

Working Party on Settlement Issues

PREPARED FOR:

Victorian Multicultural Commission

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AMES provides the following response to the request for input on the second phase of prioritising the opportunities for improvement to settlement services. While issues addressed in some areas have broader applicability to other newly arrived groups, the focus of this response is issues as they apply to the Refugee and Humanitarian client group. These issues are variously within federal and state jurisdictions.

The response draws on AMES experience in providing a broad range of services to refugees in their early period of settlement. It also draws on the experience of new settler communities. AMES regularly consults with client communities – 18 community consultations were held throughout 2008 with new and emerging community groups. Valuable input is also regularly provided from Community Guides¹ who work directly with newly arrived refugees in their initial settlement period. An evaluation of this program is currently being undertaken and involves intensive consultation with and feedback from newly arrived clients²

The three key strategic areas addressed in this response are:

1. Employment
2. Housing
3. Youth

1. Employment

Newly arrived refugees and AMES see employment as fundamental to successful settlement. Making the transition to employment is complex and is impacted on by many factors. Two key issues are addressed under the broad area of employment.

1. Impact of a weakening economy on vulnerable groups
2. Impacts of government employment policy

1. Impact of a weakening economy on vulnerable groups

The global economy is going through the most difficult period in living memory. The Victorian and the Federal Governments are both investing to strengthen the economy, support jobs and protect Australia from the worst effects of this crisis. Proactive strategy to support newly arrived refugees in this time must be actively pursued as part of these measures.

National data indicates participation rates for newly arrived refugees and some migrants are significantly lower than for the general population. Two sets of data – a study undertaken by DIAC and research being undertaken by AMES – demonstrate this.

¹ AMES Community Guides are employed in the delivery of settlement services with newly arrived refugees. Community Guides are from refugee backgrounds and work with recently arrived communities in their early settlement. AMES employs over 100 Community Guides and regularly seeks their views on issues confronting newly arrived refugees and ways to address these issues.

² The evaluation of the Community Guides Program is being undertaken by the Centre for Refugee Research at the University of NSW. This will provide additional valuable data from the perspective of refugees. This report will be available in July 2009.

DIAC Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia

The most comprehensive survey undertaken on participation rates for Humanitarian and Migrant Entrants to Australia is the DIAC Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Australia (LSIA). While data from this study indicates that participation rates have improved from LSIA 1 to LSIA 2, Humanitarian Stream Entrants continue to be severely under-represented in the workforce.³

- For Humanitarian Entrants surveyed in LSIA 2, 75% were unemployed after 4-5 months and only 16% were participating in the labour force. After 16-17 months 43% were still unemployed and only 32% were participating. (In January 2000, the unemployment rate was 7.35%, similar to predicted rates in the near future)

AMES Longitudinal Study

In September 2008 AMES commenced a longitudinal study of clients who have undertaken the government funded Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP). AMES will be in a position to provide current data on more recent arrivals later in 2009.

A smaller retrospective survey undertaken in July 2008 of 53 refugee and migrant participants as part of this project provided data on employment outcomes. This indicates similar low levels of participation and low rates of job retention even in a time of record low unemployment. Of the 53 participants surveyed:

- 31 (58%) were actively looking for work
- only 8 (15%) were currently working but 23 (43%) have had some work since arriving in Australia
- only 4 (24%) of those who have been here less than one year had ever had a job in Australia and only 2 (12%) were currently employed

A particularly concerning feature was that retention rates in employment did not improve for those who have been in Australia 1-2 years and more than 2 years, compared to those who have been here less than one year.

This data demonstrates the disadvantage newly arrived refugees and migrants face in gaining and retaining employment early in their settlement. Challenges for this group will be exacerbated as unemployment rises and competition for available jobs increases.

Levels of education of the current intake of refugees further increases barriers to employment readiness where demands for levels of reasonable communication skills are expected for many jobs. Table 1 shows data from AMES Employment job seekers indicates these low levels.

Table 1 - Job Seekers Levels of Education

Education Level	Refugee & Humanitarian Visa (RHV)	% of Total RHV Caseload
Did not go to school	164	6.30%
Primary School	1,122	42.90%
Year 10	360	13.80%
Secondary Schooling Completed	475	18.20%
Others	494	18.90%
Total	2,617	100 %

Source: Job Network Database - EA 3000 Active Case Load at 4 April 2008

³ The DIAC Longitudinal Survey surveys Primary Applicants in all visa categories over an extended period. LSIA 1 surveyed arrivals between September 1993 and August 1995, LSIA 2 surveyed arrivals between September 1999 and August 2000. LSIA 3 surveyed arrivals and those granted their visa onshore between December 2004 and March 2005. Humanitarian Entrants were not included in LSIA 3.

Data from clients learning English in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) replicates this pattern. Humanitarian Entrants who are studying in the AMEP for example had an average of less than five years schooling in 2005-2006 compared with seven years in 2001-2002. Only 2% said they read English very well. 37% did not read English at all. In the 2007 AMEP cohort, 53% of clients have less than seven years of education.⁴

Many of those with low levels of education will not realistically achieve sufficient English competency in the number of hours currently available (for example under the AMEP) to work in jobs that require fluent English language communication. Likewise they will not successfully complete vocational training in English to prepare them for employment. This does not mean they cannot work - but it does flag a need for different approaches such as social enterprises and using first language to train for and provide support in employment.

In regular consultations with newly arrived refugee communities, concerns that 510 AMEP hours are not enough to learn English and get jobs are raised.

Impacts of increasing casual work

Shrinking opportunities for full time work and increased casual work are likely to be a feature of a labour market in where employers are seeking to manage risks of labour costs. AMES experience in working with newly arrived refugee communities highlights some of the issues inherent in managing this casual work. Work with the Australian Karen Association provides one illustration. AMES has worked closely with the Australian Karen Association (AKO) to establish work opportunities in local market gardens in the Melbourne's outer west. This work commences as casual work with some, to date, converting to more secure employment.

Input from the community through bilingual outreach staff has provided valuable insights into understanding the barriers to these newly arrived refugees taking up work opportunities.

There is considerable misinformation and lack of understanding throughout the community about the negative impact of any form of reported work against Centrelink benefits. There is anxiety in particular about loss of family and healthcare benefits when employment is unpredictable and insecure. Community members with low English language skills and literacy and numeracy skills are unable to manage fortnightly reporting forms and are not confident to use the bilingual call centre.

AMES has addressed this by working with people from the community to identify the work opportunities, providing first language support to explain systems and provide support in areas such as Centrelink reporting in ongoing forums and one to one assistance. Work with local Centrelink offices where a specific staff member has been designated to manage these cases has also been effective.

These issues are also common with other newly arrived communities who AMES staff work closely with.

2. Impacts of government employment policy

Policy adjustments to address increasing casual work

To address issues raised above, policy adjustments that better supported job seekers whose only option in a period of rising unemployment is casual work would increase the probability of job seekers taking every opportunity to gain paid work. Adjustment to the income security safety net where paid work is not available would give greater security to balance the risks of casual work. Current policy does not fully exploit the uptake of sessional employment. Revisions that would provide increased security and therefore willingness to take the risk of some insecure paid work include:

- Increasing the income threshold for a Newstart recipient before benefits and partner payments are reduced
- Further streamlining income reporting requirements and increasing accessibility of designated Centrelink staff - particularly including staff of the major current intake of refugee languages. Where there are arrangements with Centrelink staff to meet regularly with client communities (for example where AMES and Centrelink worked together to assist in managing reporting requirements where

⁴ Data Source: DIAC ARMS data

refugees from Burma had casual work in market gardens in Werribee) the process is more understandable and these job seekers are somewhat reassured.

- Retention of Health Care Card benefits for refugees regardless of whether the recipient has employment in the early stage of settlement (say first 2 years) to provide security in managing chronic health issues as a result of refugee experience. Many refugee and humanitarian entrants have acute and chronic health issues that will require attention for much longer periods of time, possibly impacting on capacity for full time employment if they are not addressed – or requiring some flexibility to attend medical appointments for example. Feedback from refugee communities is that fear of losing the Health Care benefits is the single most important disincentive to taking on casual work. This policy change would not have large financial impacts as many refugees are already in receipt of Health Care Cards benefits as they are not employed. AMES has attempted to find out the nominal costs of a HCC but has not been able to get any data on this. Inter governmental committees may be able to provide these figures.

One area where the state government has intervened to address health issues has been the funding of Refugee Health Nurses (RHNS) by the state government. It is also a good demonstration of state and federal funding being complementary and increasing service. AMES works closely with the RHNS as an essential referral service to address the multiple health issues facing refugees in the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) program in the early period of their settlement. The effectiveness of this program has been further increased by the support provided by culturally competent AMES Community Guides who have an understanding of the new refugee communities. This is another example of ways in which service providers and government services can work closely together to increase effectiveness of service for refugees.

Classification of refugee job seekers

The Federal Government has made significant and welcome changes to the new Australian Job Services. AMES will be providing CALD Specialist services in this new contract. There are a number of areas that AMES considers could be further improved to support refugee job seekers in this contract.

The government is still considering the final model for the classification of job seekers using the Job Seeker Classification Instrument (JSCI). AMES considers it imperative that all job seekers who are refugees are automatically classified as highly disadvantaged. Changed economic conditions will add an additional layer of disadvantage to refugee job seekers already marginalised in employment, making it essential that they receive adequate resources to transition them into employment.

The JSCI is not guaranteed to identify all job seekers who are refugees as highly disadvantaged. In this regard the instrument is reasonably effective but fails to identify the high level of disadvantage of all refugee job seekers. Currently AMES Job Network has high numbers of RHV job seekers and therefore provides a reliable sample of the effectiveness of identifying these job seekers for immediate assistance.

AMES experience in working with refugee job seekers who have not been identified by the JSCI as highly disadvantaged is that they, too, have all or many of the characteristics of disadvantage common to newly arrived refugees. While some have qualifications and skills, their refugee experience and lack of knowledge of Australian work place culture and Australian work history indicates a need for intensive support in transitioning to work.

Table 2 provides data from the active caseload across all AMES Job Network sites on 2 May 2008. AMES currently has sites in all of the highest concentration areas of refugee settlement in Sydney and Melbourne.

Table 2 - % RHV job seekers on AMES Active Case Load

AMES Active Case Load	21,491	
Refugee Humanitarian Visa (RHV) job seekers	2,665	12.40%
- RHV (Highly Disadvantaged)	2,080	78.05%
- RHV (not Highly Disadvantaged)	585	21.95%

Data from AMES Active Caseload as at 2 May 2008

Refugee and Humanitarian Entrants face many complex issues in settling – gaining employment being one important component of this settlement. It is important that both Humanitarian Entrants are provided with support as early as possible in their settlement process. This proposition that intervention must be immediate, intense and flexible holds increasingly true in a climate of economic downturn.

A role for government

The state government has a strong commitment to supporting and consolidating multicultural policy through a legislative framework that serves as the basis for policies. The government has also allocated resources in a number of areas to implement this commitment.

A government led program (such as the example described below), offering employment opportunities to newly arrived refugees and migrants across all skill levels would clearly broadcast the government's commitment and provide those essential opportunities required to translate policy into practice. The existing Youth Employment Scheme provides a model for replication with this group.

State government as a major employer could lead by example by providing opportunities for refugees and migrants to demonstrate their existing skills through short term work placements whereby employers can experience the skills, capabilities and potential of migrants and refugees in the workplace. AMES experience is that work placements are not only a very useful way for refugees and migrants to gain familiarity with the Australian workplace but have also resulted in employment outcomes.

As a major purchaser of contracts requiring a broad range of skills the State government similarly has capacity to provide employment opportunities for migrants and refugees by including social dividend clauses within all purchasing contracts. Neighbourhood renewal contracts and public / private construction contracts are existing examples. Additional opportunities exist in areas such as transport and in the full range of services accessed by the settler communities.

AMES has used its capacity as an employer to establish a Transition to Work program. This builds on work previously undertaken to offer employment opportunities to NESB job seekers with relevant vocational skills who can also contribute bi-lingual and bi-cultural skills and knowledge to the workplace. In 2008 this program offered 50 traineeships and other paid work to migrants and refugees. Positions created included Employment Information Officers who work with job seekers in AMES Employment and also work with employers to provide support in bridging job seekers with low levels of English into employment. Settlement Information Officers provided settlement information and assistance for newly arrived refugees. There are opportunities for these staff to progress into other positions that become available in the organisation or to apply for jobs externally. The emphasis in the program was to provide a solid work and training experience that can equip these employees for their next job. There was a strong emphasis on assisting these trainees into their next job.

The experience and data from this program and other transition to work approaches applied in AMES can be used to inform approaches that government and government agencies could take in offering employment opportunities to refugees.

2. Housing

1. Impact of a shortage of rental housing on vulnerable groups

Availability and affordability

Housing availability and affordability are increasing settlement issues of serious concern for newly arrived refugees. Rental vacancy rates have been below the industry vacancy rate benchmark of 3% in every capital city in Australia for the past three years. The strong demand for rental accommodation has led to significant rent increases, particularly notable during 2007-08. This trend is likely to continue because investment in housing is declining, e.g. in February 2008, in seasonally adjusted terms, the value of investor finance declined by 9.5%. The deterioration in housing affordability, now at its lowest level in 22 years, and increased immigration, are also contributing to an increasing demand for rental properties, and the resulting imbalance in supply and demand. (REIV 2009)

This significant increase in the cost of rental accommodation has resulted in an increasing proportion of Centrelink benefits being absorbed in rental costs. Table 3 provides an indication of this price pressure.

Table 3 - Rental Costs

Family	Average rent per week	Benefit per fortnight	Rent assistance per fortnight
Single	1 bedroom \$180-200	\$453.30	\$111.20
Single parent, 2 young children	2 bedrooms \$250	\$962.22	\$130.48
Couple, 2 young children	2 bedrooms \$250	\$840.48	\$130.48
Couple, 3 young children	3 bedrooms \$270-310	\$1002.18	\$147.56
Couple, 2 older children	3 bedrooms \$270-310	\$892.42	\$130.48

Quality

Rising rental costs mean securing suitable, good quality housing for low income refugee families and single people is increasingly an issue. IHSS Case Coordinators have noted an increase in the number of issues with the quality of available and affordable rental properties. Types of issues with housing at the lower end of the rental market range from major and minor plumbing problems, faulty hot water systems and heaters to rubbish left in backyards by previous tenants.

Transport

The shortage of rental stock has resulted in refugees having to be located in areas that have less access to services and poor public transport. Houses are also frequently more readily available in areas where there are few local opportunities for employment. This is exacerbated by the fact that many newly arrived refugees have no Australian licence and no private means of transport. Consultations with communities regularly raise these issues. Communities see this as an issue for both refugees who are needing to get to employment and for parents needing to manage family transport needs in areas where there is little public transport. AMES has worked with communities, TAC, VicRoads and Victoria Police to develop Learner Driver programs. Eight programs have now started that are working with parents who are taking care of families and job seekers but the need is much greater than capacity to provide these programs.

2. Impacts of government policy

Policy that impacts on access to affordable housing includes the regulation that people who have a private rental history are ineligible for public housing. As public housing is in high demand and there are long waiting lists there is no possibility of securing public housing for newly arrived refugees. Housing for newly arrived refugees must be sourced at short notice which precludes access to public housing in the short term. These new arrivals must be accommodated in private rentals and are therefore made ineligible for public housing in the future.

The AMES IHSS Consortium is using a number of approaches to source immediate and long term accommodation for newly arrived refugees, however the broader social issue of the availability of affordable housing of reasonable quality is to a large extent beyond the Consortium's control and is a pressing settlement issue.

The Federal Government's Nation Building Investment in 20,000 new houses provides a potential opportunity to source some housing stock for newly arrived refugees if a proportion of these houses could be allocated for this group. Likewise nomination rights for a proportion of Community Housing stock could assist in addressing this issue.

Another opportunity exists to use stimulus package funds and job creation initiatives (e.g. the Jobs Fund) to upgrade poor quality housing stock in areas close to public transport routes and where services and potential employment are available and accessible. This would provide the opportunity to seed new communities in affordable areas.

One example of addressing housing issues in the IHSS is included below

AMES with its IHSS consortium partners Diversitat and Redback Accommodation Services seeded a new community of Karen families in Corio, Victoria to address the need to find and establish a broader range of settlement locations for refugees.

A particular driver for this initiative was the shortage of affordable housing in some of the established settlement centres. In this region of Victoria Karen refugee families have been settled in Werribee over the past four years and there is now a strong, established community in place but affordable housing is now in short supply.

A cluster of affordable housing was available in Corio, support services were available, and there was the potential of employment in the locality.

The preparation for the settlement of Karen families in Corio began in April 2007. The first families arrived in August 2007 and to date fifteen families, comprising 71 individuals, have been settled in Corio. Ten more families arrived during June – July 2008. To date all these families have remained in Corio.

3. Youth

1. Educational issues for young refugees

Refugee youth (13-25 year olds) represent 30% of AMES IHSS clients. This is a significant number of young people who need to access secondary schooling and vocational or higher education.

Table 4 - AMES IHSS Clients Aged 13-25

2005	2006	2007	2008	To Feb 2009	Total
114	401	1027	971	265	2,778

Challenges faced by these young refugees include: interrupted schooling, low levels of English language, experiences of torture and trauma, and lack of literacy in their own language. These barriers to learning present significant challenges for schools needing to provide educational pathways for these young people.

Both Australian agencies and their clients ... have to negotiate broader structural factors that affect in quite specific ways how "forced migrants" (can) access education and training. These factors include:

- The settlement patterns of "forced migrants" are distinctive because they often move to newer or outer suburbs where housing is more available and cheaper. These patterns of settlement mean that "forced migrants" are often in areas where infrastructure has not yet developed sufficiently.
- The mobile and dispersed nature of the population means that established agencies functioning well in some locations may not have sufficient facilities or sufficient resources in the right places to meet the needs of young people in other places.
- High transport costs and other difficulties (e.g. lack of public transport services in outer metropolitan and regional areas, difficulties faced in acquiring a driver's licence) make accessing services problematic

*Post-compulsory Pathways: Education, Work and Refugee Young People,
a project of the Victorian Settlement Planning Committee*

Secondary schooling

Of particular concern to many refugee communities is the Australian practice of placing young people with the same age cohort in schools. For refugee students experiencing some or all of the barriers above, this puts them in circumstances where they have little chance of achieving educational outcomes.

Another associated issue raised in consultations at AMES Community Forums is that of 18 – 19 year olds who wish to enrol in secondary school to be with other young people who they see as their peer group.

The school system is working to equip young people to be able to succeed and take an equal place with their fellow Australian born students. Additional initiatives in the most recent state budgets to support homework clubs are commended in this regard. Ensuring that language centres are available in areas where new arrivals are settling is also noted in this regard. Success in education for young people is critical if they are to develop the sense of personal worth and well being that will equip them to take their place as fully contributing members of a society, exercise choices and return benefits to the society.

For young people who arrive in Australia in adolescence and have interrupted schooling, the challenges and the risks are greater. For these young people, a concerted effort to link services is required to ensure that they do not fall through the cracks, that they settle successfully and contribute to a positive view of multiculturalism. By failing to address settlement issues faced by young migrants and refugees we contribute to negative perceptions portrayed from time to time in the media.

2. Impacts of government policy

The Special Preparatory Program (SPP) an English language tuition program specifically designed for eligible refugee and humanitarian entrants who may have difficulty adapting to more formal learning environments. The SPP is part of the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) funded by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC).

The SPP can provide up to 400 hours of tuition to humanitarian entrants aged between 16 to 24 years who have had 17 or less years of education. 100 hours of tuition may be provided to humanitarian entrants aged 18 years and older who have had difficult pre-migration experience, eg, torture and trauma.

To be eligible for the SPP a client must not have previously enrolled at a mainstream school.

For many young refugees and their families mainstream school is their first priority. Those who enrol and fail to cope are therefore rendered ineligible for English language and settlement assistance under the SPP. A policy adjustment to provide access to the SPP for young refugees and humanitarian entrants who fail in the mainstream school system would provide much needed support to assist these young people prepare for and return to mainstream schooling.

There are often multiple (sometimes competing) pathways [to settlement through education and training]. Refugee and humanitarian entrants need support in exploring these pathways, space to make "mistakes" and support to "try again". Sometimes the pathways will be long and this length can conflict with other needs that the young person has for employment or to provide for family in Australia or elsewhere. Pathways are, therefore, individual, not necessarily obvious and frequently require Australian institutions and agencies to talk and work together in new ways.

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a project of the Victorian Settlement Planning Committee*

3. Building skills: education and training for employment

Barriers to mainstream VET for young refugees

- Newly arrived refugee groups, along with many other Victorians, do not have the skills or confidence to enrol directly at a TAFE.
- Many newly arrived youth do not have a clear understanding of training and employment pathways in Australia.
- They can also be discouraged by the complexities of moving from one education sector to another.
- The majority of mainstream VET courses are not able to provide language (ESL) support for CALD learners.

For young refugees and newly arrived migrants, a pathway to employment comes through training. The majority require English language skills and a significant number of these require access to VET training to gain first employment in Australia.

The vocational training needs of learners within these groups are diverse and require a policy framework that drives inclusion and is followed through with practical application in a training system that can respond appropriately.

The Securing Jobs for Your Future: Skills for Victoria initiative provides an investment of \$316 million over four years. Within this budget it will be important to provide resources to bridge young new arrivals successfully into mainstream vocational training.

It is important that provision is made within this budget to provide accessible information as a first step to participation and that programs are available for learners from newly arrived communities who may require language and counselling support to undertake vocational training.

Employment for young people is ... more likely to be part-time, casual and based on non-standard working hours. Accordingly education has become increasingly important, and most young people assume they will engage in some form of post compulsory education or training. Balancing the demands of employment with education and training can prove difficult for many young people.

Future Directions: An Action Agenda for Young Victorians, Office for Youth, DPCD