



## DISCUSSION PAPER: PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Increasing attention has been paid to the barriers to accessing higher education for people seeking asylum in Australia who arrived by boat. In recent years, a number of Australian universities have responded by offering 'humanitarian scholarships' to people in this situation. However, under-examined challenges exist related to the retention, participation and success of, and support for these students in their studies.

This symposium seeks to bring together people with lived experience of seeking asylum, academics, university administrators and community organisations. It will work towards identifying key research/advocacy priorities and the development of an advocacy report, which can be used to speak to these issues.

### Background

There are currently around 30,000 asylum seekers living in Australia who arrived by boat and are in the midst of having their claims processed. Once they are found to be refugees, they will not be eligible for permanent residency in Australia and will instead be granted either a Temporary Protection Visas (TPV) or a Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEV).

As they are not permanent residents of Australia, people seeking asylum and refugees on TPVs and SHEVs do not have access to the same services and entitlements as permanent protection visas holders or refugee and humanitarian entrants who are resettled from overseas. Some of the most significant differences in entitlements are those relating to tertiary education. These people face significant barriers to tertiary education which will effectively prevent most people on these visas from pursuing further study, in turn diminishing their employment prospects and undermining positive settlement outcomes.

Unlike holders of permanent humanitarian visas, people seeking asylum (such as those on bridging visas) and refugees on temporary visas (such as those on a TPV or SHEV) are not eligible for Federal Government programs designed to assist students with financing tertiary study, including higher education loans schemes such as FEE-HELP and HECS-HELP, and Commonwealth Supported Places.

Without Government support, people are forced to pay international student rates to attend TAFE and university, in the thousands of dollars, effectively preventing them from furthering their education. These fees are likely to be unaffordable for the vast majority of people.

In the last two years, there have been some welcome developments by some of the State and Territory governments and universities to address this issue. We have outlined some of the key developments below.

## **Access to Universities, Vocational Education and TAFE**

Some universities have started to provide scholarships to asylum seekers on bridging visas and refugees on TPVs and SHEVs, which cover the entire cost of tuition for a degree. Australian universities that offer such scholarships include: Deakin University, Monash University, Macquarie University, University of Western Australia, Charles Sturt University, University of Tasmania, La Trobe University, Australian National University, Curtin University, University of Adelaide, University of Canberra, RMIT, Swinburne University, University of Notre Dame and University of Western Sydney.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, Victoria, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and South Australia have offered various supports for people to access Vocational Education and Training (VET), including concession rates for courses up to a diploma level.

While these offers of support and concession fees are very welcome, there are still many hurdles that people seeking asylum and refugees face in accessing further education.

### **Discussion 1: What more can be done to encourage and support universities to continue offering scholarships and to further expand the current scholarships on offer?**

#### **Income support**

Unlike permanent residents, refugees on TPVs and SHEVs who require income support only receive payments through Special Benefit, rather than through other income support programs such as the Newstart Allowance, Youth Allowance or Austudy. Recipients of Special Benefit who wish to pursue tertiary study can only continue to receive income support if they are undertaking a vocational course that is likely to enhance their employment prospects and which can be completed in 12 months or less.

As such, refugees on TPVs or SHEVs undertaking courses which take more than 12 months to complete will not be able to receive income support during this time. While other Australians are entitled to receive Austudy or Youth Allowance while studying, this is not available for TPV and SHEV holders. This is likely to seriously limit tertiary education opportunities for these visa holders. This policy also impacts on people being able to accept a scholarship from a university.

To address this, some institutions have offered various in-kind supports, stipends and living allowances. Others have sought to get around the policy hurdle by offering successive 12 month courses, allowing someone to continue to receive Special Benefits.<sup>2</sup> Other people have been able to continue their course on a part time basis, allowing them to receive income support or work part time.

This policy does not affect people still seeking asylum, such as those on a bridging visa, as they receive income support through the Status Resolutions Support Service.

### **Discussion 2: What can be done to support people who lose their income support?**

#### **Navigating the application process**

While scholarships from institutions have been welcome, a number of people have experienced difficulty in applying for universities. Often, they may be unaware of the scholarship and course requirements and the process for enrolling and applying for a scholarship. Further, obtaining the English level requirements and appropriate documentation, such as approved previous educational qualifications, provide additional challenges. Many universities also require online applications, presenting a hurdle for those unfamiliar

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<sup>1</sup> Further information regarding university scholarships in Australia to asylum seekers and persons on temporary visas can be found at <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/ourwork/scholarships-people-seeking-asylum-refugees/>

<sup>2</sup> Note that this is still subject to the discretion of their job services provider. For a detailed explanation, please see: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/ourwork/settlement-ourwork/education/special-benefit-income-support-tpv-shev-holders/>

with the process. Finally, a number of people have indicated experiences of being turned away by frontline staff at the university who were not aware that such scholarships for people seeking asylum existed.

Thankfully, a number of these barriers are successfully being addressed. However, the issue highlights the additional support that this group may require in order to fully participate in higher education.

### **Discussion 3: How can universities improve their application processes and the support they offer to those wishing to apply?**

#### **Settling into university life**

Even once a person is offered a scholarship, there are a range of new challenges they must face. This includes navigating the university system and campus, understanding the course requirements and purchasing books, a laptop and equipment in order to study. Some universities have offered a stipend to cover the costs of these items. Other universities have developed peer mentoring programs to support people settle into university life.

### **Discussion 4: What support can be provided to people once they start university?**

#### **Learning from other countries**

The situation faced by people seeking asylum in Australia is unfortunately not unique. According to UNHCR, only 1% of refugees ever go to university.<sup>3</sup> In response, movements around the world have sought to address this issue.

One example is the Article 26 project which developed in response to barriers faced by people seeking asylum in the UK.<sup>4</sup> The Article 26 project works in partnership with universities to provide advice and guidance on creating packages of support for students seeking asylum. This includes a full tuition fee bursary and funding to meet some of the additional costs associated with studying.

Another UK example is the Universities of Sanctuary initiative which celebrates the good practice of universities by welcoming people seeking asylum and refugees into their university community and foster a culture of welcome and inclusion for all.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Building a national movement of support**

While the supports and solutions detailed earlier show a welcome move to support people seeking asylum to access university and VET, many of these initiatives are being done by individual universities. While there are number of collaborations within Australia, such as the Refugee Education Special Interest Group, we believe it is important to look at building a movement across the country to better support this group of students.

A change in government policy that recognises at least TPV/SHEV holders as domestic students could address their need for full-fee paying scholarships in the first place. This raises the question of how the university sector might be supported and encouraged to support calls for policy change such as replacing TPVs/SHEVs with permanent visas.

### **Discussion 5: How can we build a national movement to support people seeking asylum access higher education?**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/news/stories/2017/9/59c391214/online-study-scheme-gives-refugee-students-degree-hope.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://article26.hkf.org.uk/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/>