



People Seeking Asylum and Higher Education in Australia

Post-National Symposium Report
March 2018



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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 gaining access to university, as well as the retention, participation and success of, and support for these current students in their studies.

On 15 November 2017, the *National Symposium: Seeking Asylum and Higher Education* was hosted by Melbourne Social Equity Institute. The symposium brought together 25 people with lived experience of seeking asylum and 40 representatives from Australian universities and community organisations to share experiences, concerns, existing good practice and ideas and hopes for future advocacy and practice.¹

The day was designed to listen to and learn from the lived experience of students seeking asylum. As well, participants learnt from each other the experiences of community organisations and universities that had already developed programs and interventions to support students seeking asylum with their education.

This report highlights some of the main advocacy priorities and suggestions raised by participants at the symposium and offers some next steps to take on this broad issue.

Australian Policy Overview

There are currently around 30,000 people seeking asylum living in Australia who arrived by boat before 13 August 2012 and are in the midst of having their claims processed (those that sought asylum by boat after this date are either turned back at sea or held indefinitely in offshore detention in Nauru and Manus Island). This group of people in Australia have either been residing in community detention or on a bridging visa (subclass 050 – BVE) until their claims for protection are assessed. If they are found to be refugees by the Department of Home Affairs (formerly the Department of Immigration and Border Protection), they are not be eligible for Permanent Protection in Australia and will instead receive one of two temporary visas: a three year Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) or a five year Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV).²

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

¹ The event was co-convened by Dr Lisa Hartley (Centre for Human Rights, Curtin University) and Dr Sally Baker (School of Social Sciences, UNSW). Asher Hirsch (Refugee Council of Australia) and Karen Dunwoodie (Monash University) provided invaluable support. They were supported by a wider steering group comprising colleagues from the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN), the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), the Centre for Human Rights at Curtin University and Melbourne University.

² A TPV is a three-year temporary visas while a SHEV is a five year temporary visa. If a person on a SHEV works or studies in a regional area for 42 months they can apply for certain other visas in Australia. See <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/getting-help/legal-info/visas/difference-tpv-shev/>

visas holders or refugee and humanitarian entrants who were chosen offshore for resettlement through the humanitarian program. One of the impactful differences in entitlements are those relating to tertiary education. These people face significant barriers to accessing tertiary education, which effectively prevent most people on these visas from pursuing further study, which in turn diminishes their employment prospects and undermines positive settlement outcomes.³

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 the Higher Education Loans Program (HELP) such as FEE-HELP and HECS-HELP, Commonwealth Supported Places and concession rates.

This means people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary visas are required to pay international student fees to attend vocational education and training (VET) and university, which cost thousands of dollars. This actively prohibits them from furthering their education. These fees are unaffordable for the vast majority of people.

Further, those who do engage in study risk losing their income support. Those on a TPV or SHEV are not eligible for Centrelink if they study a course greater than 12 months, while people seeking asylum may lose their income support if the Department of Home Affairs deems them to be 'job ready', regardless of whether they are studying.

In a recent government policy development, the Department of Immigration and Border Control is removing people seeking asylum on bridging visas from Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) income and casework support if they deem the person to be 'job ready'. Those that are studying full time or part time and are deemed 'job ready' will be expected to support themselves if they wish to continue to study. This policy change is putting students at even greater risk of destitution.⁴

In the last two years, we have witnessed welcome developments by some of the State and Territory governments and universities who have sought to address some of these issues, through the provision of fee-waiver scholarships, bursaries, part-time jobs attached to the scholarship, travel cards and computers. These offerings have been greatly assisted by the Refugee Council of Australia's Education for All campaign.⁵ Further, Victoria, New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and South Australia have offered various supports for people to access VET, including concession rates for courses up to a diploma level.

³ Fleay, C., Lumbus, A. & Hartley, L. (2016). People Seeking Asylum in Australia and their Access to Employment: Just What Do We Know? *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal*, 8(2); Hirsch, A., & Maylea, C. (2016). Education denied: people seeking asylum and refugees trapped in limbo. *New Community*, 14(3). Hirsch, A. (2015). *Barriers to education for people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary visas*. Refugee Council of Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/1512-Education.pdf>

⁴ These changes do not affect people who have a protection visa (including a Temporary Protection visa, Safe Haven Enterprise visa (SHEV), a Permanent Protection visa (subclass 866) or any of the visas with subclasses 200, 201, 202, 203, 204). They do affect people who have a Bridging Visa and have applied for a protection visa, but are still waiting for a decision. See <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/getting-help/information-guidance/changes-to-srss/>

⁵ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/our-work/educationcampaign/>

Key Advocacy Issues and Suggested Solutions

In the symposium, participants who had lived experience of seeking asylum spoke of many challenges in trying to access higher education in Australia, including their treatment as international students, and the complicated application process. They also spoke about the inconsistency across institutions in the application requirements, lack of 'front-end' knowledge from student services, and difficulty and an associated level of 'fear' about completing online applications. Further, they spoke of the limitations on government-funded English language courses and income supports.

Student-participants also spoke of the importance of key people, such as a trusted broker or friend, in enabling their participation. For example, one student spoke positively of the profound impact that key people within community and university sectors have had in enabling access to higher education *"I am an example of what the community can do... when the community takes responsibility for others"*.

Representatives from universities and community organisations also shared examples of good practice as well as common challenges. These presentations showed both similarities and differences in institutional responses. They also reminded participants of how many responses had been developed in isolation, and the need for collaborative spaces.

University and community organisation responses to barriers facing people seeking asylum accessing higher education:

1. Providing full or part fee-waiver scholarships;
2. Providing a living allowance/ stipends;
3. Facilitating the acquisition of work on campus;
4. Employing a support/liaison offer to support people on scholarships throughout their studies.
5. Offering subsidised accommodation options;
6. Offering up to a year of English language tuition or an alternative pathway program to meet admissions criteria;
7. Waiving IELTS fees or providing funding to cover the cost of taking the IELTS test (so as to meet English language proficiency requirements);
8. Providing funds to cover course costs, such as textbooks and study equipment.

Details of these supports per university who presented at the symposium can be found on the summary PowerPoint file hosted on the Refugee Council of Australia's [website](#).⁶

⁶ For a complete list of what support universities who attended the symposium were providing as of November 2017, see https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/National-Symposium-People-Seeking-Asylum-in-HE_Community-and-University-Responses-15-Nov-2017.pdf
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/>

Based on a [discussion paper](#) sent before the symposium,⁷ participants also discussed in small groups four topics.

1. What can be done to further encourage and support universities to continue and expand their scholarship programs?
2. What can be done to support people who lose their income support?
3. How can universities improve their application processes and the support they offer to those wishing to apply?
4. What support can be provided to people once they start university?

Some of the main issues and suggestions from the discussions throughout the day are summarised below.

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

Several universities across Australia have started to provide or consider providing scholarships to asylum seekers on bridging visas and refugees on TPVs and SHEVs, which cover the entire cost of tuition for a full-fee paying 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, University of Canberra, University of New England, Curtin University, University of Adelaide, University of Canberra, RMIT, Swinburne University, University of Notre Dame and Western Sydney University.

In addition, at the time of the symposium, some universities mentioned they were offering a stipend to scholarship holders in recognition that people seeking asylum have little or no access to government funded income support.⁸

Discussion also focused on how alternative and sustainable forms of funding can be made available to expand the current number of scholarships on offer. A range of ideas were discussed in this regard, including repurposing of funds, staff giving, and alumni.

Main suggestions:

- People with lived experience need to be given opportunities to inform policy and practice.
- Continued lobbying for an end to TPVs and SHEVs and for refugees to be granted permanent visas.
- Continued lobbying of universities to offer more scholarships while recognising the financial limitations within each institution of doing so.
- Part-time and flexible options for scholarship holders need to be made available where possible.

⁷ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/DISCUSSION-PAPER-People-Seeking-Asylum-and-Higher-Education.pdf>

⁸ https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/National-Symposium-People-Seeking-Asylum-in-HE_Community-and-University-Responses-15-Nov-2017.pdf

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/>

- The need to elevate the powerful stories about people who have received such scholarships, who given the chance to use their skills and experiences could meaningfully contribute to society and economy.
- As a way of creating an argument for universities to make more scholarships available, create a template for a standard business case around the cost-opportunity analysis of people in education versus people stuck in limbo/ welfare/ low-status jobs.
- Need to disseminate research findings and insights more 'loudly' – universities are experts at selling positive messages about scholarships (in comparison with less positive media/political messaging). This should be carefully managed, however, balancing the need for privacy around people's identity.

2. What can be done to support people who lose their income support?

Welfare payments

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 eligible to receive income support during this time. This will seriously limit participation in tertiary education opportunities for these visa holders, even if a student is a recipient of a scholarship, as it not only impacts on people being able to accept a scholarship from a university, it also puts on substantial pressure to try to balance work and study in conditions of severe precarity.

This is compounded by a recent policy development, in which the Department of Immigration and Border Control is removing people seeking asylum on bridging visas from SRSS income and casework support if they deem the person to be 'job ready'. Those that are studying full time or part time and are deemed 'job ready' will be expected to support themselves if they wish to continue to study.

Accommodation

All participants identified accommodation as one of the most crucial issues to be considered, in particular paying for suitable, safe accommodation that is appropriate for full-time study. University-participants discussed cases of students homelessness, including the case of a student camping on the beach while studying due to housing insecurity and inability to pay rent.

One student discussed her successful experience with homestay—living with an Australian family while completing her studies—and other students expressed interest in this option, not only as a safe and cost-effective alternative but as a way of enjoying a sense of 'belonging' to the Australian community. Other students also stressed that this was not a viable solution for them due to the potential for the host family to take advantage of their situation. Homestay is an option that has a number of risks and therefore needs to be carefully considered.

Some institutions are offering stipends to help alleviate this stress; however, it is clear more needs to be done.

Basic living costs

One participant described their daily living as a student as 'eat, survive, study'. 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.⁹ Other people have been able to continue their course on a part-time basis, allowing them to receive income support and/ or work part time.

Main suggestions:

- The Federal Government should ensure all people seeking asylum and refugees have access to income support, on par with other Australians;
- Universities should be encouraged to either subsidise or donate accommodation for the students who receive scholarships;
- Opportunities for students for employment on campus should be provided;
- Safe, suitable accommodation could be built into any scholarships offered and organised for students by the universities; and

3. How can universities improve their application processes and the support they offer to those wishing to apply?

While scholarships from institutions are welcome, a number of student-participants noted having extreme difficulties in applying for scholarships. Student-participants described being unaware of the scholarship and course requirements, and the process for enrolling and applying for a scholarship. A number of student-participants also indicated they had experiences of being misrecognised and sometimes turned away by frontline staff at the university, because staff were not aware that such scholarships for people seeking asylum existed. Further, they found advice complicated (or not clearly articulated) and eligibility criteria as unclear due to a lack of clarity relating to the different visa categories. For example, someone on a Bridging Visa A (who may have arrived by plane) might be excluded from applying for many of the scholarships currently available because scholarships are only offered to people seeking asylum who are issued a Bridging Visa E.

Many universities also require students to complete and submit applications through an online platform, presenting a hurdle for those unfamiliar with such procedures or without access to digital technologies to facilitate the process. A number of student-participants discussed how they found that online applications were difficult to navigate.

One student-participant highlighted their desire to study a PhD, however, it was very difficult getting information from universities as to whether scholarships are available for postgraduate studies. Related to this, the vast majority of scholarships only enable enrolment to undergraduate degrees, which precludes students who have a desire to study at a postgraduate level.

⁹ 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/>

Important questions were also raised regarding the need to dismantle institutional barriers. For example, IELTS test result requirements are too high to enable access for people seeking asylum, and sitting IELTS tests is costly.

Main suggestions:

- The need for greater collaboration and coordination between universities to streamline the application process across institutions and ensure parity of information shared with potential applicants;
- Universities could consider offering trained mentors for the application process;
- Holistic approach to support with an investment and commitment from all faculties and divisions within the University;
- Universities should offer the opportunity to apply face-to-face, rather than fully-online;
- University staff with roles relating to scholarships, equity and admissions should be trained on the specific needs of students.

4. What support can be provided to people once they start university?

Even once a person is offered a scholarship there are a range of new challenges students from asylum seeker backgrounds must face. This includes navigating the university system and campus, understanding the course requirements and purchasing items such as books, a computer and other equipment required for study. Some universities have begun offering a stipend to cover the costs of these items.

Personal support—in terms of developing connections with other students, departments and supports within the university—were also highlighted as a barrier to engagement. In particular, students moving from regional areas can face isolation and have a greater need to make community connections. Some universities have developed peer-mentoring programs to support people settle in this regard.¹⁰

Students with ongoing health concerns and disability were also raised as a particularly vulnerable group of people, particularly with regards to accessing appropriate and affordable health care and support undertaking studies.

Main suggestions:

- More information needs to be collected about the numbers of students seeking asylum who struggle with ongoing health and disability and the official structures in place to support such students.
- Advocacy should be taken at a national, state/government and institutional level to ensure people with disabilities can access the same study supports as domestic students with disabilities.
- On-campus mental health support, counselling services as well as career advisors need to be made more visible, accessible and informed

¹⁰ For example, Vickers, M., McCarthy, F. & Zammit, K. (2017) Peer mentoring and intercultural understanding: Support for refugee-background and immigrant students beginning university study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 60, 198-209

- Provide assistance with receiving study materials; for example, former students could donate their materials to scholarship recipients enrolling in their units, or stipends could be offered;
- Universities should establish a personal connection when studies first commence e.g. welcome event; phone call or meeting of welcome;
- A mentor or an identified person who can offer support and encouragement could be identified for scholarship holders;
- Find community champions—those with relevant expertise in the community—and link them up with students as mentors;
- Universities could establish and support a network of previous and current scholarship recipients for mentoring and support;
- Academic support via a mentoring program is needed;
- Academic support could be provided through a peer mentorship scheme, comprising earlier scholarship recipients, so as to foster feelings of belonging and social inclusion, and to aid navigation and orientation; and
- Universities could offer paid workplace experience to help establish networks and enable access to employment after university.

Moving forward: What actions can we take?

In our collective efforts to work towards developing clear recommendations that can be shared across the country, it is important to consult with the participants of the symposium and other interested people on how universities can provide assistance, such as support materials, and how we can leverage from existing mechanisms to ‘sell’ further action to senior executives and university leaders. With this in mind, we propose the following.

Immediate actions

- Lobby internally for funds and supports for students who will lose access to SRSS;
- Liaise with counterparts in other universities about the approaches being used to lobby internally for funds and supports for students who will lose access to their SRSS payments;
- Read the PowerPoint document outlining what supports universities who attended the symposium were providing and advise of any errors or omissions;¹¹
- Forward these documents to colleagues who did not attend the symposium;
- Identify key people/ decision makers in your institution who could be interviewed for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education-funded research project led by Lisa Hartley, Sally Baker, Caroline Fleay and Rachel Burke;¹²

Interim actions

- Lobbying internally for more scholarship and supports for people seeking asylum;
- Creation of good practice examples;
- Working group for admissions and scholarships to sit within the Refugee Education Special Interest Group;
- Coordinating with advocacy groups such as Academics for Refugees¹³ on a national campaign for a coordinated advocacy approach; and
- Continued lobbying for an end to TPVs and SHEVs and for refugees to be granted permanent visas.

¹¹ <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/National-Symposium-People-Seeking-Asylum-in-HE-Community-and-University-Responses-15-Nov-2017.pdf>

¹² For an overview of this research see <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/2017-research-grants-program-projects/>

¹³ <https://academicsforrefugees.wordpress.com/>