

Inquiry into Australia's engagement in Afghanistan

Public submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade,
21 January 2022

About AMES Australia

AMES Australia (AMES) is a statutory body of the Victorian Government and a significant provider of settlement, education, employment and social participation programs for newly arrived migrants and refugees in Australia. AMES is the largest provider of the Australian Government's Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) in Victoria and South Australia, and we draw on the direct experience of supporting humanitarian arrivals from Afghanistan in preparing this response.

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. We partner with professional, community and corporate organisations to ensure that refugees and migrants are connected to the networks and services that will best meet their goals and aspirations.

Context

AMES welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade and their Inquiry into Australia's engagement in Afghanistan. Since the early years of Australia's involvement in Afghanistan, AMES has been settling refugees fleeing the war there. Between March 2020 and August 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated Australian border closures meant that all refugee arrivals were drastically cut. The humanitarian crisis unfolding at Kabul airport in August 2021 necessitated a change to this approach, whereupon settlement service providers in Australia began preparing to welcome a large number of Afghan Locally Engaged Employee (LEE) refugees in a short space of time.

Many arrivals from this cohort, mostly holders of the Afghan subclass 449 visa, initially lacked basic necessities for life in Australia: identity documents, immediate access to social services, access to pre-arrival orientation and English language tuition etc. Furthermore, service providers such as AMES lacked the typical level of information about the arriving cohort and were challenged by the context of the public health emergency and lockdown conditions. While some of these circumstances are no longer critical issues, most arrivals have close family members who remain in danger in Afghanistan, and the cohort are awaiting what may be a difficult process for transitioning from the 449 visa to the standard permanent humanitarian visas that will allow a greater level of stability to support better settlement outcomes.

AMES response draws on our recent experience settling refugees from Afghanistan and provides the Committee with a lived experience picture of what took place and speaks directly to the capacity, suitability and delivery of settlement programs and support services for Afghan LEE who have recently arrived in Australia.

The 2021 humanitarian visa cohort in Victoria

Over 2020/21 following Australia's border closures, a small number of refugees resettled from Afghanistan – predominantly translators formerly employed to work with the ADF. Since the end of August 2021 however, AMES welcomed, housed and supported nearly 3,000 Afghan evacuees in Victoria (and hundreds more in South Australia) who were forced to flee their homes with only days to prepare following the Taliban's seizure of power in Kabul. The number of arrivals to Victoria represent the equivalent population of a medium sized town such as Anglesea or St Arnaud, arriving in the space of about a month. In normal years, before the COVID-19 pandemic, Victoria welcomed around 4,000 refugees to the State. In fifteen days of September, almost 2,000 Afghan refugees arrived. In the early days of the emergency response, settlement providers had very limited information about the cohort, often holding only basic manifests with numbers, names and flight details. In responding AMES accommodation team were able to secure 800 beds (in hotels or student accommodation) in a matter of days to accommodate the first arrivals.

Almost all of the arrivals required housing, food, clothing, personal necessities, medical, mental health and in some cases critical trauma support. Most had evacuated Kabul at extremely short notice and had spent up to a week at military facilities in Dubai where they were provided with footwear and a change of clothes, however they arrived in Australia without suitable footwear and clothing for the Australian winter.

All were provided with on arrival accommodation, and to date around half have been supported to find their own long-term housing. AMES are facilitating weekly workshops for the remaining who are yet to secure long-term housing. The easing of pandemic restrictions has alleviated some problems in this space.

Other critical activities in the first weeks of the arrivals included:

- Over 2,000 COVID-19 vaccinations were administered, with the vast majority now double dosed
- Over 200 orientation sessions were delivered informing arrivals about life in Australia
- Over 2,500 medical referrals were made
- Three babies were delivered safely
- Working with Quarantine Victoria to get clients through the hotel quarantine
- Hundreds of referrals to English language schools for children and Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) for adults
- Furnishing short-term accommodation with linen and utensils
- Distributing tablets donated to enable and improve digital access
- Assigning case managers and engaging partners and sub-contractors.

While the number of arrivals was significant requiring an upscaling of services that had been necessarily reduced due to significantly fewer arrivals over 2020 / 2021, ultimately there were many successes in the process and a high level of capability demonstrated by settlement providers. Given most of the Afghan cohort have close family in Afghanistan or Pakistan in critical need of refuge and reunion with their loved ones, AMES believes settlement providers in Australia are ready and able to accept additional arrivals. **Therefore, we strongly recommend Government consider an additional allocation of humanitarian and family reunion visas from Afghanistan in the coming months and years.**

Access and eligibility for services

A critical issue affecting the first months of life in Australia for the cohort was their access to and eligibility for services, particularly in the context of 2021 pandemic restrictions. The following section **asks the Committee to consider how visa settings and the fragmentation of services can complicate the settlement process for a cohort we aim to support to settlement success.**

A common trend with the evacuated cohort was a lack of identity documents, or individuals with identity documents deemed not suitable to immediately do things like open a bank account in Australia, enrol with Centrelink, easily/independently access healthcare etc. While this is often the case for refugees across the world, these issues are typically worked through before arrival in Australia. In these cases, providers such as AMES needed to respond with informal solutions in the short term, for example through the provision of shopping gift cards for basic food needs.

Many arrivals came with a good level of English, but for others acquiring English language will be an essential starting point for building a life in Australia. While many accessed AMEP online in their first weeks, others struggled to do so due to a complicated enrolment process, made worse by a poor understanding by education providers of the 449 visa and its various eligibilities. AMES sought feedback from 104 arrivals from the 2021 Afghan LEE cohort, and found a large majority of families, 87.5 per cent, said Australia's settlement programs were meeting their needs. However, only 59 per cent said government services were easy to access.

The impact of a temporary visa, versus the more typical permanent resettlement visa can have the effect of limiting access to support (even when eligible) to visa holders. While holders of the 449 visa are able to study, work and lease housing – all of these important activities are made more difficult when viewed by institutions reticent to work with temporary visa holders. AMES housing workers report having to liaise closely with refugee applicants, agents and landlords to secure long term housing (approximately 300 houses secured to date) and while there have been many success stories (for example recently, AMES housing workers helped a family of 21 to secure three houses in close proximity to each other) – many remain in short term accommodation despite living for months in Australia.

Provider readiness

Settlement services providers (particularly those delivering initial settlement support through the HSP) have faced difficulties scaling up at speed after 18 months of scaling down operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most providers had reduced numbers of case workers at a time when providers suddenly had more clients than ever before. As an example, AMES had limited information about the large cohort on arrival, and many times refugees were transferred from one state to another, arriving with less than 24 hours' notice. While all were able to be housed, typically providers prepare for the healthcare and other needs based on a good understanding of family and cultural composition prior to their arrival.

Additionally, the cohort arriving was not homogenous, and in many cases the profile of families and individuals was quite different to those arriving from Afghanistan in previous years, for example, a wide variety of educational, ethnic and class backgrounds; differing expectations from service providers; differing visa status and; a wide variety of experience of Australian culture (many arrivals had in fact spent time in the country and knew what to expect here). Some arrived ready and eager to work. An example is Khalid (not his real name) who states: "It was strange feeling because the last time I had been through [Kabul airport] I was wearing a suit ...now all I had was a bag with my laptop, a spare pair of jeans and an extra T-shirt.... I don't want to be called a refugee forever. I want to develop a career in the media here in Australia."

A vast diversity of healthcare issues presented themselves within days of the cohort arriving. One individual had been suffering headaches, dating back to 2019. His condition was not diagnosed until he arrived in Melbourne after being evacuated from Kabul. He had a tumour on his pituitary gland which would have ultimately killed him. The tumour was removed recently at Melbourne's Cabrini Hospital. Identifying these most critical issues among the thousands of arrivals was challenging with a reduced capacity and the success speaks to the resilience of service providers in Australia, and the energy and good will to work over and above what is normal to support the cohort.

A learning from this emergency context, is that institutions require more agility to adequately respond in future. Ideally, visa processing capacity would improve to provide greater certainty and stability for arrivals and those who remain in Afghanistan. A national approach to coordinating the arrivals would also have benefitted settlement providers who had limited ability to plan ahead more than a few days during the first weeks of significant arrivals. Banks and income support services also were unable to scale up at a rate necessary to meet demand in those first weeks and months.

Community readiness

As providers ramped up and coordinated the formal response to arrivals in Victoria, the community response was significant: filling many short-term gaps, providing familiar food and community links, easing the transition to life in Australia and ultimately demonstrating the good will and support that positively influences long term settlement outcomes. However, this voluntary support required significant coordination. This clearly demonstrated that voluntary and unfunded community interventions are not a panacea for large, sudden intakes – they are a resource whose work is amplified when coordinated.

AMES re-purposed the Multicultural Hub, based in central Melbourne, as a donations hub for clothing, shoes, toiletries, and other essentials that were in high demand. Donors ranged from individuals through to Afghan community groups; Afghan restaurants; Christian churches, supermarkets, national retailers and manufacturers, local Government and major healthcare providers.

As noted above, many new arrivals experienced lengthy delays accessing income support, and could not access funds in accounts located in Afghanistan. Many charitable donations from individuals and institutions went towards the purchase of gift vouchers. In the absence of income support, the vouchers were significant as they gave families choice and agency. Purchasing, acquitting, and allocating these materials involved coordination and engagement from AMES finance team and other non-settlement staff.

As these sorts of community support were and continue to be essential, they were not simply 'filling gaps': they enhance and complement existing support services in an increasingly complex social environment for refugees in Australia. For example, AMES has connected with the *Bakhtar Community Organisation*, an umbrella group founded in 2017 that seeks to bring together the different Afghan ethnic groups. The organisation is supporting AMES to settle refugees through providing interpreting services and case work. It is a secular, non-political and non-religious organisation, formed in opposition to the ethnic rivalries and disputes that characterised Afghanistan during Taliban rule. Through links to similar organisations around Melbourne, over 300 people were billeted or housed with fellow Afghans.

Noting the differences in the many waves of humanitarian arrivals from Afghanistan, culminating with the 2021 evacuees – AMES believes community approaches to welcoming new arrivals is important in fostering long term settlement success and social cohesion. Community organisations are key to settlement success, however quality support and coordination is essential for voluntary work and thus volunteer responses cannot be viewed as an alternative model for settlement, including under crisis scenarios.

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