

Australia's Humanitarian Program 2021-2022

Response to the Department of Home Affairs Discussion Paper, May 2021

Introduction

AMES Australia (AMES) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into Australia's 2021-2022 Humanitarian Program. Our submission is based on AMES long history of working with new arrivals to Australia through both permanent and temporary migration pathways. AMES provides integrated settlement services, English language education, and employment support to diverse migrant and refugee communities as a service delivery partner for Federal and State Governments. AMES is the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) provider for the contract regions of Melbourne, Regional Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania, and the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) provider in Victoria. AMES is also an Approved Proposing Organisation (APO) under the Community Support Program (CSP) for which it operates nationally. The overarching purpose of AMES work is to support migrants and refugees as they move from early settlement to independence and greater social and economic participation in Australia under our vision of *'full participation for all in a cohesive and diverse society'*.

The resettlement of humanitarian entrants does not just fulfill Australia's international obligations. Refugees make a substantial contribution to Australia, and once successful settlement has occurred, many achieve significant social and economic outcomes. For example, humanitarian entrants have demonstrated that they are the most entrepreneurial migrant cohort in Australia, and are nearly twice as likely to be entrepreneurs than Australian taxpayers overall¹.

While timelines regarding Australia's international borders remain uncertain as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Australia has a continued remit to support the thousands of refugees who have been granted permanent residency but remain offshore – potentially at risk of increased isolation and persecution. As of April 2021, 6,095 people who have been granted permanent visas under the Humanitarian Program have been unable to travel and settle in Australia². Estimates of another 4,000 visa grants to be made by the end of the financial year will mean that there will be roughly 10,000 humanitarian visa holders overseas by July 2021.

AMES has responded to this challenge by broadening its scope and capacity to provide pre-arrival support. This includes engaging those that remain offshore through virtual AMEP delivery and in-language podcasts on settlement orientation topics, and trialling models of engagement for those who arrive through the quarantine program. These innovative approaches align with the National Settlement Framework however do not align with the payment points and structure of the current HSP. 2021-2022 is an opportunity to expand on the current scope of settlement service delivery to humanitarian entrants, which is being shown to positively enhance the settlement experience for AMES clients.

Management and composition of the 2021-22 Program

As outlined in the Federal Budget papers, the Australian Government will maintain the Humanitarian Program at 13,750 places in 2021-2022 and over the forward estimates to 2024-25. Australia's humanitarian intake is equivalent to only about five per cent of the permanent Migration Program. The size of the program remains a ceiling rather than a target, which is a restrictive goal, as the focus is to keep humanitarian visa places granted under this program ceiling. In recent years, the allocated places have been undersubscribed due to delays in processing refugee applications.

13,750 places represent a reduction of 5,000 places from 18,750 in 2018-19 that has been maintained over the last several years. This is at a time when refugee displacement around the world is at a record high (estimated to be 26 million globally).³ Recent conflict in the Tigray region of Ethiopia has led to significant displacement of people in the Horn of Africa region, as well as the recent coup in Myanmar which has seen the repressive Military Junta return to power. These conflicts are likely to increase the number of refugees from cohorts which are already priorities in the Humanitarian Program (eg. Ethiopians, Eritreans, Myanmarese – Karen and Chin). Escalating tensions in the Middle East, such as the conflict in Israel and Gaza, and the withdrawal of American and Australian forces from Afghanistan may contribute to further unrest and displacement in the coming year. COVID-19 has increased the vulnerability of refugee populations with social, economic and

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "3418.0 - Personal income of migrants, Australia, 2009-10", accessed 19 May 2021.

² <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/allprimarymainfeatures/8800F9BC6CCB7830CA257F0F00115759?opendocument>

³ DHA FOI request, accessed 19 May 2021: <https://t.co/UTVFDj9UYJ?amp=1>

³ UNHCR Figures at a glance, accessed 19 May 2021: <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

political upheavals exacerbated by the pandemic seen in many parts of the world. AMES recommends that Australia's Humanitarian Program settings return to 18,750 places to meet anticipated demand in the coming years. Additionally, AMES recommends the process for assessing refugee applications be reviewed to reduce the time delays in finalising decisions.

Australia's Humanitarian Program is designed to prioritise the most vulnerable and maintain a position as a non-discriminatory program that does not favour race, ethnicity, gender, age, or religion. These principles are challenged with narrowing eligibility requirements found within the Program. Examples include, coming from an identified priority group across the program, and the further specification that CSP primary applicants be of 'working age' (below 50 years). This clouds decisions being made solely on humanitarian need. In line with the Humanitarian Program's principle of flexibility, AMES recommends that eligibility criteria for a humanitarian visa is reviewed with a view to the international context described above.

Offshore applicants

AMES understands that many humanitarian visa holders who remain offshore are in an extremely vulnerable situation regarding COVID-19 and may lack access to adequate health care. AMES has supported a number of travel exemption applications however few have been granted by the Department. Repatriation flights from countries hosting significant numbers of visa holders such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan is supported in recognition of the health risk to visa holders. As permanent residents of Australia their entry to Australia is recommended to be prioritised alongside international students and skilled migrants. AMES proposed model for quarantine and support for Humanitarian arrivals is detailed on page four.

AMES recommends that the number of allocated CSP places within the 2021-22 Humanitarian Program be increased, and be in addition to the total humanitarian intake to ensure the program provides a true additional pathway to resettlement. AMES has experienced ongoing demand for the CSP in Victoria and receives continuing inquiries from local community members regarding AMES Expression of Interest (EOI) openings. AMES is of the view that undersubscription of CSP is due to the high visa application and settlement costs for Australian Supporters, and the narrowing criteria for inclusion into the program for applicants. In September 2020, AMES responded to the Review into the CSP being undertaken by the Commonwealth Coordinator-General of Migrant Services within the Department of Home Affairs raising these issues.

Onshore applicants

Many onshore applicants to the Humanitarian Program are already contributing to Australia's economic recovery by meeting labour demand, especially in regional areas. Removing a cap (or ceiling) applied to onshore applications, and supporting other pathways to permanent residency through the Permanent Migration Program could be considered. Given the likely protracted downturn in offshore arrivals due to Australia's border closure, visas granted to onshore applicants in 2021-22 are recommended to be in addition to offshore visas granted.

AMES recommends that the Department:

1. Increase Australia's Humanitarian program settings to 18,750 places in light of global refugee displacement and anticipated demand for resettlement in the coming years.
2. Review the process for assessing refugee applications with a view to reducing delays in finalising decisions.
3. Apply the Humanitarian Program's non-discriminatory principle of flexibility by expanding eligibility criteria for a humanitarian visa.
4. Prioritise repatriation flights from countries hosting significant numbers of humanitarian visa holders to avoid the risk of their health deteriorating.
5. Increase CSP places available and separate them from the overall 2021-22 Humanitarian Program intake.
6. Remove the cap on visas granted to onshore applicants to the Humanitarian program, and consider these in addition to offshore applicants while Australia's borders remain closed in 2021-22.

Regional settlement

Regional settlement is a recognised priority for the Australian Government, however COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on this goal. Accommodation demand in regional areas has tripled since the beginning of the pandemic, with reports of more than 40 applicants applying for one property and an increase in discrimination as agents look for couples with no children.

There is an opportunity for the Department to reposition HSP providers during this time to: scope alternative settlement locations, build capacity of communities in those regions, extend relationships with key stakeholders, and develop material on these regional locations to be shared with clients offshore. This has the potential to both develop a stronger connection to regional settlement and build support for regional regeneration. AMES HSP consortium reaches a large group of regional stakeholders and CALD communities across Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania, making AMES well placed to assess the readiness of current and new primary settlement locations to welcome new arrivals. AMES has previously provided advice to the Department regarding regional locations; for example in South Australia there is an identified readiness in a number of border towns to house, support and employ refugees. AMES Try, Test and Learn (TTL) project for the Department of Social Services has demonstrated the importance of linking humanitarian entrants to employers in regional areas; a process that relies on strong collaboration between stakeholders including regional councils, employers, community groups, and settlement service providers.

AMES recommends that:

7. HSP providers be engaged in the process of scoping alternative settlement locations, build the capacity of communities in those regions, build stakeholder relationships, and develop materials on regional locations.

AMES model for expanding settlement support

AMES Individual Pathway Plan (IPP) demonstrates innovation in settlement services and is seen as an attractive model by the Department for expansion across the sector:

The IPP

AMES has been trialling a collaborative and integrated approach to settlement service delivery in the Individual Pathway Plan (IPP). IPP refers to the process of building connections between employment, education and settlement in order to work together as one to deliver services that are comprehensive and cohesive while being more accessible and responsive to the needs of newly arrived refugees and migrants. AMES clients are exposed to several specialists early on in their settlement to assist in informing their settlement plan. This may include but is not limited to social support, support for regional resettlement, employment support (both regular and self-employment), volunteer support, services for youth, career planning and development and more.

AMES X App and in-language podcasts

Successful orientation for humanitarian clients in HSP is embedded in case management and structured to address the individual needs of the client. Experience has shown that it requires more than 10 topics with timeframes for achievement. Orientation requires repetition as it cannot be assumed that delivery of a topic will enable a client to maintain lifelong learning. Delivery of orientation through multiple platforms (dependent on the client) can amplify the learning process. AMES has developed a digital orientation app called AMES X which can be uploaded on a client's phone upon arrival and revisited when needed. Orientation podcasts have been developed for clients in multiple languages and can also be revisited when needed for repeat access and learning.

Since the start of the pandemic, AMES has piloted several strategies to support and engage humanitarian clients who remain offshore:

Virtual AMEP

In August 2020, AMES completed a five-week project to develop the Virtual AMEP for the Department; a mobile-first website build to cover three English as an Additional Language (EAL) course levels. The Virtual AMEP offered free and open access with over 170 learning modules across the three English language levels; a support knowledge base for teachers and students, mobile-first design and online analytics. In the first five days of its launch, 1,600 unique users accessed the site (with 2,300 total site visits). This data indicates that a tool such as the Virtual AMEP could be an effective innovation for refugees offshore and onshore.

Other modes of pre-arrival engagement

AMES has identified that contact with clients offshore, via client consent, can significantly impact client's ability to connect and engage earlier. Utilisation of podcasts, Virtual AMEP and other digital innovations could

vastly increase the ability for refugees to settle in a more timely manner. Collaboration with, and building from, the AUSCO content could also enhance refugee settlement. While borders remain closed, the Department could reposition HSP providers to establish connections, content, and better ways of working with clients offshore. Collaboration with AUSCO will enable providers to engage with refugees who are ready and able to start engaging in education or employment-readiness programs accelerating their settlement journey.

Delivering settlement services to humanitarian arrivals in quarantine

For humanitarian entrants granted travel exemptions, the two-week quarantine program has shown that these arrivals have benefited from time to connect and adjust to living in Australia. Connecting with these clients remotely through this period has allowed HSP Case Managers to develop trust and rapport sooner and enabled AMES staff to identify the best method and mode to engage with clients. This intervention has shown that clients can commence the settlement journey earlier through either digital orientation, podcasts or one on one sessions. AMES has been working with the COVID-19 Quarantine Victorian team and is well positioned to provide training on the needs of newly arrived refugees.

The following documents how implementation for the humanitarian model for hotel quarantine could enhance HSP deliverables:

- The Case Manager (CM) conducts the orientation needs assessment and establishes orientation learning goals while the client is in quarantine. CM encourages the client to self-assess and reflect on prior learnings that occurred if the client attended AUSCO training overseas.
- The CM supports client awareness of basic information associated with all orientation topics and outlines information that will be delivered during quarantine.
- The CM then plans, together with the client, the delivery of orientation.
- The information is delivered daily if possible at the time that suits the client. The information is delivered by support of a phone delivery script and complimented with multiple resources sent to the client via links or communicated during conversations.
- The CM continues to support the client's learning upon exit from the quarantine setting. The final assessment of learning happens a few months later when the initially delivered information is reinforced and learnings demonstrated.

AMES recommends that:

8. HSP providers be repositioned to establish connections, content, and new ways of working with clients who remain offshore.
9. The current structure and payment points within HSP be expanded to better utilise the skill set and capacity of HSP providers, help HSP providers retain their workforce, and enhance opportunities for newly arrived humanitarian entrants when borders open.

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