



## 2022 JOBS AND SKILLS SUMMIT

# EIGHT OPPORTUNITIES TO INCREASE THE POTENTIAL OF HUMANITARIAN MIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA

As the Australian Government prepares for the [2022 Jobs and Skills Summit](#), it is timely to consider how refugee and humanitarian entrants can and do contribute to meeting Australia's current and future challenges.

## Refugees contribute significantly to Australia's economy and fill important employment gaps

While the objective of the Refugee and Humanitarian Program is to provide safety and a long-term solution to people in need of international protection, research has also clearly shown the significant contribution that refugee and humanitarian entrants make to the Australian economy, including in the areas of jobs and skills.<sup>1</sup> This relates to:

- **The younger demographic profile** and long-term engagement in the Australian labour market of humanitarian entrants (i.e. a median age 15 years younger than the national average and the lowest settler loss rate of any migrant group).<sup>2</sup>
- Refugee-humanitarian **labour force participation rates** converge toward that of the Australia-born population over time. The second generation performs at a higher level. Humanitarian entrants engage disproportionately in the labour force in some regional areas, and in industries where there are significant labour shortages.<sup>3</sup>
- Refugee-humanitarian settlers show **greater propensity to form their own business** than other migrants and risk-taking, entrepreneurialism and an ability to identify and take advantage of opportunities is a key characteristic of the group.<sup>4</sup>
- Refugee and humanitarian entrants **facilitate the development of trade** between Australia and their countries of origin.

## Humanitarian entrants face barriers in securing employment

Barriers and challenges faced by refugee and humanitarian entrants seeking employment in Australia are well evidenced. These relate to:

- **Job-seeker characteristics:** English levels, the need to upskill or retrain, particularly for those who have had limited opportunities to work and education prior to settlement, lack of Australian work experience, health and trauma recovery, understanding of and navigating the Australian labour market.
- **Labour market and other structural barriers:** recognition of qualifications and prior experience, accessibility of recruitment processes, racism and discrimination, access to transport and childcare, ineffective job services.

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<sup>1</sup> Hugo (2011). [A Significant Contribution: The Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants](#); Deloitte Access Economics (2019). [Economic and social impact of increasing Australia's humanitarian intake](#)

<sup>2</sup> The median age of migrants can differ substantially across different visa categories. Permanent Humanitarian visa entrants tended to be the youngest arrivals with a median age of 22.7 years. In contrast the overall Australian population was considerably older with a median age of 37.3 years. See ABS (2018). [Spotlight on overseas net migration](#)

<sup>3</sup> AMES (2015). [Small Towns Big Returns: Economic and Social Impact of Karen Resettlement in Nhili](#).

<sup>4</sup> Radford et al. (2021). [Refugees Rejuvenating and Connecting Communities: An analysis of the social, cultural and economic contributions of Hazara humanitarian migrants in the Port Adelaide Enfield area of Adelaide, South Australia \(Summary Report\)](#).

- **Immigration and visa status:** There are many people whose visa status presents significant challenges for accessing or sustaining employment, with employers hesitant to take on workers whose visa status is unclear or requires regular renewal. This includes:
  - 19,491 refugees on **temporary protection visas** (TPVs or SHEVs) that need to be periodically renewed.
  - 107,177 people who applied for protection and are either waiting for an initial decision, have applications under review, or have received a final refusal.<sup>5</sup> A large number **do not have work rights** and all are on **bridging visas that require regular renewal**.

## **Targeted interventions work in facilitating refugees' transition to employment**

Refugee and humanitarian entrants are a **significantly diverse population group**. Many arrive with overseas qualifications and extensive prior work experience – they were business-owners, doctors, electricians, teachers, managers and engineers. Others will have had limited opportunities to access training, education or work opportunities, or may have significant disruptions in their work histories due to experiences of persecution, conflict and displacement. What works in facilitating refugee transitions into an Australia employment context will vary significantly.

There is evidence of **approaches that work** in supporting refugee employment transitions.<sup>6</sup> These include:

- Individual case management and referral services, particularly specialist services
- Mentoring programs with an employment focus
- Information and training on Australian work culture and systems
- Work experience programs
- Industry-related training targeting migrant and refugee communities
- Services providing career advice, planning and job search support
- Social enterprise and initiatives supporting small business development
- Services advocating and liaising directly with employers
- Services providing support with skills and qualification recognition
- English language classes with an employment focus; and
- Post-employment follow-up and support.

## **Here are eight opportunities to more fully realise the potential of humanitarian-migration**

In the current context of low unemployment rates, there are opportunities for refugee and humanitarian entrants to contribute to the challenges facing the Australian economy and get a foot in the labour market door sooner with the right support. This could be done by:

### **1. Expanding the Humanitarian Program**

The 2020-21 Humanitarian Program was the smallest in 45 years, with only 5,749 visas granted. The 2022-23 program has a ceiling of 17,875 places. In its election platform, the Australian Labor Party put forward an aspiration to increase the Humanitarian Intake to 32,000 places: 27,000 places per year in the Refugee and Humanitarian Program, with 5,000 additional places set aside for community sponsorship.<sup>7</sup> It is the view of the Refugee Council and many of our members that the Albanese Government is well positioned to be able to realise its aspirations in a timely and considered manner. With a significant stock of visa applications pending and capacity and willingness within the settlement sector and broader community to scale up resettlement, there is potential to meet and exceed the aspirations to expand Australia's commitment to refugee resettlement. The positive flow-on effects on the Australian labour force of an increased humanitarian intake will be felt for years to come.

Implementing the Government's commitment to expand community sponsorship to 5,000 places outside of the Humanitarian Program may also address labour shortages, especially as sponsors have a unique role in helping new arrivals find employment and utilising their social capital.

<sup>5</sup> Statistics are from 31 July 2022. 95,364 are people seeking protection who arrived on a valid visa and 11,813 who arrived in Australia by boat and sought asylum before December 2014 ('Legacy caseload'). See: Department of Home Affairs. [Monthly Update: Onshore Protection \(Subclass 866\) Visa Processing - July 2022](#) and [UMA Legacy Caseload: Report on Processing Status and Outcomes – July 2022](#)

<sup>6</sup> Refugee Council of Australia (2010). [What works: Employment strategies for refugee and humanitarian entrants](#)

<sup>7</sup> ALP National Platform (2021). <https://alp.org.au/media/2594/2021-alp-national-platform-final-endorsed-platform.pdf>

## **2. Reinstating work rights and exploring alternative visa pathways for people already in Australia**

Finding ways to regularise visa status and remove employment barriers for the 107,000 people who have sought asylum and are currently in Australia is vital. This is important in the context of the lengthy delays in processing onshore protection applications (for example, it takes an average of two years to process an initial application and six years for a decision which is appealed to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal).<sup>8</sup> This means that a person can be waiting in Australia for many years before they receive a decision about their refugee claim. In this time, they usually remain on a bridging visa with the same conditions as their original visa. It means their access to work rights can be limited or denied, despite the change in their personal circumstances. For example, people who entered Australia on a tourist visa often have no work rights.

Instating or reinstating work rights for people who have sought protection as they move through the review and processing stages, and exploring options for alternative skilled visa pathways for those who have received a final refusal on their protection claim, will reduce the risk of worker exploitation and ensure that people who have been working for many years, often in important skills shortage areas, can continue to sustain their contribution to the Australian labour force.

## **3. Granting refugees on temporary protection visas a permanent visa**

Implementing the Government's commitment to end Temporary Protection Visas and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas will help in addressing labour shortages. While refugees on these visas have work rights, the temporary nature of these visas creates uncertainty for employers and is often a barrier for people finding secure and ongoing work. Granting a permanent visa to these refugees will support them to further contribute to the Australian workforce.

## **4. Expanding and extending the Skilled Refugee Labour Mobility Agreement Pilot**

The Skilled Refugee Labour Mobility Agreement Pilot (SRLAP) is in its second year of implementation, with a cap of 200 places.<sup>9</sup> This initiative can be seen as a constructive response to addressing Australia's skills shortages, as well as providing a durable solution for refugees with relevant skills who may not otherwise be considered for resettlement due to vulnerability criteria, and who may face significant barriers to applying for skilled migrant visas due to their refugee status. Expanding and extending the SRLAP to 500 places in 2022-23 is achievable, particularly in the context of considerable private sector interest in attracting overseas talent and meeting corporate social responsibility targets, and the SRLAP implementing organisation (Talent Beyond Boundaries) having over 40,000 refugees currently listed on their global skills register. Although the pilot is still in its early stages and requires evaluation and a potential review of existing program design and visa costs, a scaling up of numbers within the parameters of the pilot in close consultation with Talent Beyond Boundaries<sup>10</sup> is a viable short-term proposition. Following a review, the SRLAP could be scaled up to thousands with the support of the private sector, making Australia competitive in talent attraction from diverse sources.

## **5. Targeted investment in specialist refugee employment services**

The findings of a government-funded review into integration, employment and settlement outcomes for refugees and humanitarian entrants in 2019 (Shergold Review) recommended the value of refugee place-based employment trials in key areas of refugee settlement, in recognition of the importance of specialist, employment-focused and place-based supports for facilitating refugee employment transitions.<sup>11</sup> Even within the parameters and funding of the Workforce Australia program, investing in refugee specialists is imperative to ensuring the distinct employment challenges and barriers faced by refugee and humanitarian entrants can be addressed. To date, there are very few refugee specialist employment services that have received funding through Workforce Australia, despite the existence of many organisations with considerable expertise and experience delivering both settlement and refugee employment-related services.

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<sup>8</sup> See Section 8, RCOA (2022). [Rebuilding a principled and strategic refugee program: Response to the Australian Government Discussion Paper on the 2022-23 Humanitarian Program](#)

<sup>9</sup> <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/skilled-migration-program/recent-changes/skilled-refugee-labour-agreement-pilot-program>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.talentbeyondboundaries.org/blog/introducing-the-australian-skilled-refugee-pilot>

<sup>11</sup> Shergold, Benson & Piper (2019). [Investing in Refugees. Investing in Australia: The findings of a Review into Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants in Australia](#)

## 6. Investing in programs that support refugee entrepreneurs and business development

In recognition of the skills, capacity and propensity of many refugees to set up businesses, initiatives that help refugee and humanitarian entrants set up businesses earlier on in their settlement journey can be an effective way to grow both employment and business opportunities. Programs that invest in refugee entrepreneurs – such as Thrive Refugee Enterprise<sup>12</sup> and Settlement Services International's Ignite Small Business Start-Ups<sup>13</sup> – or social enterprises that combine both training and employment opportunities within businesses – such as the Bread and Butter Project<sup>14</sup>, SisterWorks<sup>15</sup> and Mu'ooz Eritrean Restaurant and Catering<sup>16</sup> – could be expanded or replicated with targeted investment.

## 7. Reviewing and implementing changes to qualification and skills recognition processes

There are countless examples of refugee and humanitarian entrants with skills or qualifications relevant to the Australian labour market who have been unable to access or afford to have their skills and qualifications formally recognised. The process of overseas qualification recognition is expensive, complex and difficult to navigate, and can be made more difficult by cultural and linguistic differences. The Shergold Review reported that what matters to employers is that refugees can demonstrate what they can do, not just having a piece of paper that shows the certification that they have received overseas.<sup>17</sup> Any changes to overseas qualifications and skills recognition processes should ensure affordability and accessibility to refugee and humanitarian entrants, including those who may find difficulty accessing required documentation, but who would be willing and able to demonstrate their skills and knowledge to prospective Australian employers.

*Case study: 'Joseph' arrived on a permanent (Refugee) visa with his family through the Humanitarian Program. Prior to resettling in Australia, Joseph had worked for 27 years as an electrician in Ghana and Liberia. Seeking work as an electrician in Perth, Joseph was told he had to re-train and would need to undertake a full apprenticeship. Joseph decided not to pursue this path and utilise his skills and experience because his family of nine would struggle to survive on an apprenticeship wage. Instead, Joseph accepted work as a cleaner.*

## 8. Implementing findings arising from the development of a National Anti-racism Framework

There is a well-evidenced 'refugee gap' in labour market participation that cannot be explained by either skills, qualifications or English language differences and has been attributed in research to systemic factors including racism and discrimination.<sup>18</sup> It is important that the work currently underway by the Australian Human Rights Commission to develop a National Anti-Racism Framework is progressed and findings implemented, including where they relate to employment practices.

### For more information

The Refugee Council of Australia welcomes an opportunity to discuss these ideas or work collaboratively with the Australian Government on progressing these ideas further.

For more information, contact: [admin@refugeecouncil.org.au](mailto:admin@refugeecouncil.org.au)

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<sup>12</sup> <https://thriverefugeeenterprise.org.au/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.ssi.org.au/services/employment/ignite>

<sup>14</sup> <http://thebreadandbutterproject.com/about-us/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://sisterworks.org.au/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.muooz.com.au/>

<sup>17</sup> Shergold, Benson & Piper (2019). [Investing in Refugees, Investing in Australia: The findings of a Review into Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants in Australia](#), p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> Olliff et al. (2022). ["We will start building from that": Social capital, social networks and African migrants' job-seeking experiences in Australia](#); Colic-Peisker & Tilbury (2007). [Integration into the Australian Labour Market: The Experience of Three "Visibly Different" Groups of Recently Arrived Refugees](#); Hugo (2011). [A Significant Contribution: The Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants](#)