagues about their experience and that there was a level of interest among their peers. Some suggestions of people to invite were made,

but being put on the spot in an interview made this a difficult question to ask for. These participants offered to provide more suggestions closer to the next lecture series if required.

Suggestions

Some suggestions for future series included:

- Increasing recruitment efforts, use local media, collaborate with partners, look beyond the ASRC
- Consider going out to communities for one-off lectures rather than having all on campus
- Provide preparatory materials to participants
- Increase participation
- Invite lecturers back for the following year to build on experience
- Trial other formats and spaces that are less formal – collaborative spaces, more interactive and practical presentations.
- Utilise new contacts such as people in key local government areas
- Ensure lectures are concise and use accessible language.

Interviews with volunteers

Three of the 36 volunteers who originally signed up to the series completed a phone interview at the completion of the series. It was quite difficult to contact volunteers at the time of the evaluation because semester had ended and many were at the end of their course and were no longer checking their university emails. The three who participated (and a fourth who had offered to respond via email whilst volunteering in Nepal with intermittent internet access, but in the end did not) were among the most committed and active volunteers in the series, attending all the lectures and the celebration and facilitating discussion groups. They were also the volunteers who were repeatedly mentioned

by name by attendees. Therefore, their experience is valuable to the evaluation, but not particularly representative of the volunteer group overall. In addition to the interview data, there were also 5 responses to an online survey sent to volunteers after the induction session. Some survey responses are useful to consider alongside the interview data.

Volunteers were asked for feedback about their experience overall, their feelings of preparedness and understanding of their role, the format of the session, their participation in discussion groups and whether anything surprised them. They were also asked to make suggestions for the future of the series. Overall these three participants were positive about their experience, as well as being thoughtful about the qualities required for a volunteer and making constructive suggestions.

Preparedness

These three volunteers all had a background working with refugee and migrant groups, although two of these were not in Australia. Due to this background, they felt that they were adequately prepared to volunteer, though were unsure or ambivalent about whether the preparation would be suitable for less experienced volunteers. Similarly, they felt that they personally did not need more information to successfully contribute, but felt that this may have been due to their own personal attributes:

Personally I did not need any, but that is maybe because I am a bit older and I've worked with refugees. Other volunteers seemed fine. (V3)

Yeah... I think the induction was adequate, but I have worked with asylum seekers and refugees before (V1)

I felt well prepared – from previous experience. I don't think the program prepared the volunteers very well but it wasn't a problem for me. The induction was fine but not that informative (V2)

The responses to the induction survey indicated that volunteers felt somewhat to well prepared for their role after attending the induction, however this was again a small percentage of the volunteer group and may not be representative. However, the responses to the induction survey indicated that the information provided about the asylum seeker experience, including the facts

as opposed to the myths about asylum seekers, was the most valuable aspect of the induction session, suggesting that the respondents may not have previously engaged with the issue.

One interview participant viewed the amount of information provided as a good balance to ensure respectful engagement with attendees:

Yes. It was very respectful. Sometimes it is hard to know how much support people need – it can get into mollycoddling. Everyone was on quite even footing. Because of the informal setting – we had a role but it was relaxed and therefore the power relations were not too clearly defined. The fact that the same people kept coming back attests to its value. (V3)

However, one participant shared an example of volunteers not being respectful of asylum seekers in their discussion group:

In one of the sessions there were two volunteers from a legal background – they spent a bit of time debating about offshore detention amongst themselves from a legal perspective and it wasn't very sensitive. There were asylum seekers in our group who had been in detention centres. Some people need more information about what is appropriate. (V2)

This kind of anecdote implies that some volunteers may be inexperienced and may need more guidance and information. There were a couple of suggestions made as to how to better prepare and handle volunteers. One participant suggested that providing some tips to volunteers about supporting English learners, such as allowing wait time and not talking too much, could be useful:

Maybe some of the volunteers spoke too much themselves. ESL is about trying to facilitate others to speak. I am guilty of that too though. The last few sessions were better in this regard. Perhaps it was a nervousness thing but maybe in the induction mentioning silence and wait time. (V1)

A response from the induction survey also suggested that more time in the induction session be allocated to preparing volunteers to support attendees with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Specific suggestions included role playing of discussion groups, practice facilitating small groups and provision of a handout about EAL strategies.

One participant also suggested that stressing that volunteering is a commitment is important to help ensure consistent attendance and enabling relationship building.

Two participants suggested rotating roles so that, for example, the same people do not miss out on every lecture whilst taking registrations or preparing food. More clearly defined roles for volunteers was also suggested by one participant, as a means of supporting the volunteers who looked uncertain and inexperienced:

On occasion some volunteers seemed a bit lost, maybe because of low numbers. They may benefit from defined roles if there are lot more volunteers than participants. There were a few predefined roles. Maybe rotate duties so everyone gets to attend the lectures, do food, facilitate discussion. (V3)

Discussion groups

Unlike the other two groups interviewed, the attendees and lecturers, the volunteers who facilitated the discussion groups had mixed reactions about their success. Generally, they seemed positive about the format, however all three mentioned the interaction between the level of English used in the lecture and/or the level of individual English proficiency as a factor in how successful the discussion was. Two participants felt that there were a proportion of lectures that were pitched at the wrong level, one saying about a third and the other suggesting half:

Some of the level of questions wasn't appropriate, but good for enabling conversation. The engagement with the content depended on the lecture. About a third of the lectures were too difficult in their language use. Because the groups were not by ability level it was hard to engage the people who the content was above (V1).

Sometimes the small group discussions were difficult to get going when the lectures were not engaging or the level was pitched wrong. I think it was about 50% were pitched appropriately. Share resources from lectures that were successful to inform future lectures (V2).

In the second of these responses this participant suggests providing best practice examples as a means of getting the level right in future lectures.

Experience

Overall these volunteers were satisfied with their experience and all three said they would be interested in volunteering again, even though two had finished their studies at the University of Melbourne. Some of the things that surprised people were the low numbers of attendees and the presence of asylum seekers from Russia.

Two of the participants mentioned learning things that were new and interesting from the lectures, and all three commented that they learnt more about asylum seekers as individuals by meeting them and hearing their stories, for example:

I learnt a lot from the lectures. Anecdotal personal stories from the participants. Hard to quantify but it is valuable to interact with people from different backgrounds. (V2)

One participant said the experience made her reflect on her own migration experience and her comparative privilege:

These type of things you always meet new people and have new experiences. Learnt about Australia's asylum seeker policy, more about the privilege of the Western passport – as a new migrant it made me reflect (V3).

These responses suggest that there is a lot for volunteers to gain in this lecture series.

Suggestions

Some suggestions these volunteers made for future series included:

- Provide volunteers with some TESOL strategies
- Emphasise commitment to volunteer role
- Translate flier into key community languages
- Have a physical presence. Send volunteers out to key locations such as the ASRC to provide information face-to-face
- Go out to community locations and provide 'taster sessions' before inviting people onto campus

- Provide flier in hardcopy, not only electronically
- Look beyond the ASRC to recruit. Mosques, cultural networks etc.
- Advise lecturers about the correct pitch for their lecture
- Allow people to bring their children.

Interviews with key contacts in community organisations

Part of the difficulty reaching potential attendees in 2015 was that key contacts in several organisations that had supported the series in its first year were not available. New relationships began with some agencies in 2015, but not in enough time to impact attendance numbers. Because of the lack of input from partner organisations, it was difficult to find people to interview, especially as they are typically very busy and time poor.

One phone interview was completed, and one contributed her thoughts on the series overall via email.

One participant suspected that the granting of work rights to many asylum seekers in the community during 2015 impacted attendance at the lectures:

I guess probably the more challenging thing is the focus of our client group at the moment. Maybe the lectures were more relevant when people didn't have work rights. The focus has shifted. I think the lectures are a really awesome idea and I think people would be interested but may have to be linked to career goals and finding work which are the challenges that are most relevant at the moment (CO1).

On the other hand, she also said she thought the lecture series was of value precisely because they are not aimed at practical solutions to asylum seeker problems. She said:

I think they are worthwhile. They get bombarded with asylum seeker issues in every other forum. It is important to have access to academia and another world outside their current struggles. It is keeping hope and aspirations alive. I think that is a good thing (CO1).

The other participant felt that the lectures did not provide enough mainstream access to the university to be meaningful. She felt that it there was limited value in inviting people into the university who, because of current visa conditions, could not hope to attend. She suggested that the University of Melbourne make a greater commitment to improve access for people on temporary visas, or for greater networking and engagement opportunities with tangible outcomes be provided as part of the lecture series.

In terms of aspirations, participant CO1 also mentioned the specific challenge for young asylum seekers who have completed VCE and aspire to attend university with few avenues to do so. She wondered whether the University of Melbourne could offer a bridging type course for young Bridging Visa holders. This lecture series in itself is limited in its scope to provide access to mainstream courses for people with restrictive visa conditions, however there may be an opportunity to improve networking and engagement opportunities in future series.

Participants had some ideas about how they may support the development and recruitment phases of the research. One participant advised that involving people seeking asylum in the planning phases may better inform the organisational group of what would be valuable to potential attendees. She also suggested that greater participation of people seeking asylum in planning would assist in clearer communication of the aims of the series than occurred in 2015. The other participant suggested that it may be possible to visit English classes in her organization as a means of recruiting for future lecture series. She agreed to be involved in the development and preparation stages and said she would also invite a colleague to contribute.

Summary

This evaluation suggests that the experience of being involved in the 2015 Lecture Series for Asylum Seekers was overwhelmingly positive for the asylum seekers who attended, as well as for lecturers and volunteers. In addition to the positive feedback, attendees, lecturers, volunteers and community organisation representatives all made suggestions as to how the series might be improved in the future.

The low numbers of attendees at each lecture was disappointing but did not negatively impact those who did attend. Some suggestions were made as to how and where to advertise for future series to increase attendance. The individuals who did attend were from a diverse range of countries and spoke many different languages. Most were over 30 years of age and there were twice as many men than women, which may indicate that people seeking asylum who have a background in tertiary education were more likely to attend.

Attendees appreciated the opportunity to learn about Australian society, and particularly to hear from and interact with academics, professional staff and students from the University of Melbourne. This experience counteracted some of their perceptions of the University of Melbourne as an institution that was closed to them, and they reported feeling a sense of welcome and aspirations to maintain contact with the University. They were happy with the format, topics and schedule. They used the lectures and discussion groups to improve their English language skills, and all said the level of English and the support provided by volunteers and lecturers to improve their comprehension was valuable. Discussion groups also provided attendees a space to share their own experiences with attendees from other backgrounds as well as Australian students and staff members.

Lecturers spoke about their involvement as professionally and personally fulfilling. They valued the opportunity to meet people seeking asylum and were interested in the way that attendees interacted with their content. Lecturers spoke about the pressures of time and demands impeding their preparedness, but all said that it was time that they would be willing to invest again in the

future. Lecturers who had returned for a second year in 2015 recommended that the same people be engaged to present in subsequent years to build on the skill set. Tailoring content and language use for a diverse group was seen as a minor challenge that one could improve upon with experience.

Volunteers provided some nuanced and valuable feedback about their role as well as reflections on the lecture content and the attendee experience from their perspective in the audience and facilitating discussion groups. Volunteers with prior experience with refugees and asylum seekers felt able to support attendees and to do so without specific preparation or role allocation. They suggested that some less experienced volunteers may require more explicit guidance. Volunteers found the lectures themselves interesting and educative, as well as valuing the opportunity to meet and interact with people seeking asylum and learn more about the diversity of the asylum seeker experience.

The representatives from the community organisation partners gave some insight as to why numbers may have been low in 2015 compared to the first year of the series: a new focus among this cohort on employability and pathways work. One participant was sceptical about the value of the series given it does not provide mainstream access to tertiary education or employment. However, the other interviewee felt that offering something that was not a practical response to an asylum seeking issue was valuable as a point of difference and one that could have a positive influence on individual's wellbeing and sense of hope. Suggestions were provided as to how to improve the value and increase attendance at the series by engaging people seeking asylum in the planning stages.

In light of these findings, it appears that future lecture series would be welcomed by certain asylum seekers in the community and by the organisations that cater to them, and that future lectures would be supported by University of Melbourne staff and student volunteers. The following recommendations have emerged from the evaluation to support future planning and evaluation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this evaluation it is recommended that the series be offered again in the future. In the future the following recommendations may improve recruitment efforts, the lectures, discussion groups and lecturer and volunteer roles.

Recruitment

Given the low numbers in 2015, efforts to increase recruitment to the series should be emphasised in future planning. Recommendations of how this may be achieved include:

- Involve people seeking asylum in the planning stages of the series to ensure what is being offered is of most value to potential attendees.
- Clarify the aim of the lecture series and the target audience and ensure that all material used to communicate with asylum seekers and/or with organisation contacts clearly expresses this aim.
- Consider changing the name of the series to better reflect what is being offered, which is more than lectures.
- Forge strong links with a range of organisations that cater for asylum seekers, especially those where people already go to find information about classes and activities.
- Also reach beyond the main agencies whose members may already be saturated with opportunities to participate in classes and activities.
- Advertise in local libraries and community centres offering English classes in key areas of Melbourne where there are a high number of asylum seekers residing.
- Engage with local governments in key areas of Melbourne where there are a high number of asylum seekers residing.
- Engage with local media in target localities to promote the series.
- Utilise the social media pages of community organisations and volunteer groups that cater for asylum seekers.

- Offer lectures or 'taster' sessions in community locations before inviting people onto campus.
- Send volunteers to partner organisations and to English classes to speak with people seeking asylum face-to-face and provide information about the lectures in hardcopy.
- Provide written information translated into key community languages (Arabic, Tamil, Farsi etc.)

Lectures

Overall most participants in this evaluation were happy with how the series was delivered. Some recommendations about the lecture series include that:

- the format that was used in 2015 be maintained, with two short lectures and a break for food followed by a discussion.
- Topics remain focused on Australian society and its systems, such as law, health care and education.
- Lectures from experts outside of the field of humanities also be engaged.
- The lecture about Human Rights Law and Equal Opportunity be delivered later in the series, or last, once attendees understand the format of the lectures and may have built supportive relationships with volunteers, organisers or other attendees.
- Consideration is given as to whether more lectures could be offered in each series, or whether the series could run multiple times per year.

To ensure that all lectures are pitched correctly and are successful in future series the following recommendations are made:

- Provide an alternative to lecturers to prepare other than attending an induction, for example a verbal briefing in a preparatory phone conversation.
- Invite lecturers back who presented in 2014 or 2015.
- Partner experienced lecturers with new lectures as mentors.

- Require that lecturers communicate and collaborate with their co-presenter.
- Provide best-practice examples of successful past lectures to new presenters.
- Suggest the use of graphics, video and other media to engage an audience with varied levels of English.
- Emphasise the need to speak slowly and clearly, to avoid jargon and slang and to clarify key terms.
- Invite lecturers to prepare a glossary of key terms to give to participants.
- Provide lecturers with some demographic information about attendees where possible.
- Encourage lecturers to begin each lecture with a show of hands to gauge English level and prior content knowledge of the audience.

The following recommendations were made for the running of the discussion groups:

- Ensure the level of the discussion questions is appropriate to the levels of English and content knowledge.
- Emphasise however, that it is not necessary to focus only on the questions and that free-flowing discussions involving sharing of experiences and opinions is also highly valued.
- Group attendees by English language ability.
- Select volunteers with the skills to support English language learners, or prepare volunteers to do so, as their role in facilitating the discussion groups is essential.
- Continue to involve lecturers in discussion groups as this was highly valued by attendees and by lecturers.

Volunteers

The volunteers play a crucial role in the lecture series and are the main point of contact and the most consistent aspect of the series for attendees. They are also the best placed to provide feedback about the success of the lecture and the discussion group because they are active participants in each. It was clear from the evaluation that experienced, friendly, respectful and helpful volunteers were highly valued by all involved. Not all volunteers bring prior experience to the role and therefore the following recommendations for preparing volunteers may be useful for future series:

- Stress that the role of a volunteer in the series requires commitment to all or most of the series.
- Provide explicit information about respectful engagement with people seeking asylum and mindfulness about some of the experiences that they may share, including experiences in the Australian Immigration system/process.
- Provide volunteers with key strategies for supporting English language learners, such as speaking less and providing longer wait time in discussion groups.
- Collect information about the experience and background of volunteers and ask more experienced volunteers to take the lead and mentor less experienced students, especially in discussion groups.
- Allocate roles to volunteers and rotate roles each week so that volunteers have an opportunity to build skills in different areas.

Conclusion

In all measures except attendance numbers, the 2015 Lecture Series for Asylum Seekers could be considered a success. The evaluation suggests that it is of value to asylum seekers in the community, especially those with a tertiary background, as well as to the staff and students who participated as volunteers. A number of recommendations have been suggested in this report to take the series into the future.

References

Beadle, S. (2014) *Facilitating the transition to employment for refugee young people*. Melbourne, VIC: The Centre for Multicultural Youth

Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2013) *Asylum Trends 2012-2013*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Appendix 1: 2015 expenses

The total cost of the 2015 lecture series was approximately \$9500, and these funds were provided by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute (\$5000) and the University of Melbourne Engagement Office, Chancellery (\$4500).

The Chancellery funds of \$4,500 was used to support the operational organisation of the Lecture Series, and the MSEI funds of \$5,000 was intended for the research and evaluation aspects of the project. The operational costs exceeded \$4,500, but the Research Assistant costs were less than expected. Overall, the project was slightly over the total budget of \$9,500.

Operating Costs	
Project Co-ordinator Salary – RA 2 for 62 hours	3,003.94
‘Thank you’ gifts for the volunteer lecturers	239.00
Printing/Artwork	217.67
Stationery	430.61
Catering	2,010.53
Performer (at the Celebration event)	250.00
Miscellaneous	80.00
Subtotal operational costs	\$6,231.75
Research/Evaluation Costs	
Research Assistant Salary	3,365.73
TOTAL COSTS	\$9,597.48

In kind support was provided by a group of staff members on the organising committee, by the lecturers who presented, and student volunteers. Use of the venue was provided free of charge by the Melbourne Law School.



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