



Melbourne  
Refugee Studies  
Program



Melbourne Centre for the  
Study of Higher Education

# NOT THERE YET

An Investigation into the Access and Participation of  
Students from Humanitarian Refugee Backgrounds in the  
Australian Higher Education System

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## Introduction

As a signatory to the United Nations 1951 International Convention on Refugees, Australia continues to accept significant numbers of humanitarian refugees on an annual basis. Recent global developments in terms of conflict in many countries have exacerbated the issue of 'forced migration', with estimates indicating that up to sixty million displaced people are seeking refuge and protection for a variety of reasons at this present time. Having experienced considerable displacement in seeking refuge, including substantial disruption of their education, many of those individuals entering Australia will encounter barriers to their access and participation in the higher education system. However, recent researches have highlighted the fact that many of these Humanitarian Program entrants arrive as highly skilled and well-educated persons. While academic preparation is an important factor in success at university level, non-academic factors that refugee background students may possess, such as 'grit' or determination, have been shown in several studies (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Strayhorn, 2014) to improve the chances of success, as well as substantially enriching university communities. Consequently, it is apparent from this research on the issue of participation of refugee background students in Australian universities, that a strengths-based approach provides the best framework for further 'engagement' with these individuals and their communities.

Specifically, this report reviews the literature and analyses enrolment data from the Department of Education and Training and also refers to Census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), with a view to contributing to discussions about the future directions in policy and action, including the development of targeted outreach and engagement programs for refugee background students.

While the Australian Government's formal equity categories for higher education subsume refugee background students within the broad category of 'Non-English Speaking Background (NESB)', refugee communities face a range of obstacles that relate to specific refugee experience, such as trauma, forced migration, loss of family, disrupted schooling, that compound the barriers that they face in their transition into Australian society. It is also clear from a study of the enrolment data collected by the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training that refugee background students form a small but increasing proportion of the Australian higher education sector. Many come from an English as an additional language (EAL) background and are overwhelmingly located in low socioeconomic (SES) areas. It should also be noted that the experiences of these communities cannot be easily subsumed under the term 'refugee' which bundles all communities and individuals into a monolithic group, and while it is the case that there are common barriers faced by these communities in achieving full participation in the higher education system in Australia, it is also apparent that the diverse communities are often positioned differently in regard to their relationship with the university sector.

Even though the higher education sector, and particularly the public universities, appear to be committed to widening participation and ensuring that all students, in this case refugee background entrants, have a positive education experience, it is the view of the authors of this study that existing university 'engagement' programs and strategies could be strengthened through a more focused, community-based rights and capacity building approach. Not only will this more targeted set of programs have the benefits of fostering links between universities and specific communities that are not well represented in the enrolment intakes across the higher education sector. Moreover, such an approach to engagement could form the basis for solid and innovative research partnerships.

The research also highlights the fact that selected universities, as shown below, have been highly active in creating pathways and reforming their curricula to be inclusive of refugee background students, including the provision of highly targeted English Language and mentoring support, as

well as cultural awareness training for all staff. In addition, it is the view of the researchers involved in this study that the work of this small group of universities, which needs to be encouraged and supported further, provides model strategies and approaches that could also be adopted by other universities in which students from refugee backgrounds are still clearly underrepresented.

Even though the research focus was confined to entrants of the Australian Humanitarian and Refugee Program a key issue that emerged as the study progressed, was the situation of asylum seekers who held temporary humanitarian visas with varying conditions attached. It was clear that there are serious issues facing many of these individuals even when permission has been granted for study in Australia. Despite the positive efforts of a number of university administrations to support these students through such initiatives as, for example, short-term humanitarian scholarships, this highly vulnerable group of potential students are not able to advance their education in any formal way at the higher education level, except under the inappropriate and costly 'International student' category. It is therefore proposed as an additional recommendation that the Commonwealth Government urgently investigate the asylum seeker situation in terms of the barriers to access to study at the tertiary level, with a view to addressing the concerns that have been consistently raised by many key community and academic sources.

## 1. Project Aims

As stated above, this research reviews selected literature and data relating to the participation of students from refugee backgrounds in Australian higher education. While acknowledging the numerous high quality case studies that have been identified through this investigation that provide ground level snapshots on the experiences of 'refugee students', it is apparent that there was a dearth of 'bigger picture' research at a system's level in relation to the situation of these students regarding their participation in higher education. There are substantial data held by the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training which relates to the participation of refugee background students across the nation, and their enrolment patterns at particular sites, but it is clear from a survey of the literature that to date this data had not been adequately explored, even though it provides a rich source of information that can complement existing efforts of universities in developing policies and programs for the increasing number of refugee background students entering Australian universities.

However, working within a 'strengths-based' approach, it is clear from the research that students from refugee background form a small but increasing proportion of the Australian higher education system who bring with them a wealth of personal skills and knowledge and who, if given the opportunity, can contribute to, as well as benefit from, the further development of a high quality socially inclusive university system.

With this context in mind, the intended purposes of this research are to:

- review the literature in order to identify key principles and practices for engaging and supporting refugee background communities with their access to and participation in the university system;
- address the lack of information on the levels of participation of people of refugee background in Australian higher education;
- provide an overview of the participation of the diverse refugee background communities across the Australian higher education system;
- identify patterns of under-representation across the university system, courses and communities;
- encourage all Australian universities to develop better targeted and designed engagement programs for the diverse refugee background communities;
- provide a research base for the development of comprehensive national and international responses to the issues of the participation of refugee background students in higher education.

While this study is intended to encourage discussion of issues to do with refugee background students in the national system of higher education, it is hoped that the research will provide an opportunity for the sector to reflect on the current patterns of participation of these students and encourage policy makers and practitioners to build on the very positive work that is going on across universities, particularly that which has been undertaken at particular sites where significant numbers of refugee background students have enrolled in the period under study. This inquiry is also presented as a first step in a larger research program that will identify more closely the educational aspirations and experiences of underrepresented communities in the higher education sector, as the basis for community and culturally specific 'engagement' initiatives.

These findings and proposals for action may also be of interest to equity programs that 'target' other groups that share characteristics with students from refugee backgrounds, including first in family, low SES, mature aged students, and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups of students, though as we have pointed out the students that are the focus for this research have

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specific needs that arise from particular histories that cannot be easily subsumed into other equity groups, but may at certain points overlap.

## 2. Project Methodology

In composing this report, the research team performed an extensive survey of selected rich literature produced from both Australian and international studies, with a view to identifying major themes, issues and strategies for engaging with refugee background communities at the tertiary education level. The general focus of the studies showed that much of the research (including action research) has proceeded beyond the 'discourses of vulnerability' to a position where students and communities from refugee backgrounds are rightfully regarded as highly active participants in expressing and acting on their educational aspirations.

Previously unexamined data on refugee background student participation in higher education was also obtained in de-identified form from the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training. Only those students identifying themselves as having a permanent humanitarian visa in their citizen/resident indicator data (element 358 in the HEIMS database) were included in the sample. Data for groups of people that were small enough to potentially identify individuals were provided in generalised form (e.g. "<5"). Simple data analysis of the records was then performed to identify key aspects of these students' participation and background.

In addition, refugee population data on four countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Bhutan) were obtained from the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, Humanitarian Program, for 2008 to 2014. The number of humanitarian visas awarded in this period was used as an estimation of refugee populations from these countries.

Social geography was performed using ABS census data. People who reported being born in specific countries of interest (Afghanistan, Bhutan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Iraq, Myanmar (Burma), South Sudan and Sudan) and had arrived in Australia between Census Day 2006 and Census Day 2011 (i.e. during the last census period) were identified. These dates were chosen because they were the most recent census figures available, and also because approximately 78% of people of refugee background participating in higher education reported arriving in Australia during this period (see Chapter 3). Data were obtained from the ABS Table Builder, using the "2011 Census – Counting Individuals, Place of Usual Residence" data cube.

Countries of interest were based on those identified as being the country of birth for a large proportion of refugee background students (see Chapter 3). Those countries that have experienced emigration due to factors other than humanitarian reasons (for example, Iran, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka and China) were discounted, while still recognising that sub-groups in these populations have entered Australia as humanitarian refugees. Consequently, the recommendations should be viewed as relevant to individuals and sub-groups of these communities. However, it should also be noted that the geographic distributions, even if predominately referring to communities with high proportions of individuals from refugee background, include all those from that community, not just those on humanitarian visas. This is a limitation of the census data collection, although the research team are of the view that the influence of this on the findings for the countries chosen was minimal. Further discussion is provided below.

Counts were obtained at Statistical Area Level 2 (SA2), which is approximately consistent with gazetted suburbs in most metropolitan regions in Australia. Counts were converted to proportions of the national total for each community of birth, and the proportions mapped across each Greater City Statistical Area.

### 3. Contexts and Challenges

In the *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* ('Bradley Review'; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) the 'expert panel' presented its findings on the 'question of whether this critical sector of education is structured, organised and financed to position Australia to compete effectively in the new globalised economy.' (2008: xi). In setting out an overarching policy framework for the future of higher education at a 'critical moment', the Report highlights the need to increase the number of youth and other potential students participating in this system, and emphasises that in order to achieve this goal, it will be necessary to 'look to members of groups currently under-represented within the system' (xi).

Currently the Commonwealth defines the higher education equity categories as low SES, students with a disability, Indigenous students, students from regional and remote backgrounds and women in non-traditional areas. They also include students of NESB (or CALD) backgrounds as a key target group. However, significantly, the monitoring of the performance of key equity groups does not shed any light on the participation of refugee background students in the Australian system of higher education. It can only be assumed that any participants who have identified themselves as having settled in Australia as part of the Australian Refugee and Humanitarian Programme have been subsumed under the NESB category, thereby overlooking the fact, as Castles, de Haas and Miller (2014) suggest, that the experience of different refugee communities is not open to simple interpretation, or 'a simple matter of individual political persecution', but is invariably a consequence of a range of factors, economic, political, social transformation, and ethnic and religious conflict, that may coalesce differently for the diverse communities.

Consequently, to place these groups under the rubric of 'NESB' is to overlook the specific history and situation that the various refugee background communities face, both with regard to their specific needs in terms of settlement and social inclusion, as well as the way in which their diverse histories differently position them *vis-à-vis* their participation in higher education. For example, though commenting specifically on differences among African-Australians, Hatoss and Huijser (cited in Harris, Spark & Watts, 2015, p.372) offer a view that could be applied more widely when they state that, 'Despite a period of high immigration of Sudanese Africans over the first decade of the 21st century, and prior to that Ethiopian, Eritrean and Somalian refugee background migrants in the 1990s and early 2000s..., many African Australians have arrived in other ways, from other backgrounds.' Continuing, these researchers state that, 'those from other African nations who have come under different circumstances and have often been here longer frequently feel erased from public discourse, and have divergent educational needs and abilities'.

In the period 2008-2009 to 2012-2013, 74,834 visas were granted under the provisions made within Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Programme (Department of Social Services, 2014). The guidelines of this Programme identify two important elements: a) the onshore component which fulfils Australia's international obligations by offering protection to people already in Australia who are found to be refugees according to the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees; b) the offshore resettlement component which offers to resettle people from overseas. This latter component comprises two categories, the first relating to persons 'who are subject to persecution and are outside their home country and are identified by the UNHCR as refugees as being in need of placement'; the other involving applicants 'who are subject to substantial discrimination amounting to gross violations of human rights in their home country, and immediate family persons that have been granted protection on the basis of sponsorship from Australian citizens or organizations.'

In the 2012-2013 period the top source countries for the offshore visa grants (Department of Social Services, 2014) included Iraq (4064), Afghanistan (2431), Myanmar/Burma (2352), Bhutan (1023), Democratic Republic of the Congo (489), Iran (471), Somalia (396) and Sudan (319). It is also the

case that in the years 2008-2009 to 2012-2013, there was an increase in the number of humanitarian refugees that were accepted into Australia, from 13,507 to 20,019 respectively.

In this context, it is apparent that there is an urgent need, at least in the first instance, to ascertain the general extent to which students from refugee background are gaining access and participating in the higher education sector in Australia, as well as to highlight the obstacles facing them in this task. This is particularly the case if the goal expressed in the 'Bradley Review', of substantially increasing the representation of equity groups is to be achieved. However, as pointed out by Harris and Marlowe (cited in Gray and Irwin, 2013), 'there is a dearth of research on refugee students' educational experiences and the need to further understand their concerns and academic aspirations'.

Nevertheless, in pursuing such a task, it is important to acknowledge that the category of 'refugee' is an ambivalent organising principle, in that on the one hand it can function to 'remarginalise and exclude' within countries of resettlement (Nunn, 2010; Harris, Spark & Watts, 2015), while on the other, as in the case of this research on refugee background students in higher education, the category 'refugee' is used as a means for making a legitimate claim for educational support and a starting point for analysing Commonwealth 'data' that has not been previously accessed, with the purpose of fostering a genuine engagement between universities and selected underrepresented communities.

### **3.1 Barriers, Needs and Aspirations of Refugee Background Students**

In recent years a number of researchers have sought to portray refugee background students' experiences in the higher education sector. Selected researches have examined the needs of specific communities such as South Sudanese, Somalian, Ethiopian, Iraqi and Syrian (see for example, Udah 2014; Wilkinson & Santoro 2014; Bowen, 2014; Harris, Spark & Watts, 2015; Hatoss, O'Neill & Eacersall 2012), but have done so on a small scale by highlighting the complex nature of the interaction between these groups and sub-groups at specific sites. Harris, Marlowe & Nyuon (2015), for example, have explored the 'gains and losses' of African-Australian women attending university. They point out that despite costly successes, many African-Australian women remain less 'visible' than their male counterparts in education, employment and community contexts (p.381). In another paper Harris, Spark & Watts (2015) reject the 'culture gap' that represents the South Sudanese-Australians' perspectives in relation to the dominant institutional knowledge as being less privileged forms of knowledge and simply represented as 'traditional' cultural practices and sensibilities. In opposition to the binary model, Harris, Spark & Watts (2015, p.1226) advocate for a perspective that recognises 'the power of multiple knowledges'.

A recent study by Naidoo et al. (2014), for example, focused on refugee background students enrolled at one of three institutions comprising the University of Western Sydney, as it was called then, Charles Sturt University and the University of Canberra, with a view to identifying successful and effective school to university pathways that ensured refugee background students were retained in the education system. Using a case study approach that was designed 'to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events', (Yin cited in Naidoo et al, 2014, p. 28) and providing space for the voices and perspectives of those interviewed, as well as the interactions between them, (Ashby & Causton-Theoharis cited in Naidoo et al., 2014, p.32), the study 'sought to relate the personal experiences of teaching, support staff and refugee background students in the Australian education system...'. The goal for these researchers was to map 'the broader social trends towards increasing diversity, representation of refugees, and government policies in education resettlement.' (p.32) In addition to identifying the barriers to refugee background student participation, such as the need for English as an additional language (EAL) support and culturally inclusive teaching, Naidoo et al. (2014), set out to develop models of

university engagement with schools that enhanced the skills and understanding necessary to prepare students for tertiary participation.

In identifying the specific student cohort, Naidoo et al. (p.5) refer to the fact that the interviewees were from diverse backgrounds and had different residency status: some had permanent residency, others had bridging visas, some had arrived with family members and others had arrived alone. The study also makes it clear that the selected participants came from a range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and had entered the system with different levels of schooling and skill sets. Naidoo et al. do not, however, identify countries of origin or distribution across the three universities, or examine participation in the various courses. While focussing on issues such as prior life experience and education, language, aspirations, 'racialisation' and 'social capital', the researchers highlighted three main factors for determining success on the part of students from refugee background: aspirations, resourcefulness and resilience as being crucial in strengthening refugee background students' capacities to '... benefit from and transform economic goods and social institutions' (Sellar & Gale cited in Naidoo et al., 2014, p. 43). However, other researchers point out that resilience is often hidden by the 'trauma narrative' (Papadopoulos cited in Naidoo et al., 2014, p.43), while also pointing out that 'aspiration' is not so much about students 'conforming to a socially-accepted, majority defined, upwardly mobile aspirational future, as it is about the potential to imagine any kind of future—whatever that might be' (p.44).

Similar research carried out in the Hunter region of New South Wales by Gray and Irwin (2013) comments that from 2004, 'a growing number of students from African refugee and humanitarian entrant backgrounds enrolled in the University of Newcastle's enabling programs which are given the nomenclature of 'Open Foundation and Newstep'. The country of origin for most students was South Sudan, with students from Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Burundi, Ethiopia and Mauritania also represented in the cohort. The task set by these researchers was to ascertain the challenges facing students from refugee background and identify ways by which social inclusion could be achieved. More specifically, Gray and Irwin examined the cultural and learning barriers that the students encountered in the university, the different cultural perspectives on education, as well as the nature of the learning support that was provided for the selected groups in their efforts to 'negotiate the university structures'. While suggesting the need for more qualitative studies on the situation of refugee background students in regional contexts, these researchers also add that initiatives to enhance the participation of these students 'could include investigating how successful refugee students have been in transitioning from enabling programs into their undergraduate program and beyond'. For Gray and Irwin, 'Education for refugee students is intricately linked to their particular cultural understandings of "community" in all its forms'. (p.9)

Similarly, Silburne, Earnst, Butcher & DeMori (2010), in a project funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, examined the needs of refugee background students attending Murdoch and Curtin Universities, with a view to developing appropriate resources and programs for entrants in the initial phase of university life. In addition, this initiative focussed on creating resources that would support the work of the academics that dealt with these particular groups of students. Silburne et al. (2010, p.3) observed that refugee students have 'multi-faceted' and 'complex' needs that required an integrated and tailored approach. These researchers also note that despite 'multiple stressors' and 'roadblocks' 'the dedication of these students to education is indisputable and is vital to their success.' Silburne et al. (2010) also found that current university preparation courses could have been extended in length and strengthened through including content for building student capacity as independent learning subjects. They also pointed out that refugee background students need on-going support including 'one-to-one help'. Their findings also included the incorporation of international perspectives into the curriculum and, among other things, the involvement of public speakers from 'similar backgrounds' to the student cohort. For these researchers, mechanisms for improving participation of refugee background students in

university life needed to be encouraged and community promotion of education, they argued, should 'target' feeder schools, families and other older adults across refugee background communities.

However, the dynamic methodology adopted by Silburne et al. (2010), involving focus group and individual interviews, allowed for 'multiple voices', thereby providing a means of strongly representing the students' experiences in the study. Consequently, it was found that the interviewees expressed the need for academic staff to make themselves familiar with the knowledge and language skills that students brought to the learning community, as well as the need for extra support with technology and better inclusion into the mainstream classrooms. Furthermore, it was also proposed that the academic staff should be encouraged to recognise that many students will be grappling with the acquisition of new cultural and educational forms of knowledge in their transition into the Australian higher education system (see also Harris, Spark & Watts, 2015).

Penn-Edwards & Donnison (2014) conducted a thorough literature review into current thinking on supporting transition in the first year of education and suggested that higher education institutions traditionally tend to 'adopt principles of assimilation' in expecting students and community partners to adjust to the university ways of working. While not focussing directly on refugee background students, they also argue from a social-justice point of view that university-community relationships should be embedded in the context of the wider and civil community. They point to the need for these institutions to adopt a 'fourth generation approach to transition in the first year in higher education', a way of working that honours what the student brings by valuing and making use of the student's 'explicit understandings as well as their social and cultural connections' (p.37).

In their study, Gale et al. (2010), commenting more generally on equity groups, point to the need for collaboration across schools, tertiary institutions, non-government organisations, families and communities if transition from school to higher education is to be effective. These researchers found that interventions that foster higher participation need to be collaborative in style. For Gale et al. (2010), not only does such an approach need to be communicative and informative, it should also be experiential in focus (familiarising students with university sites and how they operate), while always cognisant of issues of difference. Expressing a point of view noted in many of the selected studies, these researchers argue for an education provision that is challenging. But, as in the case of a number of other researchers, Gale et al. (2010) highlight financial support as a necessary requirement if the equity groups, in this case refugee background students, are to achieve their full potential.

Investigating similar issues Ben Moshe, Bertone & Grossman (2008) examined the situation of students at RMIT University, Victoria University, the Northern Institute of TAFE and the Goulburn Ovens Institute of TAFE. These researchers found that there was a great deal of diversity in the students' country of origin, but also identified that there was a lack of background information maintained on refugee background students. The main research focus of the Ben Moshe et al. (2008) study was to identify the specific factors that assist as well as impede refugee background students from accessing and completing tertiary education programs. However, Ben Moshe et al. (2008) extended their focus to include an investigation into the ways to develop the employability of these diverse student groups. They also looked at how such initiatives should be evaluated. Among their recommendations, was a proposal for institutional policies based on principles of diversity and social justice to guide a systematic approach to education provision to refugee background people and communities.

While the Ben Moshe et al. (2008) report offers a number of concrete recommendations on issues such as language and education support, culturally inclusive pedagogy and the teaching of employment skills, they too argue for 'a community engagement approach that supports the active

collaboration between the educational institution, community representatives and community services’.

As with Ben Moshe et al. (2008) and other researchers mentioned in this study on participation, Earnest, Joyce, DeMori & Silvagni (2010) looked at the local level and classroom experiences of students from refugee backgrounds, in this case primarily focussing on students from Africa and the Middle East who were attending or had graduated from Curtin University, Monash University, Deakin University or RMIT. In their study Earnest et al. (2010) comment on the paucity of research on the learning styles and academic needs of the above student groups. They suggest that creating appropriate cultural and social settings is an integral aspect of the learning process and that a major goal is to support the individuals’ learning potential and future goals and hopes. In line with other studies (Ben Moshe et al. 2008; Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2014; Silburne et al. 2010), among the several recommendations for which they advocate on the basis of feedback from students, they propose a more specific tailored induction into the university and its knowledge communities. The participants in the Ben Moshe et al. study also stressed the need for ‘guidance and encouragement’ starting with secondary school where students need to be made more ‘aware of possible courses of study and be encouraged to have dreams and goals’ (p 169). These latter researchers suggest that potential students could be reached through community based organisations and that mothers and family members should also be encouraged to pursue their own education as a means of advancing their English language and their qualifications for employment. Enhanced support for students in first year as well as the use of mentoring programs and cultural sensitivity training for academics were also suggested as constituting appropriate strategies for achieving active participation.

More specifically, Tregale, Tastan & Singh (2015) comment on the success of a mentoring program run by Macquarie University with high school students from refugee backgrounds who were from the same communities as the mentors. The qualitative study involved individual and semi-structured interviews and five focus groups with 54 mentees. This research also involved a case study following a mentee who went on to university and eventually played a role as a ‘program ambassador’. Tregale et al. (2015) report that this Ambassador Program successfully supported students in making a smooth personal, social and academic transition from high school to university. It also helped them develop leadership potential and connection with the diverse communities. The long-term hope of the authors was that this program might contribute to building refugee background students’ ‘social capital’, enhance their resilience, and empower them to be role models.

### **3.2 Highlighting Agency, Resilience, Autonomy and Community Support**

As stated, a common trend across researches was a focus on the issues of ‘resilience’ and ‘agency’ in refugee background communities. For example, Castles et al. (2014, p.213) commenting widely suggest that: ‘(Refugees) should not be seen as passive victims; they have some degree of *agency*, even under the most difficult conditions.’ In their study Gray and Irwin (2013), found that ‘enabling’ and support programs not only help individual students and their families, but may also impact on broader engagement with diverse communities, which as Harris, Spark & Watts (2015) also point out, requires an understanding that there are multiple forms of knowledge informed by different cultural perceptions and practices that are at work in the students’ transition into Australian university life. In fact, Morrice (cited in Gray and Irwin 2013, p.6) suggests that differences in *habitus* mean that some groups in the education setting are like “fish out of water” and are disadvantaged because they do not know the “rules of the game” or the social norms’, while simultaneously rejecting the focus on ‘deficit’ models for refugee background students which do not acknowledge the social and cultural capital that these students carry with them. Yet, with this in mind, Naidoo et al. (2014) found that ‘frequently, university staff – both

academic and support – were unaware of the complex needs and issues facing students of refugee origin as they transition into, and move through their university studies'. In response these researchers argue for further exploration of intercultural understanding through university-school-community partnership programs, language support programs and effective educational cultures. In addition, Naidoo et al. (2014, p.17) propose professional development programs that ensure that school and university staff are made aware of the cultural dimensions of the lives of students from refugee backgrounds, their values and beliefs, as well as the psychological, social, economic and educational barriers they face.

In another study Gateley (2015) also questions the 'dominant assumptions around 'refugees' rooted in the discourses of vulnerability' (p.27), and instead argues for a framework that affirms the principle of 'opportunity' for refugee background students in accessing further and higher education in the UK. Following a similar line of argument found in a number of the relevant studies, she suggests that 'refugees' should be empowered to 'make decisions and act' on their claims and rights and that support services and voluntary agencies should be appropriately funded to target support to these communities in this regard.

In order to investigate issues of agency and autonomy, as well as structural constraints faced by refugee background students, Gateley (2015) interviewed 'two experts' with experience in education. This researcher also carried out face-to-face qualitative narrative and semi-structured interviews and a survey with 42 refugee 'young people' from countries including Somalia, Syria, Uganda and Eritrea. Consequently, Gateley (2015) found 'a strong motivation to study was expressed and education was a central feature for participants' (p.36). Moreover, she also observed that, 'Some participants expressed a wish to study, to enter courses at college and university and to continue on to post-graduate study'. Other research participants were also noted as holding the view that education was important for its intrinsic value, and in some cases, it was found that the research participants felt that it fostered a strong sense of resilience in them for transition into the 'host' society. It was noted, in the case of one of the participants that even though 'some of her experiences were difficult, the positive aspect of arts classes was that she could identify herself beyond English'. However, for Gateley (2015), it was the structural constraints that 'proved to be the barrier to autonomy.' In her study she highlights numerous structural constraints in the higher education field that her participants had identified, including waiting times for college and university admissions, complex admission procedures as well as the absence of avenues for dealing with the 'lack of evidence' of previous qualifications.

Pursuing a similar line of argument Shakya et al. (2010) discuss how refugee youth in Canada negotiate educational goals in post-migration context in relation to shifts in family responsibilities and everyday encounters with multiple systemic barriers. In doing so, these researchers also examine the twin concepts of 'vulnerability' and 'empowerment' with which refugee background youth are required to engage in their efforts to achieve social inclusion in Canada. Shakya et al. (2010) suggest that 'humanitarian' policies in Canada have continued to 'de-humanise' people of refugee background by treating them in patronising ways as 'victims' and 'helpless people' who just need the bare necessities of life. In the view of these Canadian researchers, policy makers often categorise these individuals together with other migrants as a homogenous group, thus continuing to make 'refugees' 'invisible within mainstream research and the policy domain'. This, states Shakya et al. (2010) is especially in the education sector where the current practice of not collecting data on migration, or refugee, experience needs to be reversed. Consequently, these researchers call for a de-politicisation of Canada's refugee policies that at present claim to be humanitarian without being grounded in social justice and equity frameworks and which, it is argued, fail to empower 'refugees' and their communities to act on their own futures.

A more nuanced concept of agency is proposed by several authors such as Harris, Marlowe and Nyon (2015), Harris, Spark and Watts (2014), and Bowen (2014). They suggest that higher

education institutions play a role as key sites in resettlement that contribute to the formation of 'new race' and gender identities in ways that can challenge accepted cultural and gender 'knowledges' and relationships. A common thread in the cases presented by these researchers is the view that the lived experiences of refugee background students in higher education attest to their capacities and skills of adaptation, resilience, aptitude and a willingness to look forward. However, a number of these studies highlight the fact that the experiences of females from refugee backgrounds are not the same as those of their male counterparts in their community (see for example Seck 2015). For many of the females in the studies, developing public personae and professional networks was complicated by gender roles. It was suggested by some researchers that educational and other success often came at a cost to their cultural identity, distancing them from some aspects of traditional community and cultural roles. In their study, for example, Harris, Marlowe and Nyon (2015) also point to the need to recognise 'multiple forms of knowledge' as enriched by previous experiences and life perspectives. These researchers argue that such 'bridged' and multiple knowledges are the 'nexus of new ways of knowing in host cultures and sites of resettlement'. They suggest a more culturally sensitive and multifaceted approach that takes into account the complexity of women's lives in diverse cultural contexts.

Eades (2013, p.4) also, while not commenting specifically on education matters, argues for a rather more robust view of the 'refugee experience' and perspective and one that takes into account the strengths of 'individuals, families and communities in relation to their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values and hopes; rather than through their deficiencies, pathologies or disorders'.

### **3.3 Motivation and Skills**

Hatoss, O'Neill and Eacersall (2012) investigated the linguistic and educational 'socialisation' of Sudanese refugee background students in Australia and found that while they had a great deal of motivation and agency in their career choices, there were evident tensions between their high levels of educational aspiration and the linguistic, psychological, racial and social barriers that they encountered. Similarly, in her small-scale study Hirano (2014) also discussed the issue of motivation and outcomes for refugee background students but focussed specifically on the acquisition of writing and reading skills. Her research involved seven 'not college-ready' students at Hope College, a small private liberal arts college in the Southeast of the United States. She posits the view that an explicit focus on literacy skills development with first-year college refugee background students and a supportive learning environment with structures such as a summer bridging programs, literacy-rich contexts, orientation programs and other innovations, can lead to very positive results in the participation of these groups of students. Hirano (2014 p.48) states that, 'what distinguishes this population of students is not so much the type of challenges they face with academic literacy in college as much as the motivation they have to access resources...'. This latter researcher also found that all of the participants made use of the different resources available, but the resources they chose to use, the amount of support they required, and the steps in the writing process they needed, varied enormously between them.

Continuing, Hirano argues that providing specific support measures, such as a tutor to help with reading and writing, a writing centre, and supportive and attentive professors worked well. Hirano concludes by arguing 'that within a highly supportive environment, refugee background students who graduate from high school without reaching the standard college admissions literacy level are still able to cope with tertiary academic reading and writing'. For this researcher, 'It is possible that interrupted education may be a more salient feature to distinguish a group of students with educational needs than the refugee experience as whole...' (p.49).

The selected projects and studies indicate that much research has been carried out to identify the barriers and needs of some refugee communities in accessing higher education. However, the vast majority of these projects have been small-scale or focused on specific institutions. While they have provided an excellent base for further research and community engagement, they have been primarily qualitative in orientation and strategies identified for improving the participation of the identified groups tend to remain at the general level of response to 'refugees' as if a homogenous category.

However, as stated, the general findings from these case studies point out that refugee background students have 'complex and multifaceted' needs that often require forms of support that targets their particular situation, while recognising the knowledge and attributes that the diverse groups of students bring with them to their studies at all levels of the education system. In this context, this thumbnail sketch of the selected literature has highlighted a range of different and innovative strategies that were developed for the inclusion of refugee background students at the tertiary education level, ranging from curriculum change, literacy support, professional development of staff for engaging with diversity, as well as more focussed internationalisation of the curriculum. In addition, the issue of the lack of participation of women and the obstacles they encountered in balancing cultural and institutional demands was also highlighted, as was the point that university-community partnerships, specifically those involving the wider social/civic community have an integral part to play at key points in the progression of the student through their higher education studies.

In concluding, it is possible to argue that the general pattern emanating from the surveyed research is the view that, 'Despite multiple difficulties in commencing and completing tertiary education, the dedication and resilience of these students in education is indisputable'. (Earnest et al. 2014, p.172)

The review of the literature also points to the apparent need for a more comprehensive analysis of the situation across the entire tertiary sector in Australia. The levels and patterns of participation of people of refugee background need to be established across the national system of higher education. The spread of students across institutions, course types, and the different levels of participation and retention in terms of location, gender and specific community, need to be established in order to detail what is happening with these individuals and groups at a systemic as well as local level.

While on-campus support for refugee background students, such as programs of language support, study skills development and cross-cultural activities, are currently offered at many universities, access to the pathways into a broad range of offerings have not been fully explored in many of the universities in any specific sense. There also appears to be major gaps in the higher education sector in terms of the policy and programs for building comprehensive, culturally sensitive and well targeted forms of 'engagement' that foster community capacity for a meaningful interaction with universities. In this context this study adds to the existing body of literature in this domain through a study of quantitative data pertaining to the overall situation in higher education of those persons who have identified themselves as being a 'humanitarian refugee' at the time of their enrolment.

Such an inquiry does not in any way discount the insights and findings of the local level and specific institutional studies discussed above. However, the current study, as recommended by Shakya et al. (2010, p. 75) in their U.K. based research, has as its focus the challenge of utilising data collected by all institutions that will enable a demonstration of positive equity outcomes, or highlight areas of concern, to 'deliver early and timely' services for 'refugees'. However, as stated at the outset, and also confirmed by the discussion above, it is intended that the analysis and reflection of the data will provide a basis for a comprehensive set of two-way 'conversations' that have the goal of fostering autonomous and active education networks across those communities

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that have primarily formed in recent years as result of seeking protection and resettlement in Australia.

## 4. Summary of Selected Data on Refugee Background Student

### Participation in Higher Education from 2009 to 2014

Data for the following analysis were obtained from the Department of Education and Training's higher education statistics Group (see the Project Methodology section above). Unfortunately, data collection for students from refugee backgrounds has not been subject to rigorous scrutiny, and many records were found to be missing data or containing potentially incorrect data (for example, by listing country of birth as "Australia"). Privacy concerns regarding identifying individuals also prevented us from distinguishing commencing and continuing students for several analyses. Readers should therefore be cautious when comparing year on year change in the following section, as this may involve double counting some continuing students.

Currently, there are 3,506 students from refugee backgrounds enrolled in Australian higher education providers (HEPs) (Table 1). Although these figures represent a relatively small proportion of the total cohort, growth in the number of students from refugee backgrounds has more than doubled during this 6-year period, but is not evenly distributed across communities or discipline areas and is coming off a very low base. The largest growth, of 23.24% from the previous year, was seen in 2011, when the growth rate was 2.4% across the sector as a whole, and 3.6% for domestic students alone. This suggests that, while students from refugee backgrounds comprise only a small proportion of the sector at the moment, given current global movements of 'forced migrants', it is the case that these numbers will substantially rise in the coming years (particularly given recent commitments to increase the intake of refugees from Syria), but only if there is a set of highly attuned policy and program strategies to support the integration of these students into higher education.

The data also shows that the effective full-time student load for students from refugee backgrounds is 73.7% of the total number of this cohort. Since 2009, this ratio has declined from 75.7% to 72.2% in 2014 (with an average of 75.5% across the period of study, compared to 70% for the broader cohort). This indicates that, despite the increase in overall numbers of students from refugee backgrounds, a significant proportion is undertaking part-time study (although still at lower rates than is common for the sector as a whole).

**Table 1: Refugee Background Student Numbers by Year (2009-2014)**

Year	Number of Refugee-background students	% change on last year	% total domestic student numbers	% growth in domestic student numbers
2009	1,687	—	0.21	—
2010	1,897	12.5	0.22	5.3
2011	2,338	23.24	0.26	3.6
2012	2,864	22.49	0.30	5.1
2013	3,271	14.22	0.33	5.5
2014	3,506	7.18	0.34	4.1

**Table 2: Total Student Load (EFTSL) of Refugee Background Students Enrolled in Higher Education by Year (2009-2014)**

Year	Total EFTSL	% change on last year	% total student load	% change on last year of total student load
2009	1,276.8	—	0.2	—
2010	1,428.9	11.9	0.2	6.0
2011	1,729.8	21.0	0.2	3.1
2012	2,111.2	22.1	0.2	5.1
2013	2,392.4	13.3	0.3	5.1
2014	2,532.5	5.9	0.3	3.8

In reviewing the data it was apparent that the cohort of students from refugee backgrounds shows some demographic differences from 'mainstream' students. Females have composed approximately 55% of total student numbers since 2009. Among students from refugee backgrounds, however, the balance is skewed more towards males, who comprise between 60 and 70 per cent of these students (Table 3). The numbers of females from refugee backgrounds has grown from 30.0% to 40.25% during the 6 years since 2009 but is still substantially lower than their counterparts in the broader population. However, participation rates are dramatically different for males and females in selected communities (Table 4).

**Table 3: Refugee Background Student Numbers by Year and Gender (2009-2014)**

Gender	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Female	507 (30.05%)	608 (32.05%)	802 (34.30%)	1,055 (36.84%)	1,266 (38.72%)	1,411 (40.25%)
Male	1,180 (69.95%)	1,289 (67.95%)	1,536 (65.70%)	1,809 (63.16%)	2,004 (61.28%)	2,095 (59.75%)

**Table 4: Total Refugee Background Student Numbers by Gender for Selected Communities in 2014**

Country of Birth	Female	Male	Total	% Female students
Afghanistan	84	214	298	28.2
Bhutan	27	93	120	22.5
Burma (Myanmar)	69	75	144	47.9
Iran	251	252	503	49.9
Iraq	176	167	343	51.3
Sudan	66	216	282	23.4

Two-thirds of Australian university students are below 26 years in age, with nearly a quarter aged 19 years or younger. In contrast, students from refugee backgrounds are more likely to be older (Table 5). Only 12% are younger than 20; nearly half are 26 or older. These proportions remain quite stable across the five years being examined. These findings are important, as they indicate that the majority of students from refugee backgrounds are mature aged students, and may encounter difficulties in their studies, are less likely to complete their studies, and require more support, as shown in a number of researches (Baik, Naylor, & Arkoudis, 2015; Naylor, Baik, & James, 2013; Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009). As noted above in discussing the relatively large proportions of refugee background students studying part time, these difficulties may be compounded for students from refugee backgrounds, many of who will be grappling with cultural and linguistic barriers that arise in and beyond the settlement process.

**Table 5: Refugee Background Student Numbers by Year and Age Group (2009-2014)**

Age-group	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	% refugees (2014)	% total students (2014)
19 Years or under	156	164	214	313	408	434	12.4	23.7
20-25	739	807	944	1,153	1,291	1,361	38.8	43.3
26-30	352	421	552	668	726	817	23.3	10.3
30 above	440	505	628	730	845	894	25.4	22.6

Most (82%) students from refugee backgrounds were born in one of 20 countries (Table 6), with Sudan as the most commonly listed country of birth. It should be noted that a significant minority have their country of birth recorded as ‘Australia’ in the Department of Education’s database.

**Table 6: Country of Birth of Refugee Background Students**

	Country of Birth	Total number	%
1	Sudan	1,301	13.36
2	Iran	987	10.14
3	Iraq	857	8.80
4	Zimbabwe	627	6.44
5	Afghanistan	599	6.15
6	Sri Lanka	493	5.06
7	Burma (Myanmar)	358	3.68
8	China (excludes SARs and Taiwan Province)	331	3.40
9	Congo, Democratic Republic of	316	3.25
10	Pakistan	291	2.99
11	Sierra Leone	284	2.92
12	Bhutan	256	2.63
13	Ethiopia	224	2.30
14	Liberia	183	1.88
15	Australia	154	1.58
16	Burundi	136	1.40
17	Egypt	123	1.26
18	Rwanda	108	1.11
19	Congo	100	1.03
20	Somalia	93	0.96

In general, the higher education participation ratio for refugee background communities appears to be approximately 2-3% (based on total numbers of humanitarian visas awarded for each country of origin), which it is acknowledged shows a significant under-representation of refugee background students', even compared to other formal and informal higher education equity groups, although the rate of participation varies marginally across refugee background communities (Table 7).

**Table 7: Higher Education Participation Ratio of Total Refugee Background Population for Selected Communities in 2014**

	Refugee Population (2014)	HE participation ratio 2014 (%)
Iraq	14,600	2.29
Afghanistan	8,713	3.39
Myanmar	11,821	1.08
Bhutan	4,981	2.41

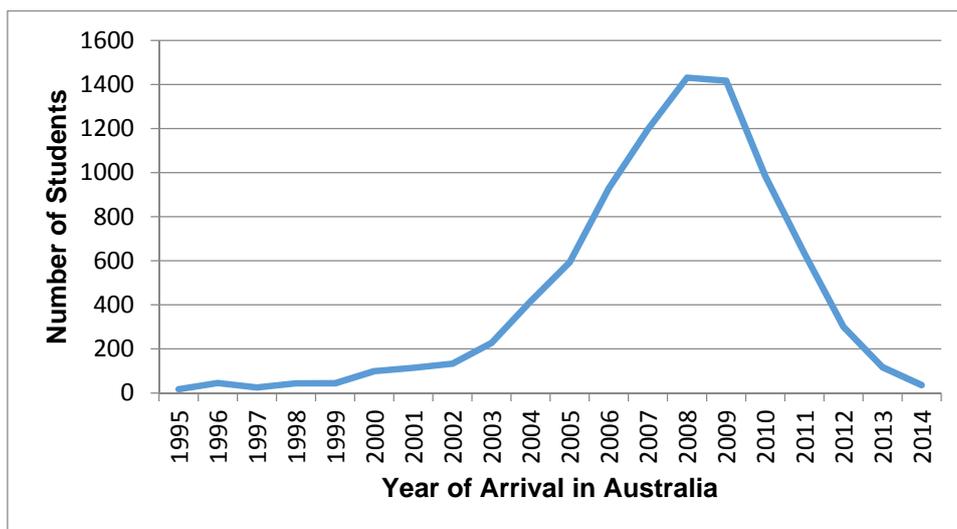
The majority (75.7%) of refugee background students are from non-English speaking backgrounds (Table 8). Arabic is reported as being the most commonly spoken language at home for refugees (13.1%), followed by African languages and Persian. English is spoken at home by 24.3% of students from refugee backgrounds. No language information was provided in 3.3% of records.

**Table 8: Languages Spoken at Home by Refugee Background Students**

	Language spoken at home other than English	Total Number	%
1	Arabic	1,280	13.1
2	Persian (excluding Dari)	595	6.1
3	African Languages (not further defined)	548	5.6
4	Persian	371	3.8
5	Tamil	350	3.6
6	Nepali	300	3.1
7	Shona	290	3.0
8	French	268	2.8
9	Swahili	268	2.8
10	Burmese	242	2.5
	Other languages	2,536	26.0
	English	2,370	24.3
	No Information	319	3.3

In terms of arrival in Australia nearly 78% of students from refugee backgrounds reported that they entered Australia between 2006 to 2009 (Figure 1). The vast majority arrived after the year 2000, although several students reported years of entry far earlier than this, which may indicate a significant engagement with lifelong learning after a long period of living in Australia.

Figure 1: Year of Arrival in Australia of Students from Refugee Backgrounds



Taken together these data suggest that many students from refugee backgrounds are relatively new arrivals with an extended peak evident in 2008 – 2009 . The majority of these students would be formally recorded as members of the non-English speaking background equity group, and possibly as low SES students or regional students. However, it should be remembered that many of them would have been in Australia for at least several years before entering higher education. As the data in Table 9 below shows, selected groups of students from refugee backgrounds have at least had some experience with the Australian education system before applying for university.

A quarter of commencing refugee background students report their highest previous level of education as completing secondary school, while another quarter report having finished a higher education course of some type (Table 9). Approximately 10% obtained university entry on the basis of having completed a VET award course or an incomplete higher education course.

**Table 9: Previous Educational Experience for Commencing Students from Refugee Backgrounds**

Highest educational participation prior to commencement	Academic Year					
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
A complete final year of secondary education at school or Registered Training Organisation	441	451	282	357	419	420
A complete higher education bachelor level course	193	264	200	184	235	239
A complete higher education postgraduate level course	46	68	69	73	70	96
A complete higher education sub-degree level course	93	115	76	89	124	99
A complete VET award course	142	189	141	215	207	187
An incomplete higher education course	176	218	130	141	144	130
An incomplete VET award course	31	44	27	54	29	45
No prior educational attainment	125	118	99	110	116	142
Other qualification, complete or incomplete	102	133	73	122	111	121
Overseas student	93	90	106	120	150	139
TAFE course	60	29				

#### 4.1 Enrolment patterns of students from refugee backgrounds

Approximately three-quarters of students from refugee backgrounds are engaged in undergraduate-level qualifications (Table 10). This is slightly higher than among mainstream students. However, at the postgraduate level, these students are present at approximately half the ratio of mainstream students (17.0% in 2014, compared to 27.4%), while refugee background students are more likely to undertake enabling and non-award courses (7.1% in 2014, compared to 3.3% for the general population). This may be due to university entrance requirements of the different universities coupled with the issues facing the different communities in terms of English language or interrupted education in either their country of origin or in transit to Australia.

**Table 10: Level of Course for Students from Refugee Backgrounds**

Level of Course	Academic Year						% total students
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2014
Enabling/Non Award (n)	120	104	162	200	203	247	
(% total)	7.11	5.48	6.93	6.98	6.21	7.05	3.3
Undergraduate (n)	1,336	1,505	1,763	2,175	2,518	2,662	
(% total)	79.19	79.34	75.41	75.94	77	75.93	69.2
Postgraduate (n)	231	288	413	489	549	597	
(% total)	13.69	15.18	17.66	17.07	16.79	17.03	27.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,687</b>	<b>1,897</b>	<b>2,338</b>	<b>2,864</b>	<b>3,270</b>	<b>3,506</b>	

The main fields of education in which refugee background students were enrolled across the 6-year period from 2009 to 2014 (Table 11) were *Society and Culture* (719 students in 2014, or 20.7% of all refugee background students); followed by *Health* (696 students or 20.0%); and *Management and Commerce* (602 students or 17.3%). More specifically, between 2009 and 2014, the most common fields of study selected were *Nursing* (976 total students or 10.0%); followed by *Business and Management* (860 students or 8.8%); and *Other natural and physical sciences* (639 students or 6.6%, using the Department of Education's coding). Overall, 31.1% of students from refugee backgrounds enrolled in STEM fields, plus 20.0% in Health, compared to 19.9% and 15.3% respectively among the broader cohort.

These patterns of enrolment are notably different to both the proportions of 'mainstream' students and (with the exception of nursing) students from 'equity' backgrounds.

**Table 11: Fields of Study for Students from Refugee Backgrounds**

Broad Field of Study	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	% refugee students 2014	% total students 2014
Natural and Physical Sciences	207	235	262	330	383	399	11.5	8.8%
Information Technology	92	93	101	142	171	183	5.3	4.3%
Engineering and Related Technologies	248	289	339	394	486	499	14.3	7.9%
Architecture and Building	11	20	31	57	64	74	2.1	2.3%
Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies	14	19	22	21	17	24	0.7	1.5%
Health	244	329	411	560	626	696	20.0	15.6%
Education	65	64	7	103	101	105	3.0	10.0%
Management and commerce	334	356	456	548	623	602	17.3	25.1%
Society and Culture	353	379	463	558	639	719	20.7	21.8%
Creative Arts	71	60	75	62	74	98	2.8	5.9%
Mixed Field Programmes	30	36	63	73	71	79	2.3	0.9%

Again however, considerable variation between communities was observed (Table 12), indicating the possibility of differing relationships between the various communities and the education networks that lead into or connect them to higher education institutions either in their local area or beyond the region in which they live.

**Table 12: Higher Education Broad Field of Study for selected Refugee Background Communities (2014)**

Broad Field of Study	Afghanistan	Bhutan	Burma (Myanmar)	Iran	Iraq	Sudan
Natural and Physical Sciences	30 (7.5%)	9 (2.3%)	10 (2.5%)	62 (15.5%)	76 (19.0%)	33 (8.3%)
Information Technology	21 (11.5%)	9 (4.9%)	13 (7.1%)	60 (32.8%)	42 (23.0%)	18 (9.8%)
Engineering and Related Technologies	54 (10.8%)	14 (2.8%)	9 (1.8%)	64 (12.8%)	38 (7.6%)	25 (5.0%)
Health	32 (4.6%)	49 (7.0%)	28 (4.0%)	68 (9.8%)	54 (7.8%)	36 (5.2%)
Education	1 (1.0%)	2 (1.9%)	3 (2.9%)	9 (8.6%)	30 (28.6%)	4 (3.8%)
Management and Commerce	48 (8.0%)	19 (3.2%)	17 (2.8%)	61 (10.1%)	24 (4.0%)	62 (10.3%)
Society and Culture	77 (10.7%)	11 (1.5%)	43 (6.0%)	76 (10.6%)	37 (5.1%)	75 (10.4%)
Other Fields	21 (7.6%)	7 (2.5%)	5 (1.8%)	57 (20.7%)	31 (11.3%)	20 (7.3%)
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>284</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>457</b>	<b>332</b>	<b>273</b>

The largest share of students from refugee backgrounds during the period of study were enrolled at Western Sydney University. In 2014, Western Sydney enrolled 9.2% of total students from refugee backgrounds, followed by Griffith University (6.4%) and RMIT University (5.6%; Table 13, Figure 2).

**Table 13: Total Number of Refugee Background Students Enrolled in Higher Education by University (2014)**

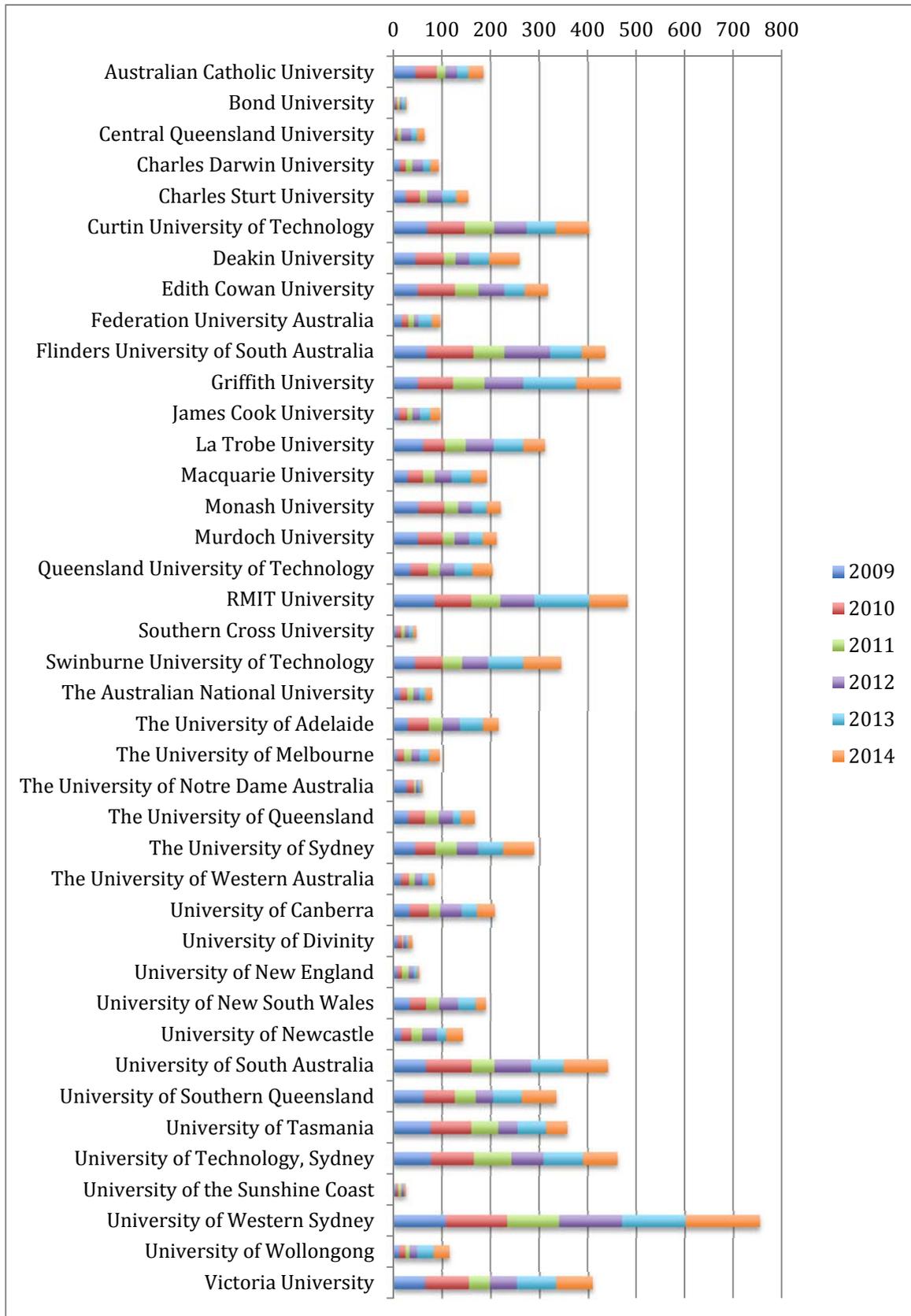
University	Number	% total refugee numbers
Australian Catholic University	71	2.0
Bond University	7	0.2
Central Queensland University	26	0.7
Charles Darwin University	33	0.9
Charles Sturt University	54	1.5
Curtin University of Technology	137	3.9
Deakin University	104	3.0
Edith Cowan University	101	2.9
Federation University Australia	36	1.0
Flinders University of South Australia	153	4.4
Griffith University	224	6.4
James Cook University	46	1.3
La Trobe University	112	3.2
Macquarie University	79	2.3
Monash University	76	2.2
Murdoch University	70	2.0
Queensland University of Technology	98	2.8
RMIT University	196	5.6
Southern Cross University	17	0.5
Swinburne University of Technology	148	4.2
The Australian National University	22	0.6
The University of Adelaide	93	2.7
The University of Melbourne	44	1.3
The University of Notre Dame Australia	13	0.4
The University of Queensland	59	1.7
The University of Sydney	110	3.1
The University of Western Australia	30	0.9
University of Canberra	83	2.4
University of Divinity	17	0.5
University of New England	16	0.5
University of New South Wales	64	1.8
University of Newcastle	70	2.0

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University of South Australia	187	5.3
University of Southern Queensland	131	3.7
University of Tasmania	83	2.4
University of Technology, Sydney	158	4.5
University of the Sunshine Coast	3	0.1
University of Wollongong	53	1.5
Victoria University	158	4.5
Western Sydney University	324	9.2

**Figure 2: Total Number of Refugee Background Students Enrolled in Higher Education by University (2009 to 2014)**



**Table 14: Total Number of Refugee Background Students Enrolled in Higher Education by State (2014)**

State	% Total Refugee Numbers	% Total Refugee EFTSL	% Total Student Numbers
New South Wales	27.0	26.9	29.8
Victoria	25.4	24.6	27.1
Queensland	16.9	17.3	17.7
Western Australia	10.0	9.5	10.1
South Australia	12.4	13.3	6.6
Tasmania	2.4	2.7	2.3
Northern Territory	0.9	0.5	0.9
Australian Capital Territory	3.0	2.8	3.1
Multi-State	2.0	2.2	2.3

Although the highest numbers of refugee students are enrolled in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania have a disproportionately high number of students from refugee backgrounds compared to their share of students generally, and a slightly higher share of EFTSL (Table 14).

A review of these data shows that students from refugee backgrounds are under-represented at the Group of Eight and Regional Universities Network (RUN) institutions, by comparison with the proportion of total student numbers at these institutions (Table 15). In the case of regional universities, this may be due to the lower proportion of refugees living in those areas. In contrast, refugee background students are relatively over-represented at the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) and unaligned universities.

**Table 15: Total Number of Refugee Background Students Enrolled in Higher Education by Type of Institution (2014)**

University Group	% Total Refugee Numbers	% Total Student Numbers 2014
Group of Eight	14.2	28.0
ATN	22.1	18.0
IRU	18.26	15.7
RUN	6.5	8.5
Unaligned	38.9	29.8

## 4.2 Geographical distribution of communities of interest

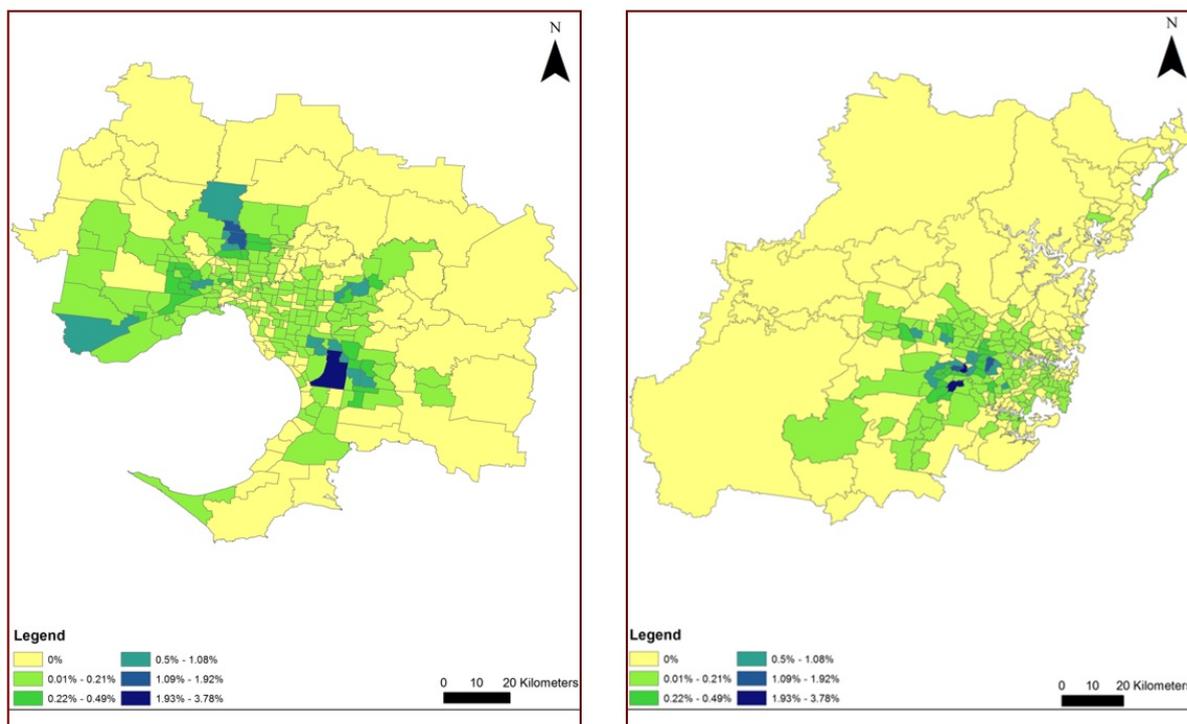
In this final section of this report, particular communities of interest and their geographic distributions around major Australian cities are reviewed using ABS census data from the most recent census in 2011. This section does not intend to provide a comprehensive survey of refugee community distributions across Australia. Instead, we wish to demonstrate using selected examples that refugees do not form a monolithic group, and that the distributions of individual communities require tailored approaches to outreach, and may present students with different challenges in terms of transport, community support and so on.

These communities were identified because of the relatively high levels of participation of individuals from refugee background in higher education (Table 6, 7 above). Those countries that have had a large amount of emigration due to factors other than humanitarian reasons (e.g. Iran, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka and China) were discounted, leaving eight countries of interest: Afghanistan, Bhutan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Iraq, Myanmar (Burma), South Sudan and Sudan. Full details are provided in Chapter 1.

Although these countries of birth were selected because these were the places that students from refugee background had listed on their university applications (information which is not collected as part of ABS census data), it should be noted that the geographic distributions include all those reporting that country of birth, not just those on humanitarian visas. However, an examination of this material was deemed necessary for the purpose of identifying particular locations where opportunities exist for universities to focus outreach programs, and better engage with the selected new and emerging communities.

Similarly, these selected communities were identified as a model for analysis that could be applied to all the communities that have a link with Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program.

**Figure 3: Geographical Distributions of Selected Overseas-Born Communities in Melbourne and Sydney**



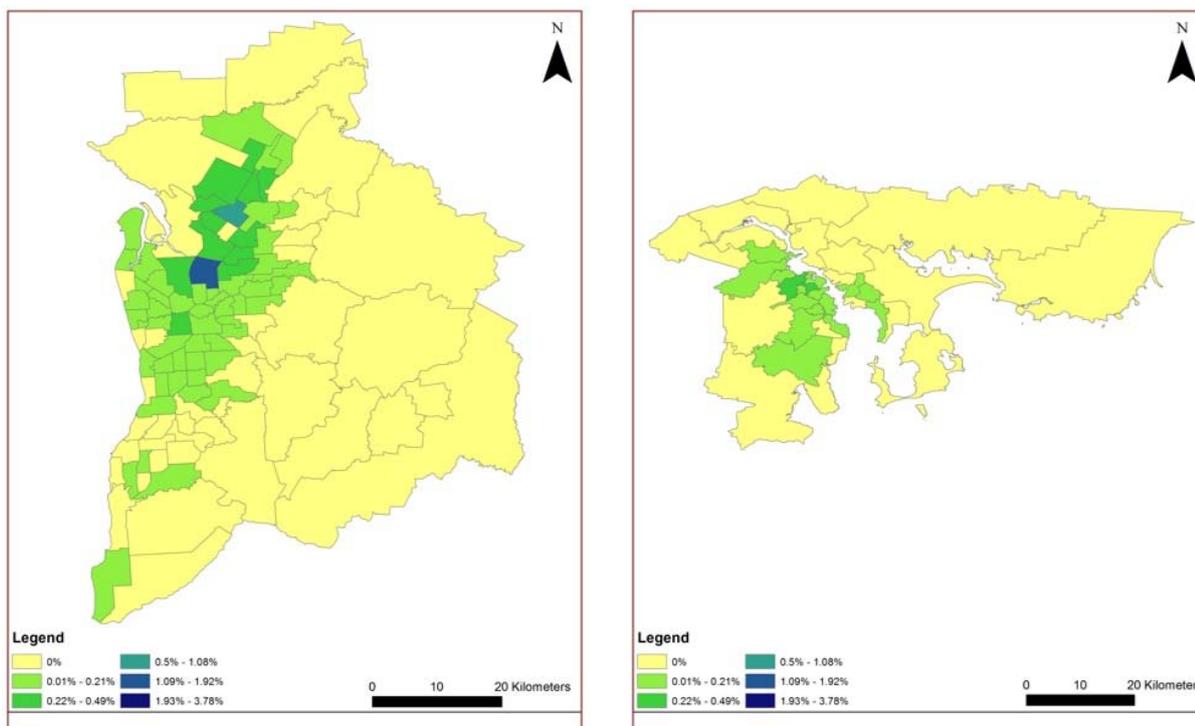
**Melbourne, Victoria (left) and Sydney, New South Wales (right)**

Population density for the communities of interest are shown in Figure 3 (as a proportion of the national total entering Australia between 2006 and 2011, from ABS data). Afghani, Bhutanese, Burmese, D.R. Congolese, Ethiopian, Iraqi, South Sudanese and Sudanese-born communities are shown here in total.

It should be noted that these are typically low SES areas, often underserved by infrastructure, such as inadequate public transport and under-resourced schools. However, the degree of concentration varies from city to city. In Sydney, the density of populations from these communities is focused primarily in Parramatta and the south-west regions, with lower densities forming three radiating areas. In Melbourne, however, these communities are far more dispersed, with particular densities found around Dandenong, Broadmeadows, Werribee, and the inner west. Also of interest is the fact that areas of high population density from these communities are frequently found alongside areas with no recorded members of these communities, thereby raising questions about the ways in which universities might ‘engage’ with these groups. More specifically, members of the communities of interest to this research are not distributed evenly across the cities. This is the case for the majority of the communities that are the focus for equity practitioners. There is considerable evidence that nuanced, community-sensitive approaches to outreach are most effective ‘engagement’ strategies. (Naylor, Baik and James 2011; Bennett et al. 2015).

These findings may also underline the impact that South Australian and Tasmanian institutions have had in encouraging participation from students from refugee backgrounds. Although Adelaide and Hobart have relatively few members from these communities of interest, they have above-average proportions of students from refugee backgrounds (see Table 11, 12 above; Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Geographical Distributions of Selected Overseas-Born Communities in Adelaide and Hobart**



**Adelaide, South Australia (left) and Hobart, Tasmania (right)**

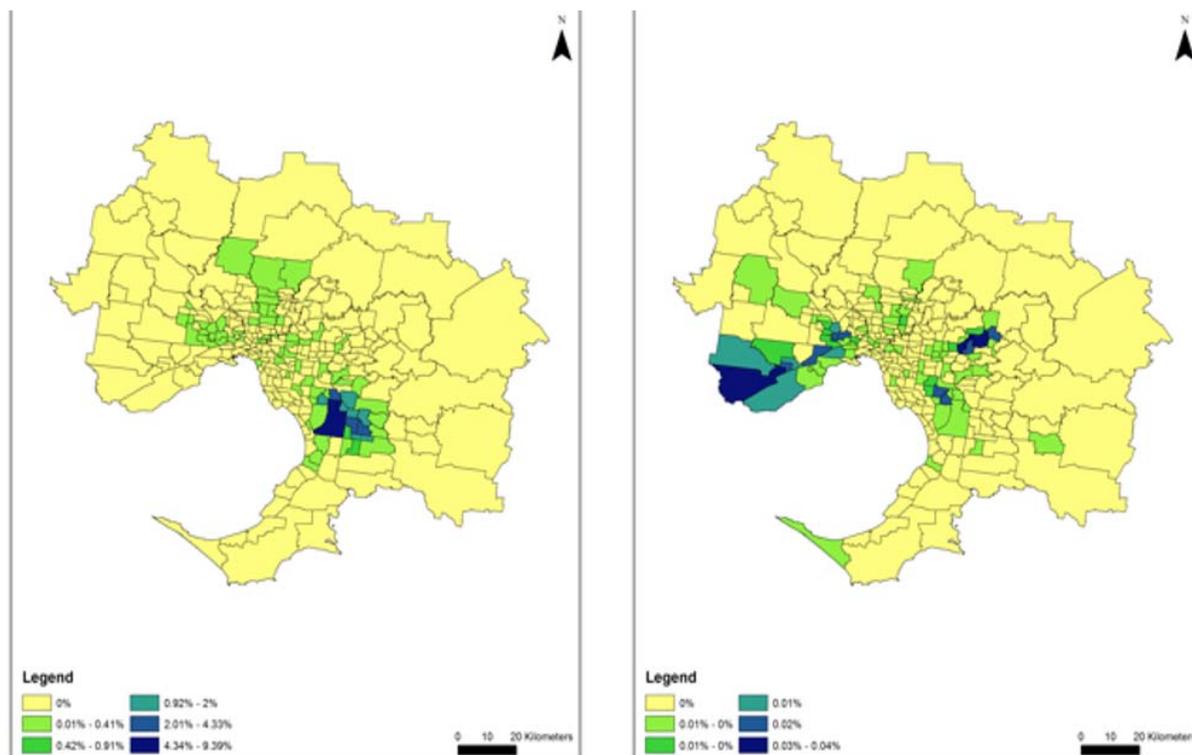
As a further example, Figure 5 demonstrates the different distributions of two of these communities within Melbourne. As shown, there is very little overlap between the distribution of people born in Afghanistan and in Burma (Myanmar). Although there may be some commonalities of experience for students from these backgrounds, there are likely to be significant differences in the issues,

### Not There Yet

An Investigation into the Access and Participation of Students from Humanitarian Refugee Backgrounds in the Australian Higher Education System

structure of networks, or history which should be accounted for in building their interactions with universities (or, indeed, wider community and institutions). It is not enough to assume a 'one size fits all' approach.

**Figure 5: Geographical Distributions of Afghani-born and Burmese-born Communities in Melbourne**



**Afghani-born Communities (left), Burmese-born Communities (right)**

More broadly, the Australian higher education sector now has the ability to identify and engage communities through targeted and culturally-sensitive ways. It should not be enough to identify students as 'NESB' and assume that those students all have similar needs (Naylor, Coates and Kelly 2016). Some institutions are already demonstrating this need for change, by focusing on specific communities such as Pasifika or particular refugee communities (for example, Western Sydney University's PATHE program). Data-based methodologies such as those shown here can inform university approaches to ensure that services are delivered to those most likely to need them, and to allow outreach programs to be specific, community-led, and culturally engaged.

## 5. Concluding Statement and Key Findings

A survey of the enrolment data collected by the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training indicated that refugee background students form a small but increasing proportion of the Australian higher education sector. Even though it is apparent that there has been an increase in the number of humanitarian refugees entering Australian universities, it should be noted that this increase is from a low base, and that the general level of participation across communities is still very low. The analysis of the data also indicates that there are only a few selected institutions, primarily in geographic locations close to where the communities settle, that have established refugee background student participation as a key part of their student intake programs. Also, considering course type and participation of the cohort under study, compared to total student population, there are concerns about the lack of refugee background student enrolments in, among others, the education, management and culture, as well as the creative arts fields of study.

However, as suggested earlier in this study, while it is the case that there are common barriers faced by these communities in achieving full participation in the higher education system in Australia, the evidence suggests that the diverse communities are also positioned differently in regard to their relationship with the university sector. In general terms, when the figures for university participation are examined for specific communities (for example, Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Bhutan), it is clear that there is only a small percentage of persons from these communities gaining access to university study. Also, the data indicates that the numbers of females as compared to males enrolling across the system, despite improved participation, is substantially lower within a number of highly vulnerable refugee background communities.

A review of the selected literature suggests that there are efforts on the part of selected institutions to develop explicit policies and programs to address barriers and provide pathways to the refugee background communities. Also, a survey of relevant research highlights the fact that a small but significant number of institutions, have put in place a range of pathways as well as reformed curricula to be inclusive of refugee background students. For example, initiatives such as English language support or mentoring programs targeted at or inclusive of refugee background students have been crucial in ensuring better access and participation. As stated earlier in this report, it is the view of the researchers involved in this study that the work of these universities, which needs to be encouraged and supported further, provides model strategies and approaches that could also be adopted by other universities in which students from refugee backgrounds are still clearly underrepresented.

However, it is also the view of the authors of this study that existing university 'engagement' programs and strategies could be strengthened through a more focused, community-based rights and capacity building approach. Not only will this have the benefits of building links between universities and specific communities that have not been well represented in the enrolment intakes across the higher education sector, but will also set a base for partnership research projects with these groups on issues of mutual interest and benefit.

Consequently, there is still much to be done in opening up the system and ensuring that the policies, structures and strategies are put in place to enable increased participation of refugee background students across university and course types. While this will require each university to review policies and programs in terms of the participation of refugee background students, there is also a need for a national set of guidelines and model projects to support universities in their efforts to address the educational needs of refugee background communities. While some positive steps have been taken in this regard, as stated, particularly at sites where there are significant enrolments from these groups, the low rate of participation for each community, the lack of spread of students across different university types, the failure to recognise unmet demand, the absence of any information on the educational aspirations and expectations of refugee background persons,

as well as the lack of a mechanism for transference of 'good practice' across the system, all mean that, in terms of a comprehensive policy and program response to the settlement of humanitarian refugees, the national university system is 'not there yet'.

## 5.1 Findings

- In 2014, there were 3,506 students from refugee backgrounds in the Australian higher education system. These numbers have more than doubled from 1,687 in 2009.
- Refugee background people are not evenly distributed across and between Australia's capital cities, though in a number of cases the communities can be identified by specific geographic distributions.
- Refugee students have complex and multifaceted needs that require an integrated and tailored approach that can specifically support their particular life and education experiences.
- The majority of students from refugee background are mature aged (49% are aged over 25) and study on a full-time basis. These factors have previously been shown to add further stressors to study, and students may require additional support.
- Nearly 78% percent of students from refugee background arrived in Australia between 2006 and 2009.
- Students from refugee background are over-represented in enabling and non-award courses, and under-represented in postgraduate study.
- A high proportion of refugee students are enrolled in STEM fields and nursing. This distribution differs from both mainstream students and from other equity groups.
- In 2014, approximately 40% of students from refugee background were female, as opposed to approximately 55% across the sector.
- Western Sydney University, Griffith University and RMIT University enrol the highest proportions of refugee background students. Institutions in NSW and Victoria enrol the largest proportion of these students overall, while South Australia and Tasmania enrol a higher proportion of those who identified themselves as having been humanitarian entrants into Australia compared to their overall share of students.
- Students from refugee backgrounds are under-represented in Group of Eight and Regional Universities Network, and relatively over-represented at the Innovative Research Universities and unaligned universities.
- A comparison of male and female participation in higher education across the communities, indicates very low levels of female participation across a number of listed specific communities (Bhutanese 22.5%, Afghan 28.2%, Sudanese 23.4%). In contrast, participation rates for females from Iraq and Iran were 51.3% and 49.9% respectively. However, these figures should be viewed in the context of the already low participation rates across the refugee background communities and the lack of direct engagement with the groups by the university system as a whole.

## 6. Recommendations

On the basis of the findings from this research it is recommended that in advancing the education of refugee background students as an 'equity group' all universities should:

- review the existing forms of support for students of refugee background to examine how these might be extended and enhanced, including the provision of humanitarian scholarships, outreach programs, well developed foundation studies, as well as community-based activities shaped by a 'rights' model rather than a marketing paradigm;
- develop more nuanced and culturally specific ways to engage with diverse refugee background communities, including the provision of multilingual materials and community-specific workshops, seminars and public events that will raise the level of the understanding of university processes, requirements and offerings;
- identify, as part of key planning processes, the geographical distributions of refugee background communities to inform university engagement activities;
- acknowledge, as a key principle, the skills, education background, resourcefulness, aspirations and resilience, that students from refugee background bring with them to the learning and research environment;
- engage actively with specific refugee background communities and individuals, with a view to building knowledge of and skills as 'agents of change' in their engagement with the university system;
- maintain university-community partnerships, specifically those involving the wider social/civic community at the crucial points in the progression of the student through undergraduate studies;
- establish community and university based group and individual mentoring schemes that recognise and involve the existing expertise across and within refugee background communities.

At the national level it is recommended that:

- there be additional and targeted funding within the Equity Program to support refugee background students at the specific locations in which they are studying;
- the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training establish a working party from across the sector and relevant key community organisations, to investigate and formulate a National Framework to guide universities in the development of programs, with a view to ensuring improved access and participation, as well as offering specifically targeted engagement for refugee background communities.

Further research is required to address the following concerns highlighted by this report:

- the barriers confronting refugee background women and girls in accessing and participating in Australia's higher education system; and
- the educational aspirations of refugee background communities across and within a number of specific refugee background communities, with a view to ensuring better targeted programs for refugee background student in terms of pathways into university programs and courses.

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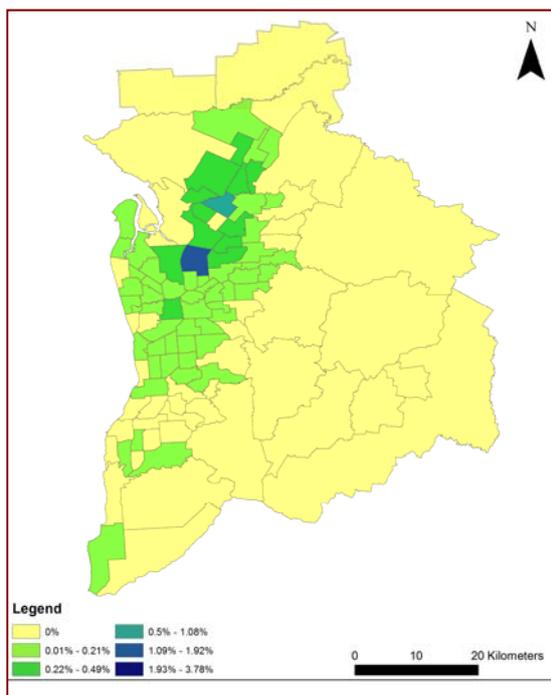
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## **8. Appendix**

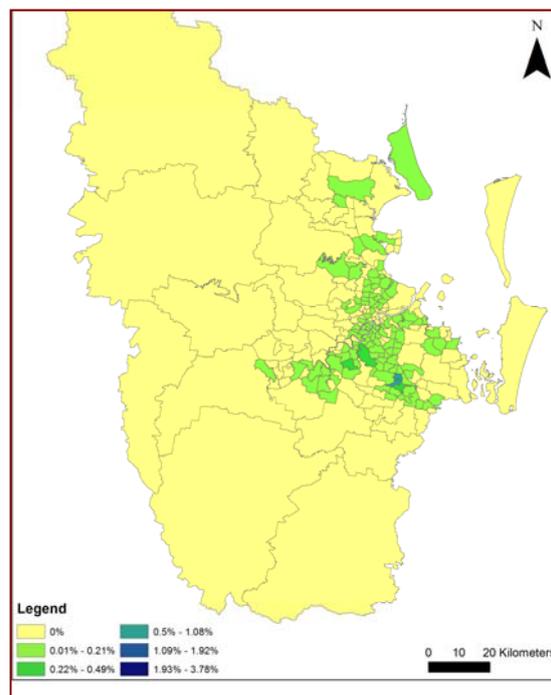
## Appendix. Geographical distributions of selected overseas-born communities in Australia

**Figure A1. Geographical distributions of selected overseas-born communities in major Australian cities.**

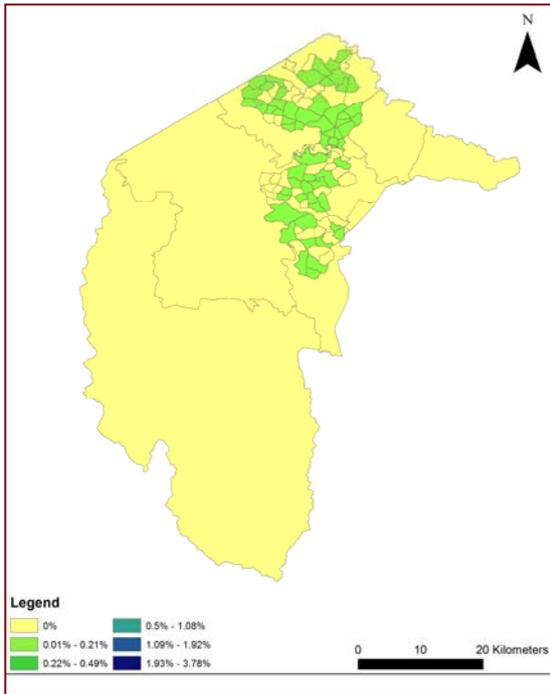
Population density shown as a proportion of the national total entering Australia between 2006 and 2011, from ABS data. Afghani, Bhutanese, Burmese, D.R. Congolese, Ethiopian, Iraqi, South Sudanese and Sudanese-born communities are shown here in total.



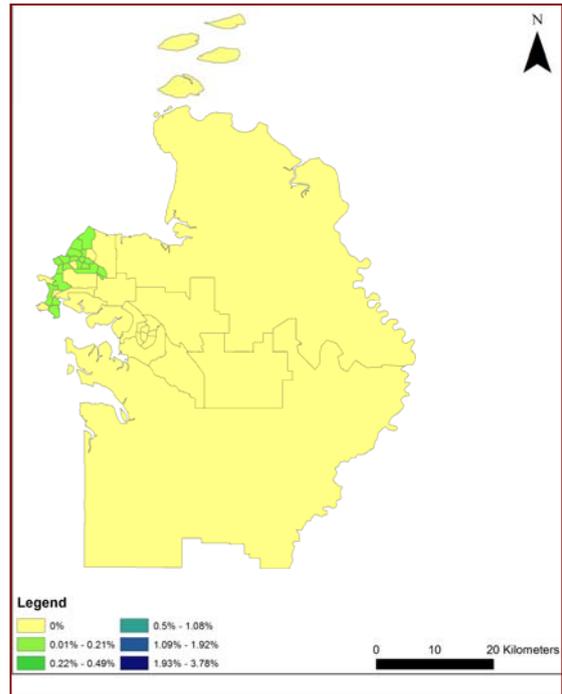
Adelaide



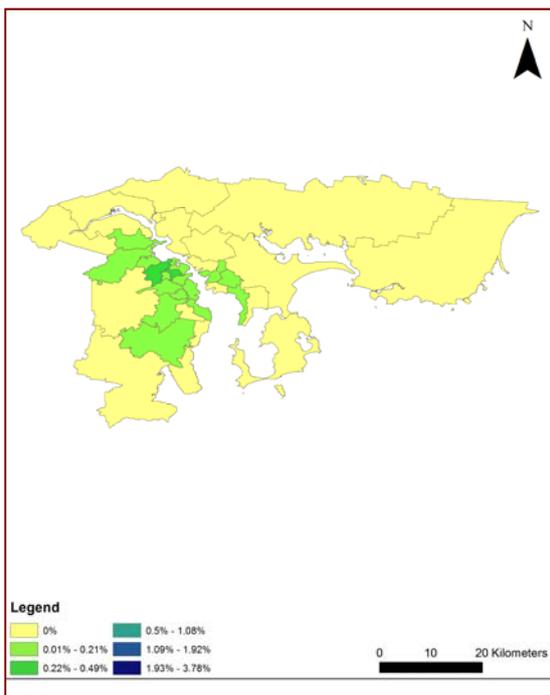
Brisbane



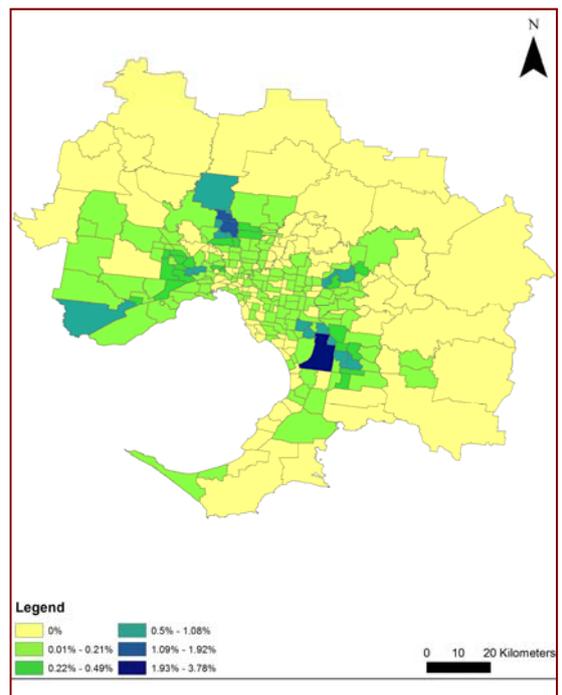
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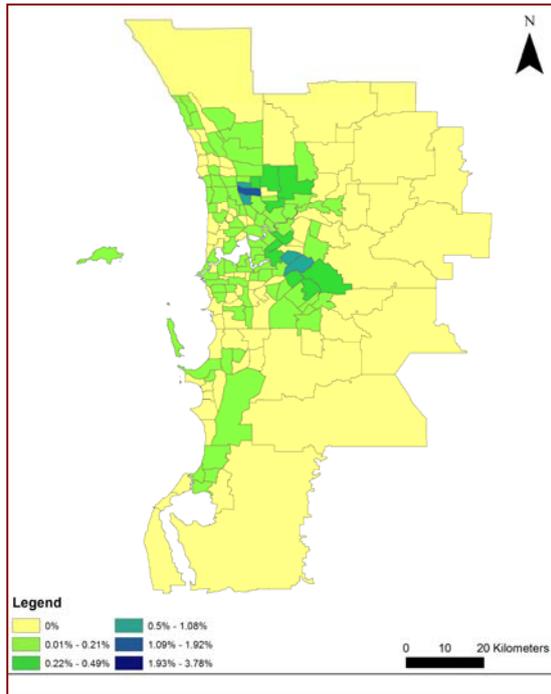
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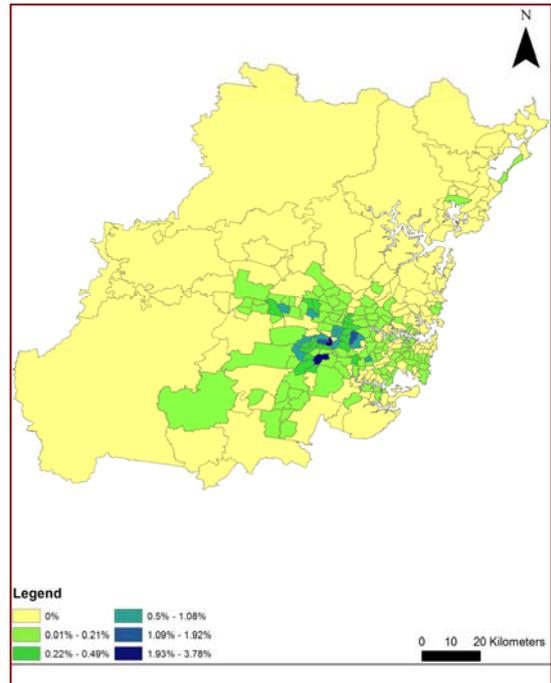
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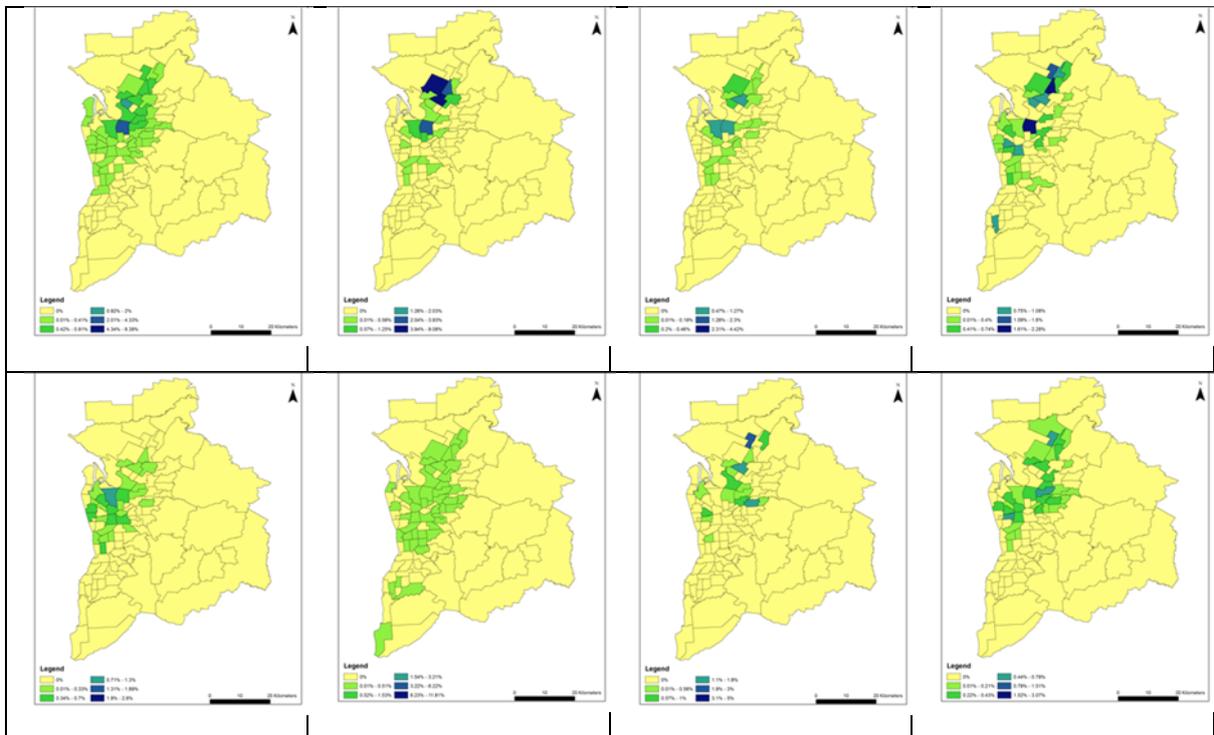
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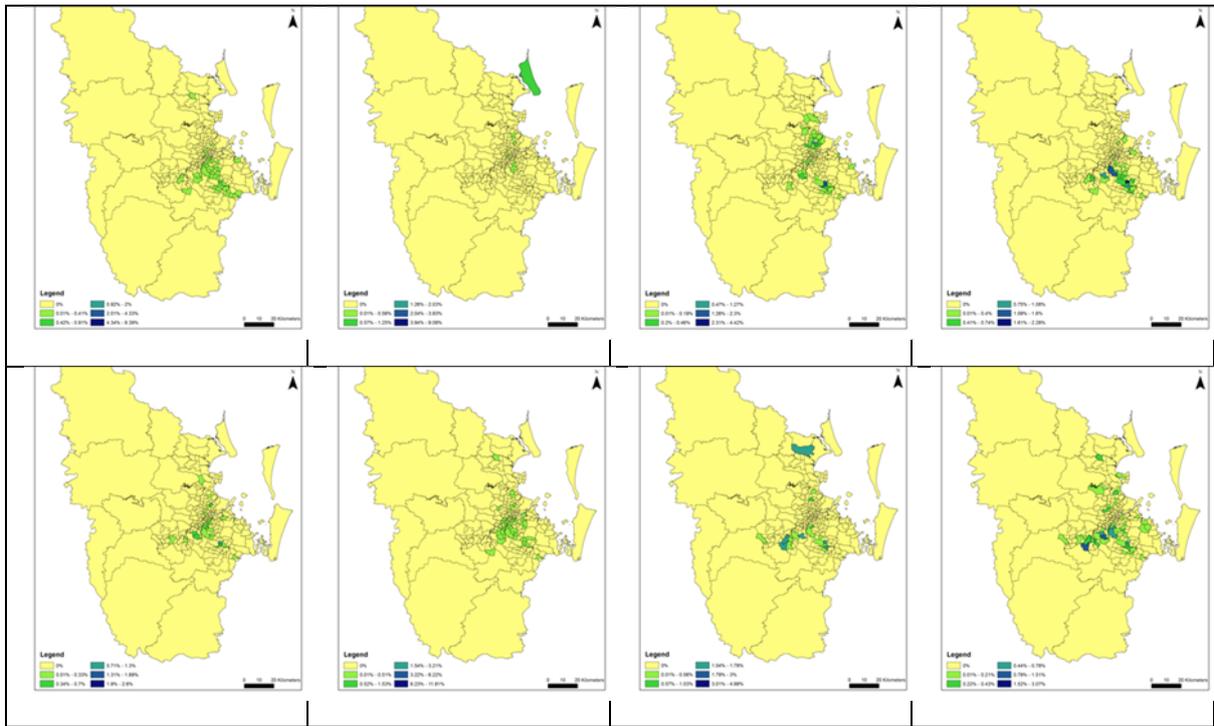
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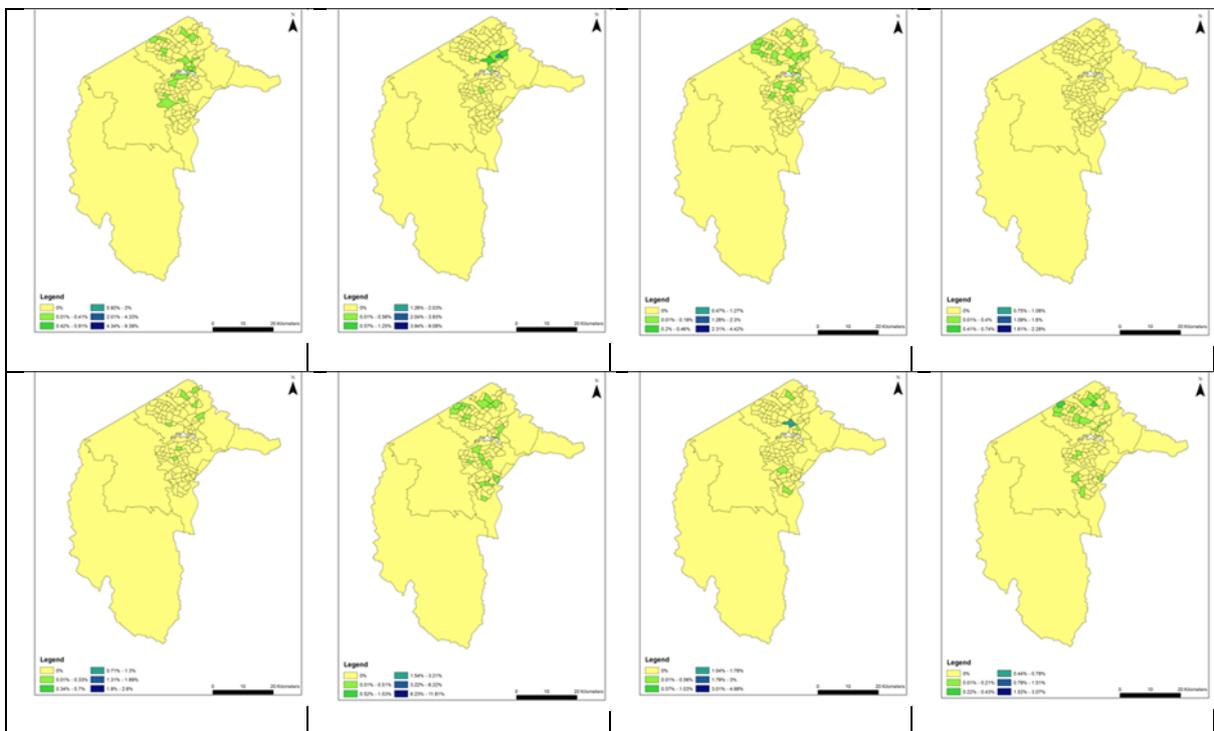
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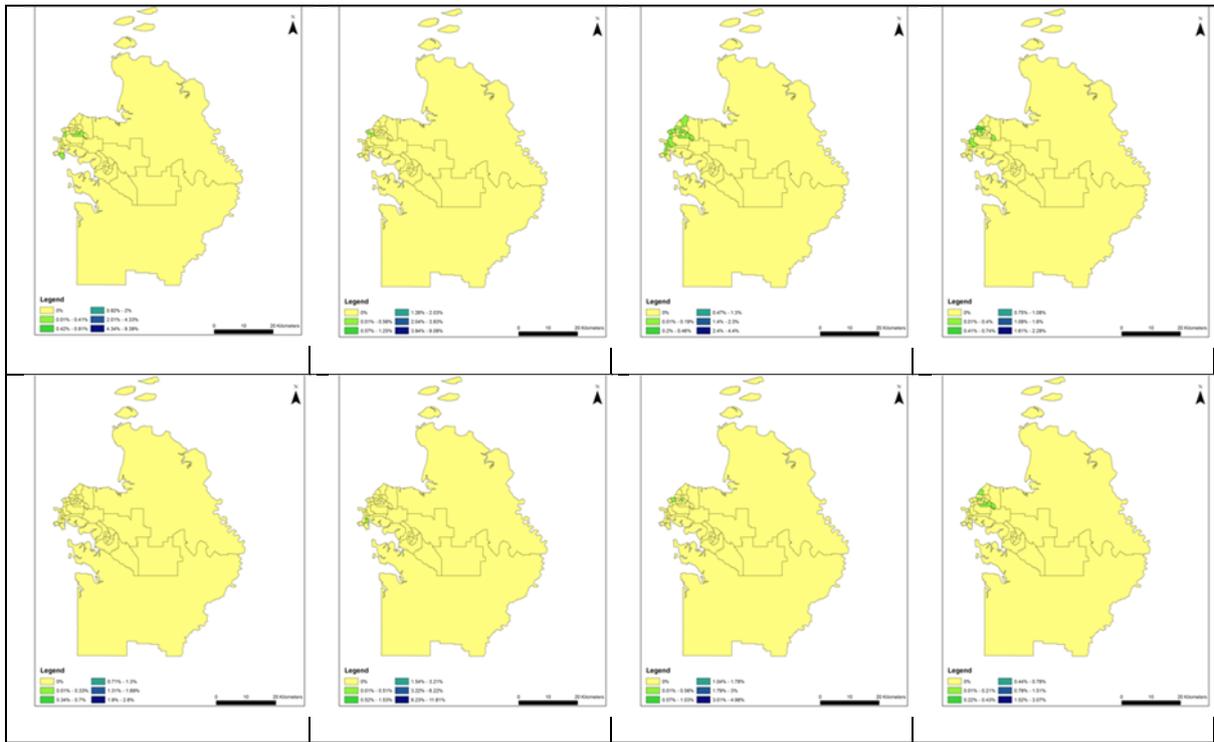
**Figure A2. Geographical distributions of selected overseas-born communities in Adelaide.** Left to right: (Top): Afghan, Bhutanese, Burmese (Myanmar), D.R. Congolese; (bottom): Ethiopian, Iraqi, South Sudanese, Sudanese. Population density shown as a proportion of the national total entering Australia between 2006 and 2011, from ABS data.



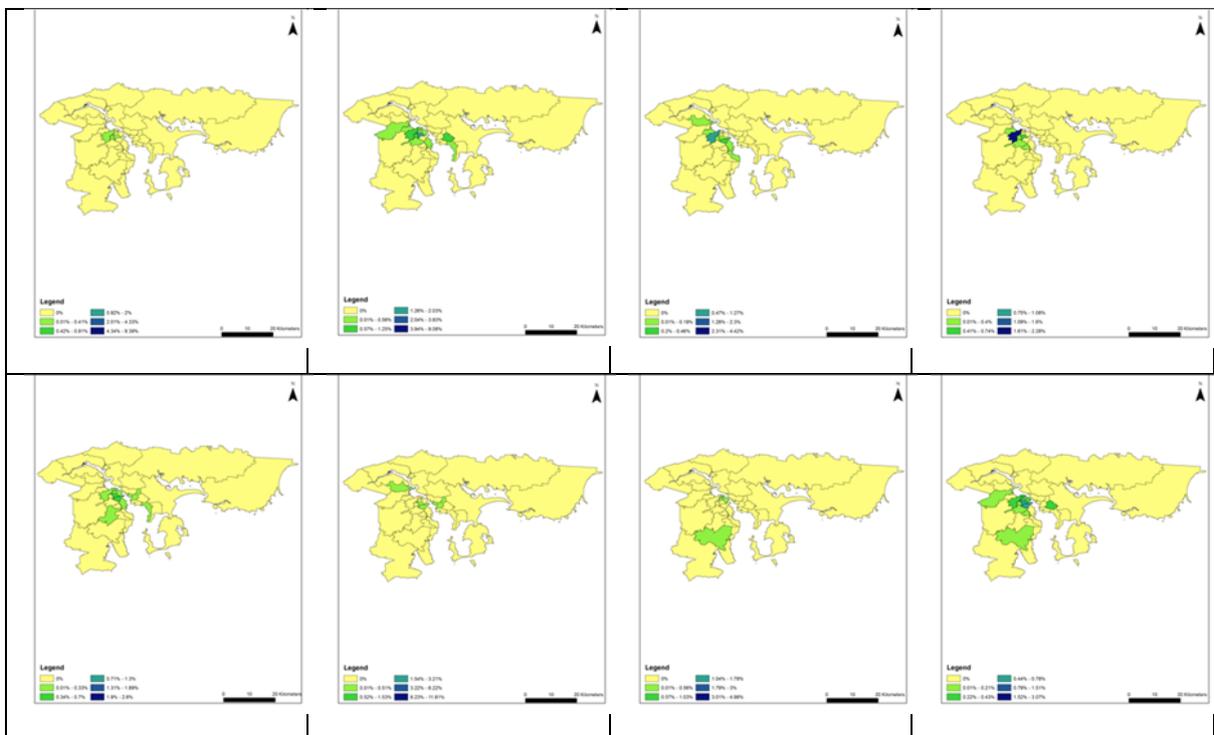
**Figure A3. Geographical distributions of selected overseas-born communities in Brisbane.** Left to right: (Top): Afghani, Bhutanese, Burmese (Myanmar), D.R. Congolese; (bottom): Ethiopian, Iraqi, South Sudanese, Sudanese. Population density shown as a proportion of the national total entering Australia between 2006 and 2011, from ABS data.



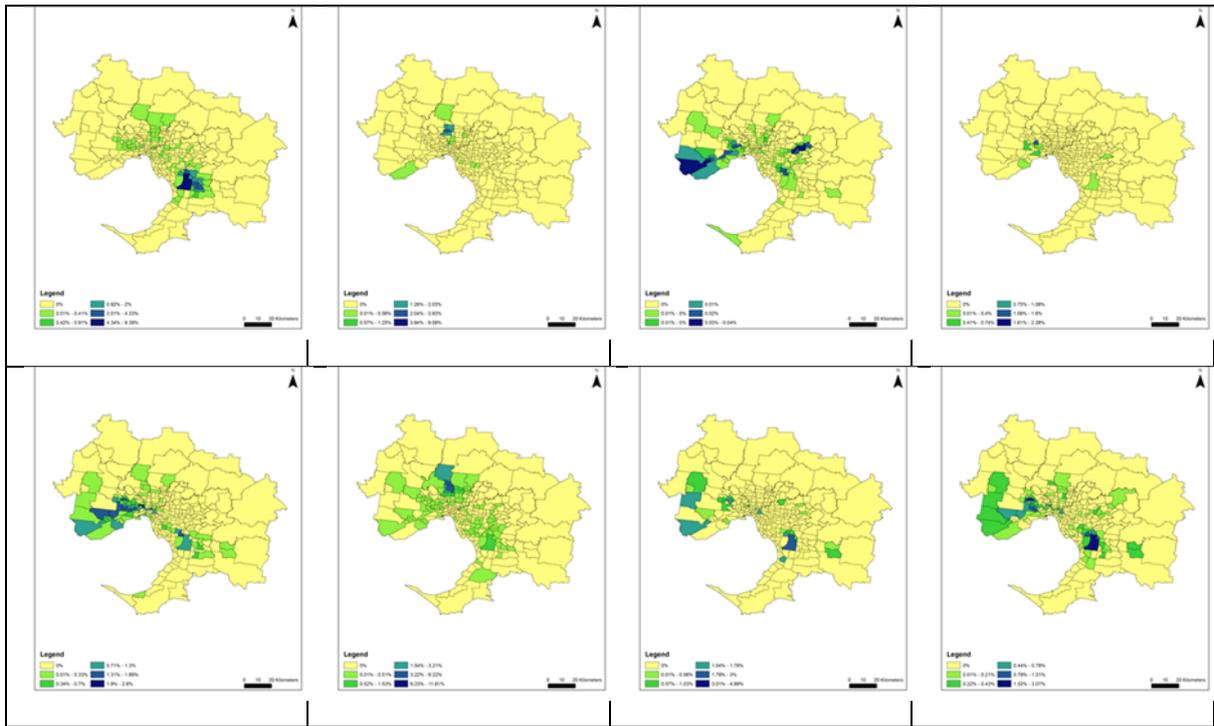
**Figure A4. Geographical distributions of selected overseas-born communities in Canberra.** Left to right: (Top): Afghani, Bhutanese, Burmese (Myanmar), D.R. Congolese; (bottom): Ethiopian, Iraqi, South Sudanese, Sudanese. Population density shown as a proportion of the national total entering Australia between 2006 and 2011, from ABS data.



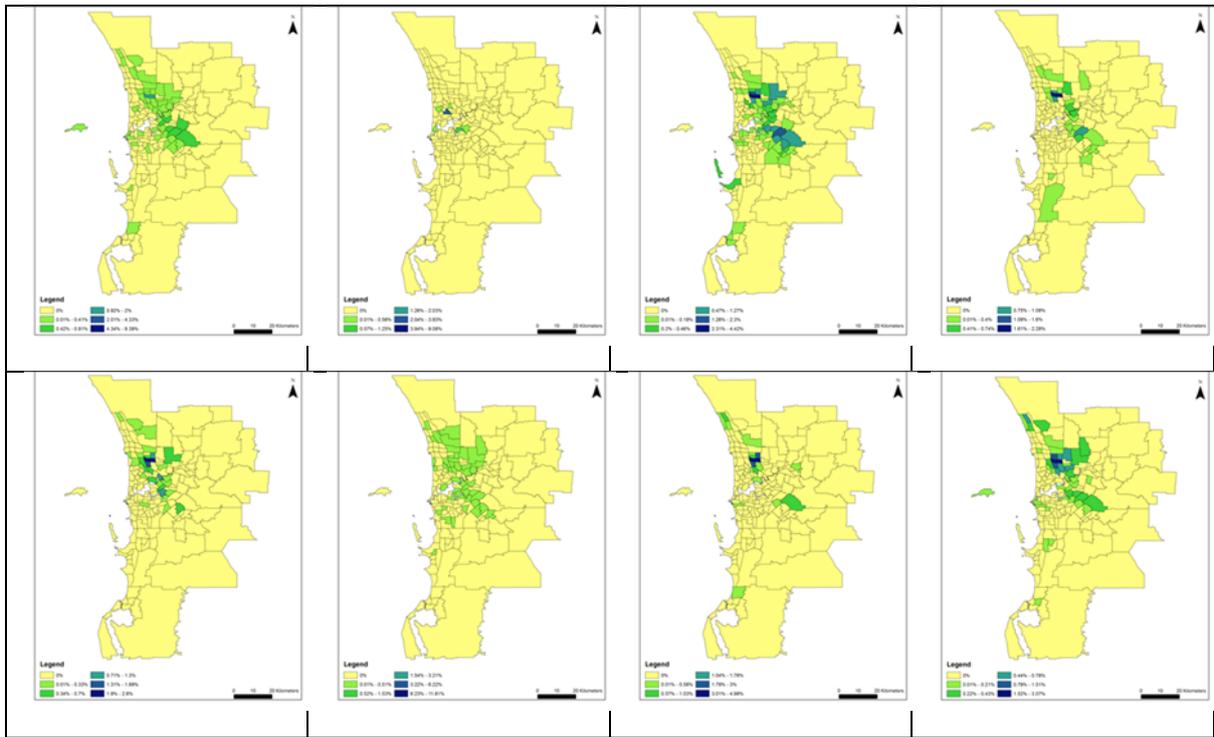
**Figure A5. Geographical distributions of selected overseas-born communities in Darwin.** Left to right: (Top): Afghani, Bhutanese, Burmese (Myanmar), D.R. Congolese; (bottom): Ethiopian, Iraqi, South Sudanese, Sudanese. Population density shown as a proportion of the national total entering Australia between 2006 and 2011, from ABS data.



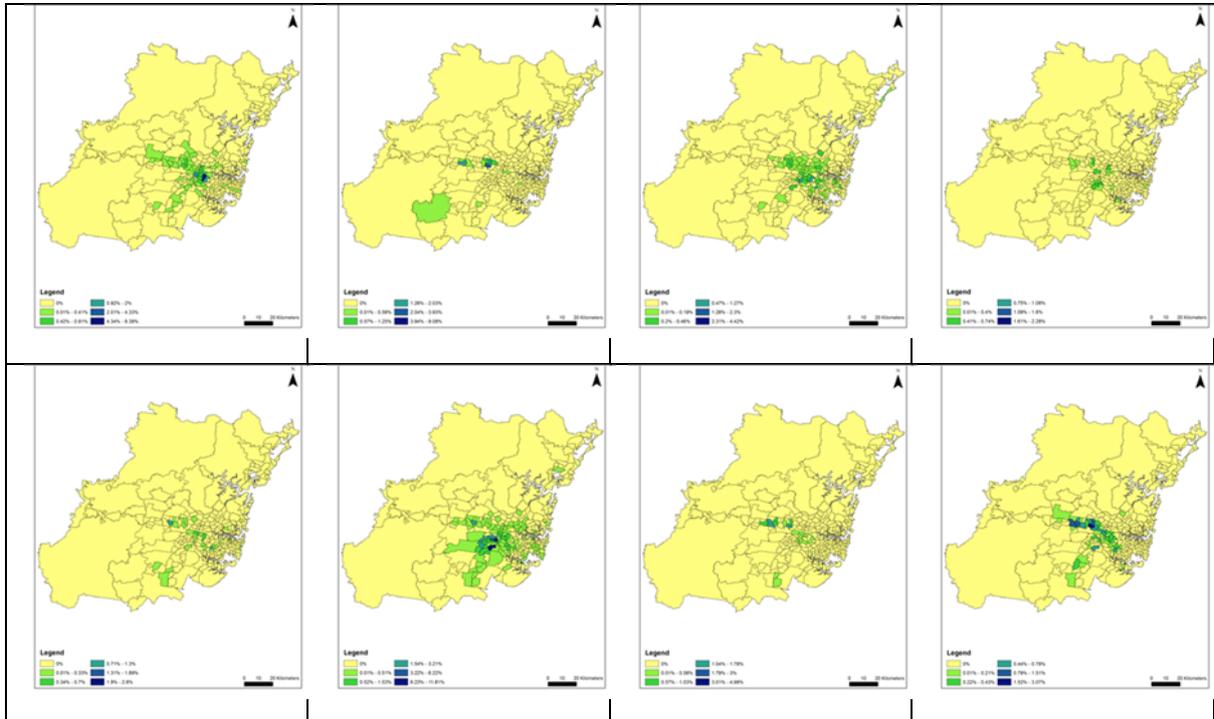
**Figure A6. Geographical distributions of selected overseas-born communities in Hobart.** Left to right: (Top): Afghani, Bhutanese, Burmese (Myanmar), D.R. Congolese; (bottom): Ethiopian, Iraqi, South Sudanese, Sudanese. Population density shown as a proportion of the national total entering Australia between 2006 and 2011, from ABS data.



**Figure A7. Geographical distributions of selected overseas-born communities in Melbourne.** Left to right: (Top): Afghani, Bhutanese, Burmese (Myanmar), D.R. Congolese; (bottom): Ethiopian, Iraqi, South Sudanese, Sudanese. Population density shown as a proportion of the national total entering Australia between 2006 and 2011, from ABS data.



**Figure A8. Geographical distributions of selected overseas-born communities in Perth.**  
**Left to right:** (Top): Afghani, Bhutanese, Burmese (Myanmar), D.R. Congolese; (bottom): Ethiopian, Iraqi, South Sudanese, Sudanese. Population density shown as a proportion of the national total entering Australia between 2006 and 2011, from ABS data.



**Figure A9. Geographical distributions of selected overseas-born communities in Sydney.**  
**Left to right:** (Top): Afghani, Bhutanese, Burmese (Myanmar), D.R. Congolese; (bottom): Ethiopian, Iraqi, South Sudanese, Sudanese. Population density shown as a proportion of the national total entering Australia between 2006 and 2011, from ABS data.