



Refugee Council
of Australia



NATIONAL SETTLEMENT POLICY TELECONFERENCE

REFUGEE YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION: FINDING THE RIGHT TIME AND PLACE

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Notes from keynote presentation by Dr Howard Nicholas¹

1. Key challenges for refugee young people in education

- *Diversity of young people's backgrounds* – The diversity of young peoples' background is overlaid with the common factor of substantial educational disruption. They are not a single group with a single solution and a single program that is going to work.
- *Young refugee people have enormous (often-negative) knowledge of the world but lack of formalised school content due to educational disruption* – There is a need to learn the 'local' (cultural) building blocks and establish a place in the (local, cultural) system. Young refugees may be worldly but they are unfamiliar with the rules and systems of this particular 'world'.
- *Previous experiences of refugees have led to a sense of insecurity (lack of faith in the system)* – As a result, young refugees have been very apt at finding ways around systems and coping with life without systems as these cannot be easily trusted. The sense that there is a system there acting 'in good faith' is essentially a new and foreign experience.
- *Physical adjustments to the constraints of institutional education* – Institutional education requires people to sit still and to concentrate for extended periods. 16-18 year olds sometimes for the first time in their lives have to sit still in a single place for 45 minutes to 1.5 hours and to concentrate; this is a formidable physical challenge and flexibility is required.
- *Mismatch between age and place in educational 'ladder'* – Ages of young refugees are diverse ranging from 16-24 years old. Some have never been to school or have literacy in ANY language, may be physically and emotionally more mature than people their own age and much more experienced than people of comparable age. However, very often they are treated as uncertain and unknowing. Therefore, how they may feel about themselves and what their experiences have taught them, together with how systems treat them in the way they are located in an educational program, often leads to great mismatches.
- *Conflict between State-based and Federal-based support structures* – The needs of young refugees are not met on a uniform basis, some are met at the Federal level whilst others at the State level. The recent arrangement put in place with some access to the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)

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for 15-17 year olds who drop out of school in their first year (as of 2009) is a much welcome change as it has decreased rigidity across systems.

- *Competing demands* – Young refugees need to contend with the conflict between obtaining an education with a view to their future vs. money for themselves and/or their family now. Additionally there is a competing demand for looking after themselves and/or others (including children who may or may not be their own biological children). The competing demands often extend beyond the expected roles and responsibilities of young people as defined in Australian systems.
- *Narrow specifications of high status careers (doctor, lawyer, and engineer)* – The challenge of a stereotypical view of high status careers and number of times young refugee people identify with being a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer as the career aspiration. It is worrying that the need to achieve such aspiration is often seen as one needed to be achieved in order to serve their families.
- *Sense of impatience* – Needs of young refugees are urgent, they cannot afford the time to go through many years of schooling or 12-18 years of education. An organised and efficient education system gets in the way of people who need things NOW.
- *Rich network of support, but enormous lack of transparency* – Work undertaken by the Victorian Settlement Planning Committee in trying to document the sorts of support available for refugees shows that the network of groups, individuals or organisations attempting to address problems faced by refugees is daunting to those who sit outside the system. Comprehension of what your choices are, where you can go first, where you go second, what happens if this does not work, who to trust for advice, what is the next step etc. create a major challenge to the very richness of the network of support for it becomes a non-transparent web which is difficult to navigate.
- *Speed required to access support conflicts with the need to slow down* – Immense speed is required to access support, i.e. newly arrived young people need to register for one thing within three months and for another within six months. The necessity for speed in order to comply with support requirements negates the fact that for many young refugees, this time in their lives is the first time that they actually have had the opportunity to slow down.
- *Perception of TAFE sector as a second class option rather than as part of a pathway* – The TAFE sector is seen to exclude training for status professions such as doctors or lawyers which relates back to the stereotypical views held as mentioned above. A lack of understanding exists as to how the Vocational, Education and Training (VET) sector fits into a network of educational opportunities and pathways which can lead to both financially rewarding and career rewarding outcomes.
- *Relatively small (dispersed) numbers of people in this category* – The relatively small and dispersed numbers of people in this category (refugee young people with disrupted education) together with their settlement patterns creates an additional challenge. The challenge for providers is how to look after a group which is dispersed. It is more economically viable to look after a group of 30 as opposed to a small group of three. Dispersed settlement patterns leads to other challenges for the provision of educational services. A pertinent example is how schools may choose to offer first language support and development programs such as Languages Other Than English (LOTE), as small numbers of commonality amongst students reduces the chance that such programs will be delivered, i.e. Better to have 216 families in the school rather than six.
- *Many innovations* – The innovations are many but it is extraordinarily difficult for the varying sectors to keep up with pace of innovation.

2. Education/training sector responses

- *Responses are not always targeted at young refugees but are responses which can 'get in the way'*
 - One potential positive is the Youth Guarantee (introduced in Victoria in 2006; Australia from 2009). This is agreement by Council of Australian Governments (COAG) for 'Job, training and youth transitions' for 15-19 year olds to education or training; entitlement to improve qualifications for 20-24 year olds. Expectation that by 2015 90% of people between the ages of 20 and 24 will have

either Year 12 or Certificate II, and Certificate III by 2020. Whilst the Youth Guarantee is a good start it does not fit neatly in the educational 'ladder' i.e. the codification of requirements that people be in formal programs can make it complex for those who do not quite fit in. COAG's expectation that by 2015 90% of people between the ages of 20 and 24 will have either Year 12 or Certificate II is a response that can end up creating barriers for those who are not clearly located within the structured system which is designed to achieve particular outcomes. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) has the potential to make it difficult for those who do not fit in the system, as everyone will be expected to have a qualification. Those lacking a qualification due to their "lack of fittedness" will therefore stand out even more.

- *Increased entitlements for State-based programs* - e.g. Positive steps in ESL support for young refugees in [NSW](#), [Victoria](#) and [South Australia](#).
- *Council of Australian Governments (COAG) post-compulsory education age* - from 1 January 2010 all people under age 17 must be in full time (at least 25 hours) education, training or employment. This is a codified expectation. Given the background sketched earlier on, this has been designed to increase the skills of a wide range of people in Australia, but this could end up being a disenfranchising barrier to young refugees.
- *Bradley review of higher education sector* - (see also www.voced.edu.au; www.ncver.edu.au) - by 2025, 40% of Australian 25-34 year olds will have at least a degree; from 2012 universities funded on the basis of demand for courses; improved connections between universities and VET sector; by 2020 20% of higher education enrolments will come from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds - low SES as the frame for everything; much more a single sector than distinct universities and VET sectors. The Review has attempted to reshape the relationship between the VET and university sector. It addresses the massive expectation that by 2025, 40% of Australian 25-34 year olds will have at least a degree and recognises how such an expectation places a need for investment in this sector of education. This poses the challenge for universities to attract new students and in particular disadvantaged students into their programs. Options are to develop outreach partnerships with schools and other sector organisations. A major problem with this expectation is that the goals that have been set are framed almost exclusively in terms of low SES background and that simply is a bad fit for young refugee people; to the extent that participation goals understood specifically around low SES might lead to a lack of recognition of the needs of refugee young people.
- *Response to AMEP review* - (<http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/help-with-english/amep/>) The way the AMEP will be restructured from 2010 may be a way of looking at how non-university and other sectors can combine to produce useful outcomes, although at this stage it is not clear as to how such an objective may be achieved.

3. Research on education/training and refugee young people

- *'Opening the Door': Provision for Refugee Youth with Minimal/No Schooling in the Adult Migrant English Program* - The report argues for the education sector to be more flexible, to find innovative ways of supporting previously disenfranchised or marginalised young refugees so as they can become involved in education. (See: www.ameprc.mq.edu.au/docs/research_reports/research_report_series/Opening_the_door.pdf)
- *What does research in education show us?* Apart from all of the above, it highlights the multiplicity of young refugees' needs and the competition of satisfaction of those needs in providing pathways and a beneficial level of support. Despite the fact that there was substantial learning progress, it was extraordinarily difficult to document that progress with the standardised measures used in the research, even in places which were sensitive to the issues of English as a Second Language (ESL) learning such as the AMEP. Recognised learning will become more of a challenge when we move into school sectors whereby the recognition of ESL as a distinctive feature is less robust than it is in the AMEP. The actual learning challenge is not easily recognisable within standard educational programs as phonological awareness as precursor to literacy development or the nature of the

relationship between what someone says, what they read and patterns that can be seen in the written word, is something that requires a fair amount of work and which is quite challenging for adults. These skills are normally acquired at the ages of 4-5 years old with colours, finger-painting etc. and are thus distinctly odd for adults. As a result, more research is required in relation to adults who have no literacy in any language at all and what can be expected as signs of learning progress.

- *Making mistakes* – Lack of experience with formal learning means that mistakes are made (young people choose the wrong course) and space is needed to redress these mistakes. Young people have to make mistakes to work out what they need, but the research shows that inflexible learning pathways generally block such opportunities.
- *Young people need distinctive treatment* – Young people are not the same as ‘oldies’ (27 y.o. can be old in this context) – they have different needs in relation to sense of culture; sense of physicality. Need for young people to have capacity and space to move whilst they are learning and to have a learning environment which has movement rather than calmness.

4. Future directions and opportunities

- *The pertinent example of Melbourne’s Somali youth* - The Somali youth in Melbourne is now maturing and in some ways repeating the intergenerational/intercultural struggles, gains and losses of much earlier migrant generations who matured in the ‘60’s and ‘70s. There is now a younger generation with an experience of the culture and education systems in Australia who are looking for ways to play a leading role in shaping something that will recognise their identity and offer experiences not accessed before. As depicted in the 1980s stage shows ‘Wogs Out of Work’, they seek to explore their distinctive perceptions of self & place within the local. This exploration can provide new ways of operating which has the capacity to recognise intergenerational gaps and intercultural ironies and which can reshape accumulated knowledge and experiences for the good of Australian society.
- *Family literacy (including cultural learning)* – ESL needs may be lost in general frameworks that see ‘disadvantage’ as ‘low SES’ or simply ‘insufficient English’. New funding arrangements between State and Federal governments mandated by COAG indicate that funding for ESL is being reduced and, whilst not entirely lost, is being woven into a general funding formula which will make it more difficult to track how it is being used and its impact on ESL-learners with a background of disrupted education.
- *Flexible networks* – mobility within Australia and between Australia and other parts of the world is an issue. Responses need to engage with diasporic communities in a range of other countries.
- *Solid data on pathways and barriers* – Data which is quantifiable is required. Experiences of young refugees needs to be documented: where they go, what they experience, how many end up benefiting or not from the experiences that they have.
- *Ginger Groups* – Such groups need to target government initiatives. Eg. Individual student number so that refugee students’ achievements/experiences can be traced. A concerted effort in this realm can transform the enormous amount of goodwill given by some government departments into concrete action that will target the group in question.