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Facilitating better employment opportunities for refugee-background migrants and people seeking asylum in Australia

A policy briefing paper

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Introduction

For refugee-background migrants and people seeking asylum, employment is a crucial step towards successful settlement in Australia. Secure and stable employment enables economic security and a positive sense of identity in their new host country (Fozdar & Hartley, 2013). However, refugee-background migrants and people seeking asylum face barriers to meaningful incorporation into Australia's labour market, with many professional and qualified people finding themselves trapped in 'survival' jobs which do not utilise their skills, expertise, and aptitudes (Barraket, 2007; Hugo, 2011).

This paper aims to make specific, implementable policy recommendations to reduce barriers and facilitate improved employment opportunities for refugee-background migrants and people seeking asylum living in Australia. These recommendations are based on a literature review of 33 Australian studies published between 2000 and 2016. A detailed description of the methodology is included in the appendix.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Overview

Refugees and people seeking asylum are not a homogenous group and their experiences differ widely. Some refugees may arrive in Australia highly skilled and with a high level of educational attainment (Peter, 2001; Beatriz, & Ruth, 2009; Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2012). Others arrive with little education or English language skills - a result of a lack of educational opportunity in their home countries or disrupted education as part of the refugee experience. However, almost all reviewed studies revealed that refugees and people seeking asylum experience multiple barriers to employment. These barriers have their basis in institutions, government policies, racism and discrimination, language proficiency, labour segmentation and a rigid system of skills recognition (Hugo, 2011; Fozdar & Torezani 2008; Casimiro, Hancock & Northcote, 2007).

Overt and covert discrimination against refugees in the job market and workplace was the most common barrier reported across almost all studies. Most studies found that individuals were discriminated against for their country of birth, culture, religion, names, accent and the colour of their skin (Boese, 2015; Fozdar & Torezani, 2008). Discrimination and racism were most acutely experienced by those from particular ethnic and religious groups (most recently, Muslim populations) and other 'visibly different' refugees (Colic-Peisker & Farida, 2006). In particular, Muslim women wearing hijabs or other cultural dress experienced increased discrimination. (Casimiro, Hancock & Northcote, 2007; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010; Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2012; Tilbury & Colic-Peskier, 2006).

This discrimination is reinforced by negative public discourse concerning refugees and asylum seekers. Negative portrayals, of boat arrivals in particular, in news media and political debate adversely influences

public opinion and community attitudes towards people seeking asylum (Hugo, 2014; Fozdar & Hartley, 2013; Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2012).

Reducing discrimination is clearly an important long-term goal that will require the concerted efforts of multiple sectors within government and across society. Specific findings and corresponding recommendations are as follows.

Visa determination processes

The lengthy and protracted status determination process can take between 1 – 3 years and different visa categories create different barriers to employment for people seeking asylum:

- Placing people seeking asylum in detention centres can disrupt their education, and therefore, limit their future employment opportunities (Janet, 2004; Fleay, Lumbus & Hartley, 2016; Correa-Velez & Onsando 2009).
- Up to Dec 2014 21,000 asylum seekers on bridging visas did not have work rights, even if they had been in Australia for many years. (Woodcroft, Barnes & Wilkinson, 2014)
- Those on temporary protection visas (TPVs) have work rights but limited access to higher education and the full range of social security benefits (Marston, 2004; Fiona, et al. 2004; Janet, 2004; Fiona, et al. 2004). Further, those living with an uncertain visa status can be less attractive to potential employers (Woodcroft, Barnes & Wilkinson, 2014; Janet, 2004).

Recommendation 1: Ensure that the visa determination process is fair and timely, by decreasing the length of stay in detention centres and quickly granting work rights.

English language proficiency

Although a number of the studies reported that many refugees and migrants have a reasonably high level of English proficiency at the time of arrival (Fozdar & Torezani, 2008), others arrive with low levels of literacy in their mother tongue languages.

English proficiency is vital for securing meaningful employment and for successful settlement in Australia. English language programs for refugees include the Adult Migrants English Program (AMEP), Special Preparatory Program, Basic English Program and advance certificate I and II (Peters, 2008) and are available to all refugees. 'However, a 2013 study showed that one-quarter of humanitarian immigrants did not take up these language training opportunities (Fozdar & Hartley 2013). Whereas, some of the reasons were prioritising employment, having logistical and transport issues, and for refugee's mothers did not having access to appropriate child care (Fozdar & Torezani 2008; Fozdar, & Hartley, 2013). These studies also highlighted the inadequacy of the AMEP for professionals and for those people illiterate in their mother tongue languages.

People seeking asylum are not eligible for AMEP and further educational opportunities, even though the visa determination process can take up to three years.

Recommendation 2: Support early English language acquisition

Specific recommendations include:

- Provide access to English language programs for people seeking asylum.
- Improve take-up of programs for mothers through the provision of flexible and appropriate childcare.
- Ensure that English courses are compatible with vocational education pathways and the International English language Test (IELTS) for those refugees that want to pursue their education at university level.
- Review the current English programs, extend language tutoring besides the functional terms, provide an adult educational system, and increase the number of programmes that support literacy, numeracy, and computer skills.

Addressing labour market barriers

A major challenge for refugees and other newly arrived migrants is understanding the local labour market. A lack of local work experience, awareness about the job search methods, local referees and lack of social networks all present barriers to employment (Lenette & Ingamells, 2013; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2003). On the other hand, for highly-skilled refugees and those with recognised degrees, a common response from potential employers is that they are overqualified (Boese, 2015).

Recommendation 3: Develop a national refugee employment strategy to facilitate improved employment outcomes.

Specific recommendations:

- Provide incentives and support to employers to support refugees through a range of alternative recruitment strategies and by providing career counselling in their transition period. Alternative recruitment strategies include access to placements, internships, mentoring programs, voluntary work and post-employment follow-up programs. These types of opportunities support refugees to gain and maintain employment (Schech, 2014; Fiona, et al. 2004; RCOA, 2010).
- Support employment services to raise employer awareness in how to prevent discrimination, racism and abuse, and to address injustice and inequitable employment outcomes.

Recognising and improving access to professional qualifications

A number of migrants and refugees arrive in Australia with high levels of education and professional expertise but face barriers to education and employment when their overseas qualifications are not recognised or valued. Others may have fled without documentation and are not able to request copies of

academic transcripts (e.g. if their universities no longer exist). Further, those on temporary protection visas are not eligible to access higher education as domestic students and are therefore liable for international student fees (Marston, 2004).

Recommendation 4: Improve accreditation processes and access to education and training opportunities

Specific recommendations include:

- Develop innovative strategies that support the process of recognition of refugees' qualifications.
- Improve coordination among professional registration boards, accreditation bodies and employment agencies.
- Create provisions for those with temporary visa status to access higher education as domestic students.
- Review policies and practices of other developed/OECD countries regarding accreditation of international qualifications and support for refugees to be integrated into the labour market.

Regional settlement

In regional areas, there is high demand for less qualified labour which has the potential to provide an excellent opportunity for less educated migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to live and work in these areas. However, whilst regional settlement may provide desired employment opportunities for some refugees, for those who are more educated, this could represent a significant barrier to gaining meaningful employment.

Recommendation 5: Proactively support regional resettlement, where appropriate.

Specific recommendations include:

- Increase support services in regional areas to support refugees.
- Work with communities and community organisations to facilitate successful settlement for willing individuals and families.

Since this review was conducted, nearly 8,000 asylum seekers have been granted a SHEV (Safe Haven Enterprise Visa). A new temporary visa which requires settlement in non-metropolitan areas and includes employment and /or educational conditions.

Settlement and employment services

The reviewed research found that some community service providers gave poor quality service and advice, creating further barriers for new arrivals (Fiona, et al. 2004; Fozdar& Hartley, 2013).

Some highly skilled refugees were channelled into low-skill sectors of the labour market by agencies that may not have had the expertise, capacity or networks to find better quality employment or overcome structural barriers. (Marston, 2004; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2003; Correa-Velez, Spaaij & Upham, 2013).

Recommendation 6: Strengthen the expertise and capacity of settlement service sectors

Specific recommendation:

- Facilitate stronger coordination and collaboration between refugee communities, educational institutions, employment services and employers.

Building on strengths

Migrants can be very entrepreneurial; taking risks and advantage of opportunities (Hugo, 2014; Kerry, Alison & Jim, 2007).

Recommendation 7: Support entrepreneurialism

Specific recommendation:

- Encourage and support refugee-led small business development and social enterprise initiatives.

Conclusion

Refugees and people seeking asylum are a diverse cohort with a range of professional skills, education attainment and human capital who can contribute to a more multicultural and socially cohesive Australian society and vibrant economy (RCOA, 2014; Hugo, 2014).

Social and economic inclusion of refugees is beneficial for host countries (Correa-Velez, Spaaij et al. 2013; Janet, 2004) and it is within the country's best interest to best utilise the skills, experience and expertise of those that settle and seek refuge in Australia.

About the authors

In 2017, Dr Nadera Hayat Burhani and Dr Jawid Sayed were employed as Community Researchers at the Social Equity Institute at the University of Melbourne. Both have been granted refugee status in Australia.

The authors received support and guidance from the following people:

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APPENDIX 1: Methodology

The ‘Social Science Institute for Excellence (SCIE) systematic review guidelines’ (SCIE, 2010) was adopted as a general framework in order to review and appraise studies. It included establishing the study aim, objective, question, conducting initial searching, screening, and mapping stages as well as developing the review inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Search strategy

The search strategy aimed to find relevant published studies and comprised the following stages:

- A preliminary search via discovery engine, and grey literature of two organisations sites;
- Systematic database searches;
- Checking the reference lists and bibliographies of retrieved articles; and,
- Cross-referencing from a list of relevant articles and related publications from the Refugee Council of Australia and the Melbourne Social Equity Institute.

The databases searched included the Multicultural Australia and Immigration Studies, SocINDEX with full text, Humanities International Complete, Scopus, Informit Families & Society Collection, The Social Science Research Network (SSRN), Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), Medline, and Journal of Sociology (SAGE). The followings are the combination of keywords used in search of databases:

- Asylum Seekers or Refugees and Employment and Australia
- Asylum seekers and employment and Australia
- Work and refugees and Australia
- Employment barriers and Australia and Asylum seekers
- Employment and recently arrived refugees and Australia
- Refugees or Asylum seekers and economic impact
- Employment discrimination and jobs opportunities and asylum seekers or refugees and Australia

58 studies were retrieved and included qualitative, mix studies, a systematic literature review, and literature reviews that focused on humanitarian-refugee’s employment barriers and facilitators in Australia between 2000 and 2016. One limitation recognised was the dearth of specific research among asylum seekers with work rights.

The researchers reviewed all relevant studies to identify their contents including publication details, their nature, outcomes, and the study’s results were described and categorised accordingly. The researchers also developed an internal quality assurance processes guided by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme and the SCIE guide to ensure the consistency of recording information and the interpretation of their different elements (SCIE, 2010; CASP, 2016).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The following criteria have guided the studies inclusion:

- Studies published in the English language.

- Study participants: People seeking asylum with full work rights, and humanitarian refugees from different cultural and educational backgrounds, gender, and ages.
- Study titles and contents included keywords: employment barriers and facilitators
- Study designs: quantitative, qualitative or mixed studies published in peer reviewed journals
- Study settings: All states, territories or regions within Australia
- Study period: published between 2000-2016

Those articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from review. After a comprehensive review of all retrieved articles in the data extraction and quality appraisal stage, 33 studies accomplished the inclusion criteria while 25 studies were rejected.

Data synthesis

A thematic content analysis approach was used to synthesis the study's findings as a general framework. The main themes (relevant to review question) were identified across multiple studies and the groupings and relationships constructed.

Limitations

Limitations are related to the current review and to the studies reported on which it is based. The review only focused on the findings of articles which were directly relevant to the study aim, objective and question. For example, if a study discussed refugees' housing, health, well-being, family and social support as well, the reviewers only extracted the study findings concerned with employment.

Some other limitations include:

- The scarcity of literature exploring the barriers and facilitators of employment in Australia.
- The majority of studies were conducted using qualitative methods only.
- In one of the studies, the participant's duration of stay in Australia was only 1 or 2 months which was not an enough time to know about their resettlement and employment.
- Most of the studies were conducted among a particular ethnic group, gender, and a specific geographical location.
- In one study, participants were intentionally chosen from a cohort of refugees who were well-educated and had a reasonably English proficiency.
- Some of the studies indicated that their sampling strategy such as the non-probabilistic sampling strategy or a non-representative nature of their study participants affected validity and generalisability.
- An observational study was conducted without a control group.

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