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# People seeking asylum in Australia: Access & support in higher education

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# People seeking asylum in Australia: Access and support in higher education

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## List of Acronyms Used

ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
CSP	Commonwealth Supported Places
HELP	Higher Education Loans Program
MYAN	Multicultural Advocacy Youth Network
RCOA	Refugee Council of Australia
SHEV	Safe Haven Enterprise Visa
SRSS	Status Resolution Support Services
TPV	Temporary Protection Visa
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VET	Vocational Education and Training

# Executive Summary

*My study is the purpose of continuing my life.*

*(Student from an asylum-seeker background: Individual Interview)*

Accessing higher education is critical for many people seeking asylum; not simply as a means of acquiring the qualifications necessary for employment, but as essential to living a meaningful life. The opportunity to undertake study is also seen by many as an important tool for developing the capacities and knowledge to sustain their livelihoods and to contribute to their communities and to society. However, the findings of this first Australia-wide study into access to higher education for people seeking asylum highlight that most continue to face enormous barriers in doing so. These barriers are largely due to the restrictive Federal Government policies that are imposed on them. While many universities and community organisations have responded to this situation by offering initiatives and supports to enable more than 204 people seeking asylum around Australia to access higher education, they continue to face significant challenges throughout their studies, and there are many others who remain without such access.

For much of the past six years, approximately 30,000 people seeking asylum have resided in “community detention”<sup>1</sup> or lived in the community on temporary Bridging Visas while they await the processing of their claim for refugee status. These are people who arrived in the country by boat either before 13 August 2012 without having their protection visa application finalised as at 18 September 2013 or those who arrived on or after 13 August 2012 and were not sent to offshore detention on Nauru or Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island. If they are deemed eligible for protection in Australia, they are issued with one of two temporary visas: a three year Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) or a five year Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV). In this report, the term “people seeking asylum” is used to refer to people who are awaiting the outcome of their refugee application and living in the community on a Bridging Visa or in community detention, or those already found to be a refugee and granted a TPV or SHEV.

The current research project provides a nationwide map of the policies and practices affecting people seeking asylum and is the first of its kind to evaluate university and community supports for these students. It draws on the findings of a national symposium held in November 2017 that explored these issues. The symposium brought together 25 people seeking asylum both currently enrolled in higher education programs as well as prospective students, and 40 representatives from universities and community organisations. This research project also draws on the findings of a national online survey of 67 representatives from 25 Australian universities and 21 community organisations, individual interviews with 11 students with lived experience of seeking asylum either studying or wanting to study at university, interviews with 11 university representatives from nine universities in five Australian states, and six representatives from community organisations in New South Wales and Victoria.

The findings highlight that people seeking asylum face complex and specific challenges and barriers to higher education access and enrolment. A major barrier is that their only pathway to accessing higher education is being granted admission as an international student given the temporary nature of the visa they are issued. This means they are ineligible for Federal Government programs designed to assist students with financing tertiary study, including the Higher Education Loans Program (HELP), Commonwealth Supported Places, and concession rates. Therefore, for most, this entry-point is financially prohibitive. Further

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<sup>1</sup> A small number of people seeking asylum in Australia are released from immigration detention into “community detention” without a bridging visa. This allows them to live in the community without the right to work. They are effectively barred from higher education because they are not issued with any form of visa while they wait for their refugee claim to be finalised.

barriers given their temporary visa status include difficulty in accessing enabling courses and, for many, lack of access to affordable English language courses and student or other income supports. People seeking asylum are also forced to endure a policy landscape that is not only hostile but changeable with very little, or no warning, which creates considerable stress and confusion.

In recent years, a number of Australian universities have responded to the restrictive federal policies by implementing mechanisms to support access to higher education such as offering scholarships that cover full tuition fees coupled with community sector advocacy and support. This study highlights that these efforts have resulted in more than 204 people seeking asylum studying in 23 universities across the country on scholarships that meet their full tuition fees. Some of the universities also offer a living allowance. However, our research finds that there are many other people seeking asylum who have not been able to access a scholarship and/or meet the university entry requirements.

It is clear that university scholarships for people seeking asylum that meet full tuition fees, coupled with living allowance and other supports, have enabled access to higher education for more than 204 people across Australia. The determination and commitment of these students to their studies—while living in situations of extreme uncertainty and receiving minimal supports compared with most other students in Australia—is clearly evident and needs to be lauded. The university and community organisations responsible for the scholarships and other supports are also to be commended.

However, further measures are needed to be provided by many universities to ensure these students receive supports that are necessary for their retention, participation, and success in their studies. In addition, the Federal Government policies underpinning the most significant barriers that people seeking asylum face in accessing higher education need to be addressed, including the need for permanent protection visas to be issued to all who have been recognised as refugees. Efforts directed at realising this are critical.

## **Federal Government Recommendations**

- Grant permanent visas to all people currently on TPVs and SHEVs.
- Expedite the processing of refugee claims for those yet to be finalised.
- Ensure that all people seeking asylum and refugees have access to income and student supports on par with other Australians.

## **University Recommendations**

### ***Policy and practice development***

- Provide opportunities for people with lived experience of seeking asylum to inform policy and practice.
- Allocate one staff member as a central point for students from asylum-seeking backgrounds.

### ***Full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships***

- Until permanent protection visas are issued, establish and continue to expand the number of full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships to people seeking asylum.
- Offer scholarships that allow people seeking asylum to study postgraduate studies.
- Offer part-time and flexible options for scholarship holders.

### ***Financial support***

- In the absence of access to government-funded income support, include supports for meeting living expenses in scholarship offerings.
- Offer subsidised accommodation for students who receive scholarships.



- Provide opportunities for students for employment on campus, such as paid workplace experience, to help establish networks and enable access to employment after university.

#### ***Alternative entry pathways and transition supports***

- Offer alternative entrance pathways, such as enabling programs or diploma pathways, to facilitate access to undergraduate programs.
- Tailor services and supportive pathways through the provision of mentoring.

#### ***Application process***

- Offer the opportunity for students to apply face-to-face rather than fully-online.
- Train university staff with roles relating to scholarships, equity, and admissions on the specific needs of students seeking asylum.
- Collaborate and coordinate with other universities to streamline the application process across institutions and ensure parity of information shared with potential applicants.
- Avoid requiring applicants to disclose their financial situation to access scholarships and/or living allowances.
- Avoid requiring applicants to demonstrate that they will be able to complete their qualification due to their temporary visa status.

#### ***Academic and language support***

- Offer tailored academic support (for academic language, literacies, and cultural navigation) for people seeking asylum.
- This support should consider whether students have had established careers and qualifications in their country of origin or completed schooling after arriving in Australia.

#### ***Support for people with disability, mental health issues, ongoing health challenges, and family responsibilities***

- Provide on-campus refugee-specific mental health support and counselling services.
- Provide training for all frontline staff on issues dealing with people seeking asylum.
- Implement official structures to support such students.
- Offer people seeking asylum with young children access to affordable childcare.

#### ***Sector advocacy***

- Collaborate and coordinate with other universities and community organisations to advocate for Federal Government policy change to ensure that people seeking asylum recognised as refugees are given permanent protection visas, and all people seeking asylum access appropriate income supports.

### **Community Organisation Recommendation**

#### ***Sector advocacy***

- Collaborate and coordinate with other community organisations and universities to advocate for Federal Government policy change to ensure that people seeking asylum recognised as refugees are given permanent protection visas, and all people seeking asylum access appropriate income supports.

# 1. Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated in 2017 that only one per cent of refugees have access to higher education compared with 36 per cent of the global population (UNHCR, 2017). Without access to higher education, refugees<sup>2</sup> and people seeking asylum<sup>3</sup> are denied opportunities to develop the capacities and knowledge to sustain their livelihoods and to contribute to their communities and host societies. This lack of access is particularly complex in the Australian context where refugees and people seeking asylum are afforded different rights and entitlements based on their mode of arrival to Australia. For example, refugees and humanitarian entrants who are resettled to Australia through the offshore component of Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Programme have access to services and entitlements that are denied to people seeking asylum who arrive in Australia without a valid visa (most of whom have historically arrived to Australia by boat) (Hartley & Pedersen, 2015). One impactful difference in entitlements relates to access to higher education. The current research project explores this under-researched area in the Australian context.

## 1.1 Current Australian Policy Landscape

For much of the past six years, approximately 30,000 people seeking asylum have resided in “community detention”<sup>4</sup> or lived in the community on temporary Bridging Visas while they await the processing of their claim for refugee status. These are people who arrived in the country by boat either prior to 13 August 2012 and had not had their protection visa application finalised as at 18 September 2013, or arrived in the country on, or after, 13 August 2012 and were not sent to offshore detention on Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. If people seeking asylum are deemed eligible for protection in Australia, they are issued with one of two temporary visas: a three-year Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) or a five-year Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV).<sup>5</sup> While more than half of the people seeking asylum had received a decision on their refugee claim as at July 2018, there were still 12,290 people who continued to wait.<sup>6</sup> In this report, the term “people seeking asylum” is used to refer to people who are either awaiting the outcome of their refugee application and living in the community on a Bridging Visa or in community detention, or those already found to be a refugee and granted a TPV or SHEV.

Unlike people with Permanent Protection Visas, such as those offered resettlement through the offshore component of Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Programme, people seeking asylum are ineligible for a range of services and entitlements. This differing access to support and assistance is a key factor distinguishing the experiences of people seeking asylum from refugees with permanent protection status. This contrast is particularly evident with regards to opportunities for participation in higher education.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the *1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees* and its 1967 Protocol, a refugee is any person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country.

<sup>3</sup> A person seeking asylum, or asylum seeker, is someone who has sought protection as a refugee, but whose claim for refugee protection has not yet been finalised.

<sup>4</sup> A small number of people seeking asylum in Australia are released from immigration detention into “community detention” without a bridging visa. This allows them to live in the community but without the right to work and they are effectively barred from higher education because they are not issued with any form of visa while they wait for their refugee claim to be finalised.

<sup>5</sup> If a person on a SHEV works or studies in a designated regional area for 42 months, and satisfies other requirements, they may be eligible for one of a particular range of permanent visas in Australia. See <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/getting-help/legal-info/visas/difference-tpv-shev/>

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/ReportsandPublications/Documents/statistics/ima-legacy-caseload-report-july-2018.pdf>

People seeking asylum who hold Bridging Visas, TPVs, or SHEVs are ineligible for income support programs such as Newstart Allowance, Youth Allowance, or Austudy. They also face barriers in accessing Special Benefit payment given that there are stipulations on the nature and length of study that may be undertaken while receiving this income support. Further, people seeking asylum are ineligible for Federal Government programs designed to assist students with financing tertiary study including the HELP (such as FEE-HELP and HECS-HELP), Commonwealth Supported Places, and concession rates. These supports are only available to Australian citizens, permanent humanitarian visa holders, and New Zealanders in receipt of a Special Category Visa who meet the long-term residency requirements. Accordingly, people seeking asylum are generally required to pay international student fees in order to attend vocational education and training (VET) and university in Australia.

With the average undergraduate degree costing over AU\$30,000 per year without government subsidies (McCarthy & Dauba, 2017), the financial expense of admission to higher education via the international student program is prohibitive for most people seeking asylum. As such, while students from asylum-seeker backgrounds may successfully complete secondary schooling in Australia and qualify for entry into university, most are unable to continue their education due to the cost of enrolling as an international student. This situation highlights a contrast in policy where people seeking asylum are permitted to attend government schools yet, upon graduation, they are not deemed to be local students for the purposes of receiving financial assistance to attend university (White, 2017).

People seeking asylum, and refugees with temporary protection visas who do engage in tertiary study, risk losing any entitlements to income support (Refugee Council of Australia [RCOA], 2018). People on TPVs and SHEVs who are recipients of Special Benefits and wish to pursue higher education can only continue to receive income support if they are undertaking a vocational course that is likely to enhance their employment prospects and can be completed in 12 months or less. People undertaking courses that are more than 12 months in duration are therefore ineligible for income support during this time. This seriously reduces the possibility of undertaking tertiary education—even for recipients of full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships—due to the difficulties of balancing work and study within the context of severe financial vulnerability.

Further complicating access to higher education for people seeking asylum on Bridging Visas is the decision to remove the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) income and casework assistance from people with Bridging Visas who do not meet a “high threshold of vulnerability” (van Kooy & Ward, 2018).<sup>7</sup> This means that people studying full-time or part-time are expected to support themselves if they wish to continue their studies. This recent policy change has put students at even greater risk of financial destitution.

In addition to their ineligibility for student or Special Benefit income supports, further barriers to accessing higher education for people with temporary visa status include a lack of access to enabling courses and government-funded English language courses (Fleay, Lumbus & Hartley, 2016; Hartley & Fleay, 2014; RCOA, 2015). These barriers raise important questions about the potential impact on people seeking asylum who attempt to undertake education in Australia without the various support mechanisms available to other groups in the community.

## 1.2 People Seeking Asylum and Higher Education

The significant obstacles facing people seeking asylum who wish to participate in tertiary studies renders education an impossibility for most people in this situation. The inability to afford tertiary education through the international student program—the only entry pathway

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<sup>7</sup> For details of how a person’s “vulnerability” is assessed by the Department of Home Affairs, see van Kooy & Ward (2018, p. 5).

available to those on temporary visas—further disadvantages this already vulnerable population. Exclusion from further education diminishes employment potential and has been shown to significantly undermine positive resettlement prospects and social inclusion (Fleay et al. 2016; Hirsch, 2015). For people seeking asylum, “being denied access to education [is] just another symptom of being stuck in limbo” and it further reinforces the lengthy process they endure to seek asylum (Hirsch & Maylea, 2016, p. 21).

In response to the substantial barriers preventing people seeking asylum from participating in higher education, some universities have introduced full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships, bursaries, stipends, part-time employment opportunities attached to scholarships, and computers. These contributions have been greatly supported by the RCOA’s “Education for All” campaign.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, state governments in Victoria, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, and South Australia have offered various supports for people to access VET including concession rates for some Certificate level courses. In Victoria, for example, state-funded VET advice and referral assistance is offered to students who are seeking asylum to enrol in the government-funded Asylum Seeker Vocational Education Training Program.<sup>9</sup> This program allows people seeking asylum to enrol in Skills First<sup>10</sup> courses (run through TAFE and Learn Local Organisations) at subsidised rates.

There have also been local community responses seeking to facilitate access to higher education for people seeking asylum. This includes the provision of case management to link people seeking asylum with potential scholarship opportunities and liaising with universities in order to highlight the urgent need for full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships and other supports. In addition, a national network of academics, practitioners, and community sector organisations have established the Special Interest Group on Refugee Education which hosts bi-monthly national teleconferences to discuss developing challenges in this area.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the growing recognition that people seeking asylum represent a particularly disadvantaged group due to the uncertainty of their situation, the ongoing impact of trauma, and their limited access to government services and support, there remains a dearth of research examining these issues. Significantly, there has never been a nationwide review of university and community strategies for inclusion of people seeking asylum in higher education, nor an evaluation of the efficacy or impact of these initiatives. This project responds to the urgent need for a cross-institutional investigation in which the voices of students, potential students, university staff, and community advocates are included.

There is a significantly larger body of work focusing on the educational experiences of people with refugee status, although most relates to the schooling sector (Naidoo, Wilkinson, Adoniou, & Langat, 2018; Sidhu & Taylor, 2007). A central focus of work undertaken within the tertiary sector includes approaches to facilitating successful transitions to, and participation in, higher education for people with refugee backgrounds as well support mechanisms for assisting with the navigation of linguistic and sociocultural practices (Baker, Irwin, Freeman, Nance, & Coleman, 2018a; Naidoo et al., 2018). This research provides important insights into the significant hardships faced by people with Permanent Protection Visas including ongoing trauma resulting from human rights violations and issues associated with forced migration, loss of family, and disrupted schooling (Ben Moshe, Bertone, & Grossman, 2008; Gray & Irwin, 2013; Naidoo et al., 2014; Terry, Naylor, Nguyen, & Rizzo.,

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/our-work/educationcampaign/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/training/providers/learnlocal/Pages/asylumseekervetpro.aspx#link37>

<sup>10</sup> These courses are identified by the Victorian Government as underpinning six sectors that are seen to be areas of major job growth. See: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/skillsfirst/Pages/about.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/educationsig/>. This group was developed from the existing teleconference about people seeking asylum and access to higher education that was established by the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN).

2016). Research into the experiences of students with refugee and humanitarian status also highlights how resilience and courage is shown by many (Eades, 2013; Earnest, Joyce, DeMori, & Silvagni, 2010). However, while the determination of these students can be an important factor in their overall success in higher education, a sole focus on resilience can also obscure the systemic barriers to meaningful participation in education including racism and restrictive government policy.

Refugees who have been granted permanent visas are eligible for government-funded university places and have greater access to financial support that seeks to ease some of the pressure associated with tertiary education. In contrast, people seeking asylum are excluded from these support systems and remain virtually invisible in terms of institutional policies and broader public agenda/popular media. This group faces unique and significant hardships; however, they are frequently subsumed into the broader categories of refugee, Non-English Speaking Background or international student education. Incorporating students into the Non-English Speaking Background category works to homogenise the unique life histories and personal experiences of students with refugee backgrounds and denies their specific representation in higher education policy and practice (Sidhu & Taylor, 2007; Sladek & King, 2016; Stevenson & Baker, 2018; Terry et al., 2016). Researching the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds attending university in Australia, and innovative institutional strategies for their inclusion, Terry et al. (p. 6) identify the need to address the exclusion of people seeking asylum and recommend 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.*

White's (2017) discussion of the systematic exclusion of people seeking asylum from higher education offers one of the few instances of critical engagement with how, and why, such exclusion occurs and offers a perspective on the implications of this treatment for notions of "Australian identity". A significant point raised in White's discussion is the fact that the systematic educational exclusion of people seeking asylum—which hinges on government and university funding policies—has received limited media attention.

### 1.3 The Current Research Project

Although there has been growing interest in exploring the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds accessing and participating in higher education, there is limited research examining barriers, access, and support of people seeking asylum. No national data have been collected on the number of people seeking asylum participating in higher education or the numbers of people seeking asylum who would like to pursue such studies. Further, there is no published research regarding the effectiveness of university and community scholarships and support mechanisms as well as the retention, participation, success of, and support for people seeking asylum in their studies. Accordingly, there are no clear indicators as to how people seeking asylum manage to navigate the financial, linguistic, bureaucratic, social, and cultural landscape of Australian tertiary institutions nor the impact of being without the various support mechanisms available to other groups in the community.

Based on this, our research project has three aims:

- Gather the first Australia-wide data on numbers of people seeking asylum currently engaging in higher education, and those interested in doing so, and to provide an overview of the federal policy context with regard to people seeking asylum and their right to education.

- Provide an overview of the current institutional context with regard to policies and mechanisms to support people seeking asylum and community sector support.
- Identify the barriers to accessing higher education for people seeking asylum and evaluate the effectiveness of university and community sector support initiatives.

## 2. Methodology

This qualitative, participatory project employed a mixed methods design to address the research aims. Consistent with the researchers' ethical stance, a safe space was sought to be opened for the research participants to share their experiences and amplify their voices, rather than the researchers recasting all of the interviewed stories in their own words. Exploring the experiences of people seeking asylum (including through systems and institutions like higher education) can help to “challenge the competing voices that come from [those] more socially powerful” and allow for people's experiences to be elevated (BenEzer & Zetter, 2014, p. 304).

The precarious position of students seeking asylum means that telling their stories can be felt as a risk. The researchers sought to bring participants (students, universities, community organisations) along throughout the process of the study, which extends to their advocacy and practice beyond this project. However, even with the best intentions, participatory research can objectify and reduce people from a refugee background (Doná, 2007). The researchers have sought to avoid this as much as possible by seeking to learn from and with participants throughout each part of the research process (Block, Warr, Gibbs, & Riggs, 2012; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Hugman, Bartolomei, & Pittaway, 2011).

The project design drew from three main forms of data collection: a public symposium on issues of access to higher education for people seeking asylum; an online survey of Australian universities and community organisations working with people seeking asylum; and a series of individual semi-structured interviews with students with lived experience of seeking asylum, university representatives, and community practitioners.

### 2.1 National Symposium: People Seeking Asylum & Higher Education

In November 2017, a public symposium was convened at the University of Melbourne organised by the research team in collaboration with community sector organisations including RCOA, MYAN, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, and colleagues from the Melbourne Social Equity Institute at the University of Melbourne and Monash University.<sup>12</sup> The symposium was organised with the purpose of bringing key stakeholders from across Australia together for the first time to discuss the possibilities for better supporting people seeking asylum with access to university study and focused on identifying emerging challenges and future opportunities. The stakeholders included 25 students with asylum-seeking backgrounds (both currently enrolled in higher education programs and prospective students) and 40 representatives from universities (equity practitioners, administrators, language teachers, academics), and community organisations.

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<sup>12</sup> The National Symposium was organised prior to receiving the grant from the National Centre of Student Equity in Higher Education, and no funding was received from them for this event. The final symposium report can be viewed here: <http://apo.org.au/system/files/135431/apo-nid135431-612796.pdf>

## 2.2 Online Survey of Universities and Community Organisations

To add to the information informally gathered through the symposium, university representatives were invited from every Australian university to complete an online survey between mid- February and mid-March 2018. The survey gathered information on:

- whether the university offered scholarships to students with asylum-seeking backgrounds
- the numbers of current and graduated students with asylum-seeking backgrounds
- the types of support the institution offered to students with asylum-seeking backgrounds
- whether the university had an identified contact person to support students from asylum-seeking backgrounds with applying for study or with engaging in their studies.

At the same time, an online survey for community organisations was conducted to get a sense of the numbers of people with asylum-seeking backgrounds in the community who had expressed an interest in pursuing higher education. Data was also sought on the types of supports that existed in the community to assist people seeking asylum gain access to higher education. In addition, participants were asked about their views on what kinds of supports would be useful that did not currently exist.

The data gathered for the quantitative questions in the survey (e.g. whether the university offered full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships and—if so—how many; a checklist of the types of supports offered to students from asylum-seeking backgrounds) was analysed by way of descriptive statistics. Responses to questions that allowed for a qualitative response (e.g. details about the scholarships and the type of supports offered; the source and process of funding the scholarship; and the types of community partnerships universities had) were initially transported to a Word document, coded into themes, and quantified where possible.

There was a total of 88 responses to the online survey of which 67 were university staff members (representing a total of 25 universities across the country) and 21 were representatives from community organisations working with people seeking asylum.

Of the *university staff member responses*, a total of 14 people did not identify which higher education institution they were affiliated with, while the remaining responses were from universities in Tasmania (seven respondents from one institution), Western Australia (four respondents from two institutions), Queensland (seven respondents from three institutions), New South Wales (14 respondents from eight institutions), Victoria (11 respondents from seven institutions), Australian Capital Territory (one respondent from one institution) South Australia (three respondents from one institution), and the Northern Territory (two respondents from one institution).

Of the 21 *community organisation responses*, two were from a national-based organisation, six were based in Victoria, three were based in Western Australia, one was based in the Australian Capital Territory, one was based in Tasmania, and three from South Australia. Five respondents did not identify which community organisation they were affiliated with.

## 2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

A series of semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the three key groups to explore in more depth the experiences of being a student or supporting students with asylum-seeking backgrounds. Participants were recruited via their engagement in either the symposium, from signalling their willingness to be interviewed at the end of the survey, or contacts known to the researchers. In total, 28 interviews were conducted with the following groups:

- eleven students with lived experience of seeking asylum and studying in higher education residing in Western Australia, New South Wales, and Victoria (ten men, one woman)
- eleven people representing nine universities from five states
- six representatives from community organisations from New South Wales and Victoria.

The interviews were either conducted face-to-face or over the phone, and the majority were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription company. Some of the participants did not want to be recorded for reasons of sensitivity or perceived risk, and in those cases extensive notes were made during the conversation. All the transcriptions or notes of the recordings were sent back to the participants to ensure that they were happy with the representation of their conversation, and participants were offered the opportunity to edit or remove parts of the interview if desired. Feedback from a number of participants was received.

The interview data were coded using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Overall, a more 'deductive' rather than 'inductive' approach was undertaken as this allowed for a more detailed analysis of specific research aims. However, there was also an inductive element to the analysis in that some themes emerged that did not fit into a pre-existing coding frame and were refined as the analysis progressed. The data were initially coded in NVivo Version 11 by a team member. In the second phase, the initial codes were reviewed and themes reviewed that overlapped or did not have enough data to support them. In the final stage, how the themes were defined and named were reviewed, themes were then crosschecked, and any themes that were unclear or appeared counter-intuitive were deliberated on.

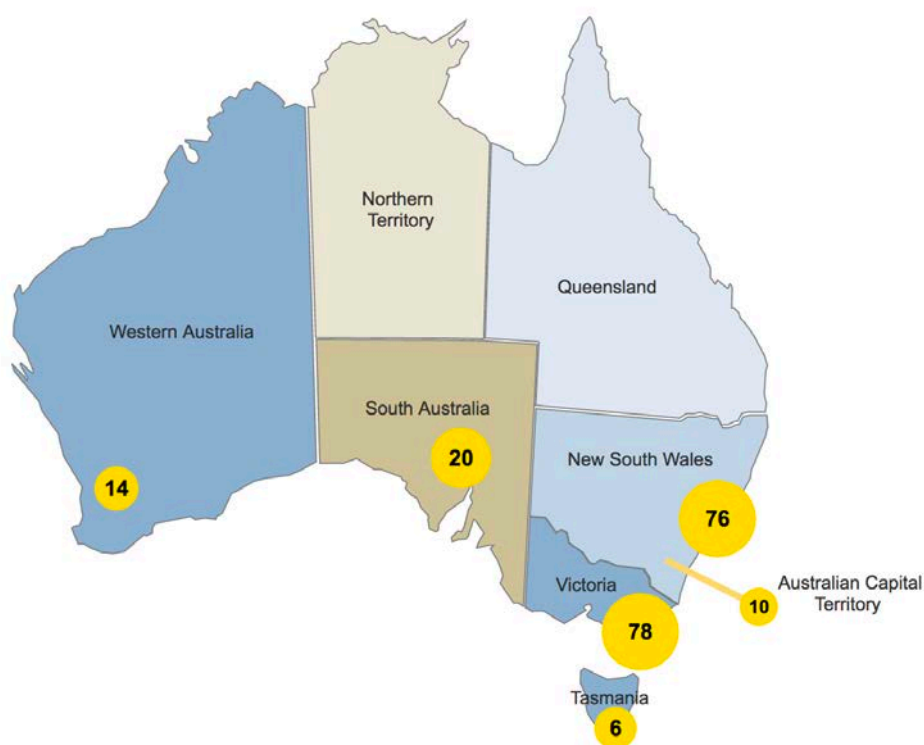


### 3. Research Findings

The findings represented in this section are an integration of data collected from the National Symposium, the surveys, and the interviews. The analysis produced many overlapping and interrelated themes which were largely situated at the federal policy level, the institutional or organisational level, and the individual level. Accordingly, after outlining a national map of people seeking asylum accessing higher education, the interpretations of the data were mapped onto three layers of the socio-political context: the macro (national, socio-political), meso (institutional), and micro (individual) layers. At the macro level, the findings provide an important insight into the federal policy, institutional and organisational, and lived-experience terrain of people seeking asylum in higher education in Australia.

#### 3.1 National Map of People Seeking Asylum Accessing Higher Education

Based on the national survey of universities and community organisations, the interviews, and cross-verification with each institution offering full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships to people seeking asylum, it was estimated that there were currently 204 people seeking asylum across Australia who were studying at a university on a full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarship as of October 2018 (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. National Map of People Seeking Asylum Studying at university on a Full Fee-Paying/Fee-Waiver Scholarship in 2018**

Table 1 lists the universities offering these scholarships as of October 2018. It is estimated that approximately ten people seeking asylum across Australia have graduated from an Australian university since 2013.

**Table 1. Australian Universities that Offer Scholarships that Cover the Entire Cost of Tuition for a Full Fee-Paying/Fee-Waiver Degree in 2018<sup>13</sup>**

State/Territory	University
New South Wales	Australian Catholic University (Sydney); Charles Sturt University; Macquarie University; University of New England; The University of Newcastle; University of Notre Dame (Sydney); University of Sydney; University of Technology, Sydney; University of Wollongong; Western Sydney University
Victoria	Deakin University; Federation University Australia; La Trobe University; Monash University; RMIT University; The University of Melbourne; Swinburne University; Victoria University
Western Australia	Curtin University; University of Western Australia; University of Notre Dame (Fremantle)
Australian Capital Territory	Australian Catholic University (Canberra); Australian National University
Tasmania	University of Tasmania
South Australia	The University of Adelaide

However, there are important factors that need to be considered when interpreting the national map:

1. The actual national number is slightly higher as one institution that offers full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships did not respond to requests for numbers of students from asylum-seeker backgrounds who were studying or had graduated on such scholarships.
2. At least two more universities had recently opened a full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarship to people seeking asylum but had not issued any scholarships at the time of publication.
3. There was a smaller number of people seeking asylum who were studying on partial scholarships; that is, they were still paying international fees but partial scholarships were used to contribute to the cost of the degree. While data were not collected on this cohort of students, a number of universities disclosed that they offered partial scholarships. Based on the numbers provided of people seeking asylum who had been offered these scholarships, there were at least 15 people seeking asylum studying in this situation. However, the numbers in this cohort are likely to be higher as not all universities that offer partial scholarships disclosed these numbers or had access to such data.

<sup>13</sup> Further information regarding university scholarships in Australia to people seeking asylum can be found at <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/ourwork/scholarships-people-seeking-asylum-refugees/>

4. These numbers do not include students completing apprenticeships, foundation, or diploma studies on scholarships offered through dual-sector institutions that have various supports for people seeking asylum such as Deakin University, RMIT University, and Swinburne University, or VET providers in Victoria, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, and South Australia. Although systematic data were not gathered on this cohort of students, the authors are aware that in New South Wales alone, over 660 people seeking asylum are currently receiving tuition waivers in this situation.<sup>14</sup>

It needs to be stressed that the numbers outlined above of people seeking asylum accessing higher education are only likely to be a small percentage of those in this situation who wish to do so. The data suggest that there are a considerable number of people seeking asylum who have not been able to access a scholarship and/or meet the university entry requirements. For example, of the 21 community organisations who participated in the national survey, 18 reported that they personally knew people seeking asylum who had not been able to access higher education. This sentiment was reinforced by participants at the National Symposium and in the interviews where 12 of the 16 university and community organisation participants explicitly discussed examples of people seeking asylum not able to access higher education. This includes one community organisation representative who reported that most of the people seeking asylum they knew were unable to access higher education. Some of the university participants made similar observations; for example:

*I mean higher education is a very remote dream for a lot of individuals because even though the universities have been increasingly generous in providing fee-waiver scholarships—and it's really kind of heart-warming to see how galvanised the university community has been—the reality is we have many more people that would like to be able to participate in higher education who are never going to be able to. These places are coveted and there will be a very small proportion of people who will be able to take advantage of them.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

## 3.2 The Macro Layer: Federal Policy Impacts on Access and Support in Higher Education

It is clear from the data collected from each source that the federal policy landscape governing the supports and entitlements afforded to people seeking asylum is restrictive. Participants viewed this policy landscape as a compounding set of injustices. This is the major barrier for people seeking asylum in accessing higher education.

While most Bridging Visa holders and all TPV and SHEV holders have study rights, there are two small groups of people seeking asylum who are legally locked out of accessing education. First, there are those waiting for refugee status in Australia while in community detention who are unable to apply for admission at a higher education institution because they do not have a valid visa.<sup>15</sup> Second, there is also a small number of people seeking asylum on Bridging Visas who are not afforded study rights while they wait for their refugee claim to be finalised.<sup>16</sup> For those who do have study rights (TPV and SHEV visa holders, and

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<sup>14</sup> These numbers are based on investigations led by Amanda Moors-Mailei from the University of Technology, Sydney. The authors thank Amanda for generously sharing this information with us.

<sup>15</sup> Some people in community detention have been transferred from the offshore detention site on Nauru and are not waiting for refugee status in Australia.

<sup>16</sup> While most Bridging Visa holders are not prohibited from studying, there are some people who have not been afforded study rights. For such people, Condition 8207 will normally apply, preventing them from studying:

"The holder must not engage in any studies or training in Australia." See *Migration Regulations 1994* (Cth) Sch 8.

most Bridging Visa holders), being classified as an international (full fee-paying) student means that the high fees essentially lock most people seeking asylum out of a tertiary education system that is open to people with permanent protection visas or permanent residency status. This also causes distress and erodes the hopeful possibilities that engaging in education can (and should) offer.

Another factor that contributes to the challenges of accessing higher education for people seeking asylum on a SHEV is the imperative to work or study for 42 months in a designated regional area in order to meet the SHEV pathway for a possible permanent visa. As this pathway is the only option that offers a (very small) chance of accessing a permanent visa for people seeking asylum, moving to a SHEV-designated regional area is a sacrifice considered by many to be worth making. However, this has significant implications for many SHEV holders who have lived for some five years in cities that are not included as SHEV regional areas and developed important support networks there.<sup>17</sup> Given that many university campuses are located in these cities, it also means that prospects for finding a scholarship to study in a designated SHEV regional area are even more limited.

Another significant impact of federal policy is the lack of access to income support for people seeking asylum. As outlined earlier, people seeking asylum on a TPV or SHEV who require income support face barriers accessing payments through Special Benefit in addition to being denied access to other income support programs such as the Newstart Allowance, Youth Allowance, or Austudy. Recipients of Special Benefit who wish to pursue tertiary study can only continue to receive income support if they are undertaking a vocational course that is likely to enhance their employment prospects and which can be completed in 12 months or less.

Due to a policy shift in early 2018, people seeking asylum on a Bridging Visa who receive SRSS payments now also face extreme financial difficulties. The Department of Home Affairs has commenced ceasing SRSS payments for anyone assessed as not being 'vulnerable'. This policy change is putting students at even greater risk of destitution and puts substantial pressure on them to try to balance work and study in conditions of severe precarity. Our data suggest that the cuts to SRSS payments has severely diminished the intentions of students who had been offered scholarships in 2018 to take up courses. This provides a further barrier to students even if they are successful in being awarded a scholarship. As one participant from a community organisation recounted:

*[There are] some case studies of people who've been successful getting the scholarships at university who have had to reconsider whether they will take them or not because they didn't want to lose their income. So then that affects your numbers as well at the unis.*

*(Community organisation representative: Individual Interview)*

The communication strategy for the policy change contributed an additional layer of hardship as many people seeking asylum were not aware that they would lose access to their SRSS payments. One student only found out that his payments had been cut when he checked his bank balance and rang to ask his case manager what had happened. Another student found out about the diminished income support from a Centrelink official when he had already commenced full-time studies on a university scholarship:

*They said 'oh you're studying full-time and you are not eligible for that payment' and I said 'why don't you give me like six weeks to be able to work something out, find a job or do something'. But they said 'no you cannot get that payment'.*

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[http://www6.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/cth/consol\\_reg/mr1994227/sch8.html](http://www6.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/cth/consol_reg/mr1994227/sch8.html)

<sup>17</sup> As at September 2018, the capital cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, and Perth are not included as SHEV regions.

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

An encounter between another student and a Department of Home Affairs official suggests this official's view that people seeking asylum do not have the right to study:

*So [the Department of Home Affairs official] was really — she was really like rude and then she said you're coming for protection which is right, you're not an international student and you're not coming for study in Australia so you have to go and feed yourself, you have to work right.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

The same student was also told by a Centrelink official not to spend any further payments that may be received, causing him a large degree of stress as he needed these payments to meet living expenses:

*... they told me so they are going to send the money but actually it's better not to use it because maybe we will have to return it back.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

At the National Symposium, participants highlighted the need for the Federal Government to ensure that all people seeking asylum have access to income support on par with other Australians. As one university staff participant expressed it:

*...the only solution is that if, I think on the finance side if we had a change in government policy whereby they were eligible for Youth Allowance [and other income support] then that, that would go a great way.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

Overwhelmingly, the changeable and hostile federal policy context was the most commonly cited factor impacting on people seeking asylum to engage in higher education. Across all data sources, participants highlighted the stress and confusion that was caused by the changing federal policy landscape. This was reported as a great challenge for students, staff in educational institutions, and community sector workers because it changes the educational context and necessitates new responses.

*We've been grappling with the policy landscape and the organisational landscape and all of that kept shifting of course.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

In response to the significant barriers that federal policy imposes on people seeking asylum accessing higher education, across all data sources, there was a strong and consistent call that policy needs to be changed so that people found to be refugees are given permanent visas. As one community organisation participant commented, what is needed is:

*Just a more humane attitude from our government and an appreciation of the bleeding obvious that a well-educated young student is an asset to our community.*

*(Community Organisation Representative: Individual Interview)*

Issuing permanent visas would at least allow students seeking asylum who are found to be refugees to enter higher education as domestic students. This would prevent the need for full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships and living allowance supports from the university or subsidised access to VET providers. However, this does not negate the other institutional supports that would still be required for people seeking asylum studying at university as discussed further below.

### 3.3 The Meso Layer: University and Community Sector Responses

It is clear that the federal policy landscape governing the supports and entitlements afforded to people seeking asylum provide significant and, in most cases, insurmountable barriers for their access and meaningful participation in higher education. In response, over the last few years there have been a number of universities and community sector organisations who have tried to facilitate this access. From the university sector, this included offering measures such as full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships and providing living allowances/stipends and ongoing language supports during studies. The community sector has also been instrumental in advocating for the critical need for such scholarships and supports and for supporting people seeking asylum through the difficult application and admission processes. The following section highlights and evaluates the effectiveness of university and community sector responses as well as the retention, participation, success of, and support for people seeking asylum in their studies.

#### University responses: access and admissions practices

Across all data sources, there was great diversity across the universities in terms of their responses to facilitating people seeking asylum access to higher education.<sup>18</sup> Analysis of these supports is offered in the following sections.

##### *Full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships*

The most commonly offered form of support specifically for people seeking asylum was the provision of scholarships that covered either the full or partial cost of full fee-paying places. A total of 23 universities across Australia provided scholarships to people seeking asylum which covered the entire cost of tuition for a full fee-paying degree. While this university sector response is significant, the total number of scholarships on offer does not meet the need for all people seeking asylum who wish to access higher education. Our data suggest that there was a considerable number of other people seeking asylum who had not been able to access a scholarship and/or meet university entry requirements.

However, given Federal Government policies that place significant barriers on people seeking asylum in accessing higher education, scholarships that cover the full cost of tuition provide an important alternative.

*I'm not saying that the university scholarships are going to solve this very complex problem but they definitely provide, you know, opportunities where there was none I suppose, and that's unbelievably valuable to the people that get to actually, are lucky enough to get to take advantage of them.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

If a university does not offer scholarships that meet the full cost of tuition, this is another barrier to accessing higher education for people seeking asylum, as highlighted by a number of participants:

*I know that there are some universities who offer a part scholarship, and that's great, but you know they still have to make up the difference and they're not—it's just virtually impossible if they don't have the funds.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

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<sup>18</sup> For a list of the supports that universities who attended the symposium were providing as at November 2017 see [https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/National-Symposium-People-Seeking-Asylum-in-HE\\_Community-and-University-Responses-15-Nov-2017.pdf](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/National-Symposium-People-Seeking-Asylum-in-HE_Community-and-University-Responses-15-Nov-2017.pdf)

For universities offering scholarships to people seeking asylum, there was diversity in the way they described the scholarships across the sector. Some universities preferred to call the scholarship a “fee-waiver” as opposed to a “full fee-paying” scholarship. For example:

*We call it access to a fee-waiver place because we're trying to make that distinction because we've been able to be far more generous in terms of funding fee-waiver places than we have scholarships and we're trying to see them as separate things.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

Other institutions talked about a full fee-waiver not in terms of the cost to the university, but “income forgone” from having a university place taken by a fee-paying student. For example:

*the way that we've negotiated it internally is actually as income forgone rather than the university having to actually pay that fee, that's the best way that I can put it.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

In terms of funding scholarships and associated financial supports (such as living allowance bursaries/stipends, subsidised accommodation, and money for course-related equipment and books), university participants in both the survey and interviews discussed a range of funding sources. These included philanthropic, alumni and other fundraising donations, staff donation schemes that the university matches, repurposing funds allocated to another scholarship area, and central university and faculty funds. Across the responses, no one specific funding strategy was most common; rather, what was most common was for universities to rely on a range of different strategies to raise funds such as central university funding combined with philanthropic and fundraising activities.

There was similar diversity reported in the institutional processes of establishing the scholarships and associated supports. While many scholarship schemes are built on existing support mechanisms within the institution and/or collaborating with community organisations, the genesis for several scholarship/support schemes was due to the pivotal role played by the advocacy of particular staff. Several participants from both community organisations and universities reported that setting up scholarship programs (and related collaborations) was made possible by finding ‘the right person’ to talk to. Some university staff advocates described devising strategies in order to rally the required support to establish scholarships in their institution:

*The absolutely critical thing in this was finding who to ask because I started with the scholarships office and I had you know reasonable contacts around the university 'cause I've sat on the scholarships committee for many years.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

Another university established full fee-paying scholarships with an existing community partner which included a co-commitment from the partner to assist with the provision of accommodation.

However, universities also need to provide students from asylum-seeking backgrounds with more than just a scholarship. As another community organisation participant commented:

*[Universities] should recognise that reducing the access barriers through the provision of a scholarship is only the beginning—there needs to be consideration of what additional supports are required to ensure people seeking asylum can successfully complete their studies.*



*(Community Organisation Representative: Individual Interview)*

### *Alternative entry pathways and transition supports*

The challenges faced by people seeking asylum are not restricted to the financial level. For many, particularly those who had not been educated in the Australian schooling system, meeting the entry requirements for higher education study (often understood in terms of having an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) or a qualification that demonstrates English language proficiency) represents an unassailable challenge. To remedy the challenges posed by restrictive entry requirements, some universities offered alternative entrance pathways such as enabling programs<sup>19</sup> or diploma pathways<sup>20</sup> to facilitate access to undergraduate programs. These programs were usually offered by the university<sup>21</sup> where a student intended to study. Nine universities who participated in this study reported that they were able to package alternative entry pathways into the scholarships that they offered. Alternative entry programs offered students the opportunity to develop familiarity with the academic environment (both physical and online spaces) and academic practices as well as often a 'taster' of disciplinary content.<sup>22</sup> Alternative entry programs also often had a reduced study load (compared with a full-time first-year undergraduate program) and came with additional, targeted supports (Baker & Irwin, 2016).

Even when offered a scholarship, there are many other challenges a student from an asylum-seeker background must face. These include navigating the university system and campus; understanding the course requirements; purchasing items such as books, a computer and other equipment required for study; and coping with their study requirements. This constitutes a series of necessary transitions and adaptations which can be overwhelming for all students, but are particularly challenging for people seeking asylum who already live in an extremely precarious context. As one university staff member articulated:

*The motivation is there to succeed but if there's no supplementary support to you know help them transition into an Australian academic culture, and then if there's financial issues and they're having to work, then finding that time, finding the balance between studying but also working to be able to afford to study, is challenging.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

Students seeking asylum were unlikely to have developed familiarity with the academic literacies of their discipline or the Australian higher education system having come from a different academic culture and perhaps experienced interruption to their education prior to arriving in Australia. According to one university staff member who provided these forms of support, students were often:

*... not familiar with the way that these bureaucracies operate ... I think those internal systems are really difficult for them to navigate and that's a fault of the system more than anything else.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

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<sup>19</sup> Enabling programs offer a form of preparatory study for undergraduate programs which offer a free (to 'domestic' students) alternative pathway to students who do not meet the 'traditional' entry requirements of a degree program.

<sup>20</sup> Diploma pathways offer an alternative pathway into undergraduate study but incur a student contribution and offer a diploma certificate for articulation into a degree program

<sup>21</sup> Or a subsidiary college of that institution.

<sup>22</sup> Enabling programs vary significantly from institution to institution. See Baker & Irwin (2016), Pitman et al. (2016), and <http://enablingeducators.org/enablingtypology/typology/> for overviews of this variability.



In all of the data sources, there were examples cited of inadequate support given in the transition to university. Participants strongly articulated a need to tailor services and supportive pathways to enable people seeking asylum access to higher education. One community organisation participant highlighted the need for:

*Making sure that when they're in they're getting checked on through, that those wrap-around services are being touched, like that they are getting good mentors, they're getting tutoring, they've got the text books, they've got the resources that they need.*

*(Community Organisation Representative: Individual Interview)*

#### *Other forms of institutional support offered by universities*

In addition to providing alternative pathways and transition supports for full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarship recipients, some universities are implementing a range of other measures.

#### *Financial supports*

The majority of universities offering full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships also provided some form of living allowance, bursary, or study allowance to students seeking asylum. The amounts offered varied significantly between institutions. For example, one university offered a discretionary amount allocated on a case-by-case basis while another offered \$7,500 per annum for eligible scholarship holders. As one university staff member said:

*I just feel like [offering a scholarship without financial support is] ... counterproductive because these are people that are trying to work towards their future but if they want to study an actual program or a degree at uni, which is three to four years [and] then they're not eligible for that income support and I just think that you know that shouldn't be the case.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

Without access to government-funded income support, many students reported struggling to survive. The small bursaries offered by some universities were seen as critical in helping with this situation. However, given that some students had lost up to \$17,000 a year in terms of income support<sup>23</sup>, they were left with a significant gap in income that they still needed to cover.

*... it is imperative for universities offering scholarships to also offer living support stipends/bursaries, and to subsidise or donate accommodation for the students who receive scholarships, as some universities currently do. In addition, access to part-time work for people seeking asylum students could be facilitated, as a small number of universities also do.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

One of the university staff members highlighted the need for advocacy across the higher education sector to ensure that supports for meeting living expenses are included in scholarship offerings.

*... I think we really need to [encourage universities] to offer more living expenses support to everyone who needs it when they get a fee-waiver place.*

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<sup>23</sup> The maximum amount of an SRSS allowance is set at 89 per cent of the Centrelink Newstart.

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

However, there is a risk of further stigmatising students if financial support is means-tested. For instance, when students are obliged to disclose their financial situation to the university in order to access any financial supports, this can be a degrading and dehumanising experience:

*They have to make then a voluntary you know stigmatising disclosure of their personal circumstances to our hardship fund.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

It is important for higher education institutions to remember that some of their standard application processes are inappropriate for people seeking asylum, with disclosing financial hardship being a pertinent example. It is imperative that universities and their representatives are fully informed of the policy landscape with regard to visa types and entitlements so that they are able to act with compassion and care.

### *Academic and language support*

A growing concern for practitioners, scholars, and institutional policymakers was the issue of academic support which has been identified as an ongoing area of concern for students' experience of their degree programs in the national Student Experience Survey (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2018). Provision of academic support that is targeted at culturally and linguistically diverse students was also a common concern in the academic literature (Baker, Ramsay, Irwin, & Miles, 2018b; Earnest et al. 2010; Harris & Marlowe, 2011; Lenette, 2016; Stevenson & Baker, 2018), and personalised academic support (for academic language, literacies, and cultural navigation) is essential for students who are seeking asylum. Indeed, most of the university staff members, community organisation representatives, and student participants raised the need for more targeted support. For example, one university staff member talked about the critical importance of a language transition program designed for students from refugee, Pacifica, and non-English speaking backgrounds. The program was seen as providing a 'confidence boost' as well as ensuring that students gain some experience with undertaking academic literacy practices such as critical reading and referencing.

### *Mental health support and counselling services.*

While some students have been accessing trauma counselling services outside the university, access to existing counselling services and support within the institution is also important. For one student participant, counselling support was crucial to being able to cope with very stressful circumstances:

*The only support that I got, which was amazing was from a, a counsellor at [university] Counselling ... that was amazing and I tell everyone that they should go and get help if they feel they are under pressure.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

However, the availability of mental health support and counselling services needs to be visible and accessible, as highlighted by participants, and there is a need for staff employed in these support roles to be informed about the challenges facing people seeking asylum. Moreover, counselling and mental health support staff need to engage in refugee-specific training that unpacks the particular complexities of working with people from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds.

### *Employing a staff member as a central point for people seeking asylum*

Having a dedicated, experienced staff member at the university can play a crucial role for students who are seeking asylum transitioning into, and during, their studies. Although only a very small number of universities who participated in the current research provided such a support, the provision of such a position at one university was regarded as best practice by a number of participants.

*[The refugee support person's] job is like to build with refugee students or asylum seekers to help them you know where she can. Whenever we have a problem or something, we can discuss with her and then she organises an appointment and then she figures out how she can help, in which way.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

As others have contended, providing this level of specialised support (ideally employing someone with lived experience of seeking refuge) is a key recommendation for universities working with students from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds (Baker et al., 2018b). This was expressed by several of our participants and seen as crucial to ensuring equitable access for people seeking asylum:

*... there has to be people or support provided for [students who are seeking asylum] to reach out to more students like that because people, well students are simply scared of bureaucracy and just the whole issue with navigating through the university system and the complicated channel that there is when it comes to you know scholarship provision.*

*(Community organisation representative: Individual Interview)*

At the same time, several university staff members highlighted the need to balance having a dedicated “go-to” support person while simultaneously ensuring people seeking asylum also have access to mainstream services provided at the university.

*... [we are] really trying to tread that fine line about you know, trying to see if this cohort can, as much as possible, that they can utilise the mainstream services and support channels and application processes and so on 'cause we don't want them to have, to be marked out ... as having a distinct experience but there is some need obviously as other universities have found, you know the need for that coordination and someone to have oversight of all the pieces of the puzzle which for us you know covers pre-entry right through to post-graduation employment.*

*(University staff participant: Individual Interview)*

While employing a dedicated support person was a key recommendation shared at the National Symposium and echoed in many of the individual interviews, it is important not to overlook the valuable work undertaken by trusted staff members, advocates, and brokers.<sup>24</sup> Key individuals within some university settings have become key brokers in enabling access to higher education and also in enabling access to important supports and information once the student accesses higher education. These may be lecturers or other university staff. One student spoke about the crucial support of an independent counsellor during the application process and also a professor at the university who encouraged them to apply after looking at the transcript from their previous studies. As the student describes this: “it was the first time someone was treating me like a human being”.

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<sup>24</sup> Or “warm” forms of support, according to Baker et al. (2018b).

### *Barriers to access and meaningful participation at university*

There are a range of barriers at the university/institutional level that make access to higher education difficult. One of the challenges that participants with lived experience of seeking asylum spoke about included complicated application processes. To enrol people seeking asylum into the university system, they need to be entered as an international student due to their temporary visa status. As such, some institutions maintained elements of the application process that are targeted at international student visa holders such as imposing an application fee on the admissions application or demanding English language proficiency requirements be met. In one case, the admission fee was swiftly abolished following the realisation that this was a financially disadvantaged cohort of potential students. However, this suggests that appropriating existing mechanisms and processes without due consideration of the particular circumstances of this new group of 'international students' can be fraught.

Other aspects of the admissions process also caused confusion and distress. Our participants spoke about the inconsistency across institutions in the application requirements, a lack of knowledge about visa categories and available supports from student services, and difficulties and an associated level of fear about completing online applications. For example, our student participants described being largely unaware of the scholarship and course requirements and the process for enrolling and applying for a scholarship. One reason for this difficulty was a lack of consistency in how information about scholarship and enrolling processes was conveyed. Finding out about available pathways or scholarships can be difficult when there is poor publicity/advertising, and it can be unclear about where to go within a university for information about applying for a scholarship or course.

None of the currently enrolled students who were interviewed or attended the symposium were aware of any university supports provided specifically to help people seeking asylum with the application process.<sup>25</sup> A number of student participants indicated that they had experiences of being identified as an international student, not as someone seeking asylum, and sometimes turned away by frontline staff at the university because staff were not aware that such scholarships existed. Data suggests that there is also a lack of 'front-end' knowledge from student services staff including international and scholarship offices. A number of student participants found this to be a source of stress when engaging with the systems.

*There are different kinds of visas with different conditions and not many people have the knowledge of the legal differences and what the requirements are.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

Further, student participants often found advice complicated (or not clearly articulated) and eligibility criteria unclear or restricted due to a lack of clarity relating to the different visa categories. For example, someone on a Bridging Visa A (who may have arrived by plane) might be excluded from applying for many of the scholarships currently available if they are only offered to people seeking asylum who are issued a Bridging Visa E. Some student participants faced other restricted eligibility criteria:

*I started looking for scholarships in Australia but there was a confusion whether to apply for international student scholarship or humanitarian scholarship. I am here for humanitarian reasons but the humanitarian scholarships have some rules that do not apply on me. For example, they require that the applicant haven't had any degree from Australia and I do have. For this reason I didn't*

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<sup>25</sup> However, discussions at the National Symposium suggest there are colleagues across the country who are now formally able to support students who are seeking asylum in that this is now a recognised part of their role and workload.

*apply for humanitarian scholarships. My only other option is to apply as an international student.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

Further challenges are created by the silos that university departments often operate in as reported by community organisation and university participants. This means that equity/student welfare services, admissions, and/or international student departments do not always have opportunities to collaborate and share knowledge, updates to policy, and good practice. This makes it challenging for a potential student to know where to go, or who to speak to, about issues to do with their application. Community organisation participants and students reported that there was a lot of labour and time needed to navigate this process:

*... it took quite a lot of phone calls to manage all the bits of the process. So people in scholarships were particularly helpful and then when the people in the international student area realised, they were very helpful. [However] the two systems weren't aligned.*

*(Community Organisation Representative: Individual Interview)*

There is clearly a need for assistance in navigating application processes.

Having to apply for both entry to a course and a scholarship, and to be accepted into a course before being considered for a scholarship, compounds the complexity of the process.

*Another problem with the process is ... you have to apply for the place on the academic course and then you have to apply for a scholarship and the timing of the two events are, cause you know some distress I think 'cause you know you're applying for one and you have to accept one, you have to accepted a place. You have to be, applied, been accepted and accepted a place in order to do it but you can't really dare to accept the place unless you know you've got the scholarship.*

*(Community Organisation Representative: Individual Interview)*

Many universities also require students to complete and submit applications through an online platform which presents a hurdle for those unfamiliar with such procedures or without access to digital technologies to facilitate the process. A number of student participants, as well as those at the National Symposium, discussed how they found online applications difficult to navigate.

An additional barrier is at the level of institutional perceptions of students' impermanency. The temporary and precarious nature of the visa with which people seeking asylum are forced to live is a barrier to accessing higher education when an institution requires applicants to demonstrate that they will be able to complete their qualification or makes assumptions around their ability to do so. One university staff member articulated this as a double bind: while many universities are keen to respond to the needs of people seeking asylum in their communities, they are also concerned with the potential impacts that people seeking asylum might have on their institutional metrics around retention and success:

*The problem is this university is a bit obsessed with retention ... and so they make this really close connection between retention and scholarships being only useful for people who are really high achievers. And so if, if they're in, they sort of take a risk management strategy ... they don't want to be giving money away for somebody who's not going to stick around.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

The increasingly competitive higher education landscape, coupled with reduced funding for undergraduate places, has (perhaps inevitably) resulted in universities operating in more cautious and metrics-driven ways. This can reduce their willingness to be more flexible in terms of who is offered scholarships and their preparedness to provide tailored support services.

A further challenge faced by many universities is the difficulty in identifying students seeking asylum once they are enrolled in higher education which has implications for facilitating their access to available supports. As some university staff participants highlighted, being able to access services often relies on the student disclosing their situation which people seeking asylum may not want to do for fear of stigmatisation or retribution from the Federal Government. For example:

*I would definitely find it useful if we were to be informed of, you know, the cohort that start here from that background only because I think it's important that we are proactive and even if they don't need support at the very early stages but just you know making sure that they're aware that support is available and then they know exactly where to go if they do encounter any challenges.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

Some university staff members argued that transition to university would also be more effective if support staff at higher education institutions were able to identify students who are people seeking asylum. This could allow for earlier outreach and offer of supports. From a student's perspective, however, there is a need for any public identification of their background to be avoided. One student participant highlighted that the university should not publicly identify students who are seeking asylum as scholarship recipients in an effort to capitalise on a scholarship holder's background and use it for marketing purposes. This student did not want to be identified as a student who was seeking asylum but as a student who was accessing studies on merit.

*I've been told [by a university] to ... go on social media with them or to take a photo and they put it there. "Oh this guy got a scholarship ... We gave a poor blind person or we gave refugee people a scholarship". I do not like that, I want to see, I got [the scholarship] because of my work.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

Further complications are imposed on students who are seeking asylum if they are perceived as being a homogenous group. Community organisation representatives differentiated between three groups of students who are seeking asylum who wish to participate in higher education: those who had established careers and qualifications in their country of origin; those who had incomplete qualifications from their home country and had little or no work experience in their chosen field; and those who completed schooling after arriving in Australia. Individuals in these three groups were undertaking study with distinct background experiences, goals, and learning needs. Individuals in the first group brought with them a wealth of professional experience and knowledge but required an Australian qualification to continue working in their chosen profession, while individuals in the other two groups were seeking tertiary education to build a future career.

These three groups of students have markedly diverse understandings, expectations, and experiences of education and therefore require differentiated forms of support. For the first group, the limited recognition available to utilise existing qualifications gained overseas closes down many opportunities for meaningful employment in their professional area of expertise. Many people who have studied in the Global South face their overseas qualifications not being recognised in Australia, and students seeking asylum may face the additional challenge of not having the relevant documentation to evidence their qualifications. This means that previously qualified/experienced people seeking asylum may

have to undertake another degree. A number of student participants and symposium participants reported that they already had qualifications in their country of origin but were not able to use these skills in Australia due to government and professional association policies on recognising overseas qualifications. As one university representative articulated:

*I think we're also missing out on people with valuable higher education qualifications because they're, you know, unable to prove that ... There must be a way that we can test people's knowledge and ability. Like recognition of prior learning, we do it for other things why can't we do it for people who've been professionals in their own country? I think that would be useful as well and it would be useful to the economy.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

Recognition of prior professional learning and greater access to higher education in Australia would also allow more people seeking asylum to gain employment in tertiary institutions in roles specifically targeted at better supporting students from refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds. Access to degrees related to community development, social work, and student support services, for example, would allow people seeking asylum to contribute their unique experiences and insights to shaping policy and practice in Australian tertiary institutions.

A related challenge for qualified people seeking asylum is that the vast majority of universities offering scholarships only enable access to undergraduate degrees which precludes students who have a desire to study at a postgraduate level. To our knowledge, there are only two universities that offer full fee-paying fee-waiver scholarships for post-graduate degrees. One student participant highlighted their desire to study a PhD and that it was very difficult getting information from universities as to whether scholarships are available for postgraduate studies. This student, who brings to Australia valuable skills and experience in the area of science, highlighted how the lack of opportunity to study a PhD will hinder their career and ability to contribute to Australian society:

*If I don't get a PhD, I am not going to progress in my career, I will remain a research assistant.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

### **Community organisation sector: access and support practices**

Community organisations assisting people seeking asylum to access higher education have needed to be responsive to a changeable political and policy context. They have responded to the fluctuating environment and to the developing needs of people seeking asylum in a number of ways ranging from participation in national, collective efforts through to individual case work.

#### *Advocacy and outreach*

A range of community organisations actively support RCOA's "Education for All" campaign that seeks to address the barriers facing people seeking asylum in accessing higher education. This national campaign provides details of scholarships offered by higher education providers across the country through RCOA's website. Through the campaign, RCOA also engages with universities to encourage further scholarships and other supports to people seeking asylum as well as raises public awareness and engages in advocacy with state and federal governments around the rights of people seeking asylum.

Alongside their involvement in national efforts such as the "Education for All" campaign, community organisations undertake important advocacy work in the local context liaising with universities in order to highlight the urgent need for full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships. The need for more accessible information regarding scholarship opportunities,

and increased support with application processes, is a key theme within this community organisation advocacy.

*... There needs to sort of be some sort of centralised portal or information available which is independent of us. I kind of feel that that's the next stage. We've started working with the universities to facilitate access but I think from here it's going to continue to be provided that we look at ways that we can work cohesively together to make it a fair process.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

Community organisations also organise collaborative information sessions about scholarships and application processes frequently with the support of universities. For example, RCOA has run well-attended information sessions for people seeking asylum in Victoria and New South Wales with a range of representatives from community organisations and universities. In Western Australia, similar information sessions have been held although coordinated by a less formal collective of community organisation, university, and VET members.

Some community organisations liaise with high schools to identify students seeking asylum who are interested in pursuing higher education. In these circumstances, the community organisation acts as a conduit between the community and universities offering scholarships. As one community organisation participant outlined:

*Students who aspire to higher education need to be identified during the early years at secondary school, so that future planning around supporting them makes it possible for them to hold on to their dreams.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

However, as one university staff member identified, there are implications if advocacy efforts aiming to enable access to higher education for people seeking asylum are focused exclusively on encouraging universities to offer scholarships. The complexities of the student experience post-enrolment, and the national policy context, also need to be addressed:

*I do sometimes think that some [refugee advocacy/support] organisations push things a little too hard without understanding or acknowledging some of the really intricate advocacy [and support] work that does go on within universities...I have some mixed feelings about how far these external organisations should be pushing universities when I believe that it is the government that should be being pushed; with this government we're going to get nowhere. I think we all should be advocating for refugee/asylum seeker access to tertiary education with the other side of politics.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

In recognition of the need for financial supports beyond full-fee scholarships, some community organisations have also made donations, or leveraged philanthropic support, from religious organisations and other donors to help pay for the living allowances for scholarship recipients.

### *Community organisation and university collaboration*

For some community organisations, relationship building has been central to bringing about change regarding educational access for people seeking asylum. There are examples of strong collaborative relationships between universities and community organisations in this regard. At one university:



*Student engagement [at the university is] made up of corporate and community services with the intention of supporting migrants, refugee and asylum seekers on campus to engage in education.*

*(University Staff Participant: Individual Interview)*

Developing effective collaborations between community organisations and university staff in the process of either trying to encourage universities to offer scholarships to people seeking asylum, or enabling the access of people seeking asylum to available scholarships and supports at the university, is a time-consuming process. The success of such collaborative efforts is also dependent on the individual university staff member, their attitudes to collaboration with the community, and their awareness regarding the challenges facing people seeking asylum. Persistence in forging productive relationships between community organisations and universities was noted as key to successful collaboration.

*... I don't think my direct supervisor realised how much work went into massaging the relationships with the unis, the amount of administration, the amount of hurdles ... everyone else helped between IELTS [International English Language Testing System] and all the different hurdles we had to jump to get kids in and not knowing until the last minute they were accepted and oh anyway. It was a lot, a lot of work, a lot of stress, a lot of uncertainty for these kids along the way.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

#### *Case work support*

A significant element of community sector practice includes case work support where organisations are funded to assist people seeking asylum living in the community. These supports included helping students cope with stress and anxiety, linking people seeking asylum with scholarship programs at universities, and/or providing scholarship information. Some community organisations also provided support with the completion of scholarship applications which has become a primary part of one community organisation participant's workload:

*... that kind of became a portfolio within my role was to look at scholarship opportunities, full fee-waivers ... it was only meant to be two hours of my week but it became a lot, probably took up 80 per cent of my hours, of my workload just because of the demand and the passion that these kids had and the case workers were constantly giving me referrals in for potential kids who were you know possibly going to get good ATAR or you know had potential, had the appetite to go on to uni.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

In the absence of dedicated funding, community organisations face significant challenges in providing advocacy support for people seeking asylum wishing to access higher education and those who have accessed it and require ongoing assistance.

*Yeah there were so many people who didn't have ... advocacy support, there's simply not enough capacity well for me and there was no capacity to you know provide that one-to-one support you know to students who needed it.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

Furthermore, community organisations have managed to provide assistance to people seeking asylum to meet higher education entry requirements such as preparing for, and sitting, IELTS tests. A number of organisations provide free IELTS preparation classes or

English language supports through tutoring to help people seeking asylum prepare for university. These services are provided without government funded support.

Some community organisations in Victoria and New South Wales assist people seeking asylum to access subsidised VET and vocational programs. In addition, a number of community organisations provided support to help build the confidence of people seeking asylum regarding their education and employment aspirations. For example:

*The Empowerment Pathways Programs conduct an intake assessment with every single member who wants to come into the Hub for either education or employment pathways planning and to look at their background, skills and experience and English language level. We look at what they're interested in and help them to develop an individual pathway plan and also connect them into group-based activities.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

The extent to which some community organisations are able to provide these supports has been impacted by SRSS policy changes. Organisations who have lost their SRSS contract have had to change the focus of their work to remain viable, while other community organisations now see increasing numbers of people seeking asylum who have been exited from SRSS and try to find support elsewhere.

*[There is] so much work at the moment 'cause you know all these people that are having their SRSS payments cut off are coming to us.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

Changes to funding have resulted in less capacity in some community organisations to provide case work support to assist people seeking asylum with processes to access higher education. Further, effective casework support is dependent on community organisation staff and volunteers' understanding of the changing policy context and how these fluctuations impact on access to higher education for people seeking asylum. As one community organisation participant noted, difficulties arise when case workers are not familiar with university processes.

*... another kind of barrier as well, where you had organisations that had case workers that didn't really understand the education component of some of it.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

Some organisations have enhanced awareness around how changing policy affects people seeking asylum by employing core staff members with lived experience.

*I think it is really valuable to have, yeah to have obviously the right individuals but people with lived experience as core staff members in, in programs and the hub is very much, it's a diverse team and I think that diversity gives it additional strength.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

### **3.4 The Micro Layer: Lived Experiences of People Seeking Asylum**

At the symposium and throughout the interviews, participants who had lived experience of seeking asylum spoke of many challenges in trying to access higher education in Australia including their treatment as international students and the complicated application process. But they also discussed the importance of key people, such as a trusted broker or friend, in enabling their participation and often demonstrated resilience in the face of extraordinarily

difficult circumstances. This section outlines the impact of practice and policy on the lived experiences of people seeking asylum.

### **The importance of accessing studies**

The critical importance of scholarships in enabling access to higher education was highlighted by student participants at the National Symposium and those taking part in the interviews.

*I just wanted to appreciate whoever they gave us this opportunity [to obtain a scholarship] ... [it] is going to open a way for us, not just me for a lot of people. I know a lot of young people just hoping to go to university to find a way to get out of this miserable life that I don't know that life brought for them. It's not their decision actually they had to just move, they had to, they had to escape from whatever life ...*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

Student participants emphasised the value of education, not simply as a means of acquiring the qualifications necessary for employment, but as essential to living a meaningful life. The opportunity to undertake study was regarded as an important tool for self-actualisation and for contributing to society.

*Each person, each person has to have a purpose or goal you may say. My study is the purpose of continuing my life. If that is taken away from me, I am nothing. It's an honour to be teaching people and its honour to learn from people.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

*... they wanted to use all the skill they have. Like to be, the better person that they are.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

However, many students who attended the symposium or participated in individual interviews expressed a preference for loans rather than scholarships to facilitate their studies. The desire to 'earn' their education, or to reimburse the institution for the opportunity to study, is indicative of their willingness to contribute to the resettlement context and play a role in 'giving back' to the community.

Despite the significant challenges associated with studying in a foreign language and unfamiliar institutional environment with limited financial resources, student participants maintained a strong commitment to successfully completing their education in Australia. A desire to make family proud, and an appreciation for educational opportunities that were denied to parents and other relatives, was identified as a chief motivating factor.

*My parents never had an opportunity to study ... So we always, my parents said to me if you got the opportunity just make our dream real. We want to see at least one of us study at, get one degree you know.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

*So it was so hard to study and the first semester but I tried my best to concentrate and move forward and stuff. You know like all my families when we were kids like my father and my mum was telling us like you have to study, you have to like be a good person like for community and stuff like, even now my brother and my other sister they really like to study.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

Another clear theme that was present in discussions at the symposium and in the interviews with people seeking asylum was their degree of resilience, devotion, drive to study, and use of coping strategies to achieve good outcomes from participation in higher education.

One student believed that he “got lucky” reflecting on the many other people he had met in his literacy class who also wanted to go to university, but he also reflected that he had “worked [his] arse off”. He said “I would just say that I broke the norms and made it possible”.

The degree of resilience demonstrated by some people seeking asylum was also noted by community organisation and educational institutional participants.

*But on the positive side I think that you know we do see some of the most unbelievably resilient individuals going through all of these kind of setbacks to be able to then actually succeed. So I think that, I think that despite what I'm describing in terms of quite a bleak context, what we do see when people get [study opportunities] is that they really thrive.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

Another student described how he was undertaking trimesters of study in order to get through his degree as quickly as possible given the severe financial constraints he faced. Despite his very heavy study load over the past two years, he expressed his gratitude for the opportunity and when asked how he was experiencing his studies replied that he was “loving it”.

### **The stress of struggling to meet living expenses while studying**

The policy landscape outlined earlier in which people seeking asylum, whether on a Bridging Visa, TPV or SHEV, are treated as international students has an extremely negative personal impact on student participants. Given that the limited government financial assistance for people on a SHEV or TPV is not available for those undertaking education for longer than 12 months, and the cessation of SRSS payments for increasing numbers of Bridging Visa holders, financial concerns are a chief cause of psychological stress. Homelessness and a lack of food seriously detracts from students' capacity to focus on their studies. Many student participants also identified the rapidity with which policy changes were implemented and a lack of clear communication around the new policy stipulations, particularly regarding SRSS payments, as creating considerable confusion and distress. These concerns, combined with ongoing trauma from past experiences and separation from family, weighed heavily on people seeking asylum.

The cost of living is a significant barrier to people seeking asylum accessing higher education. One of the student participants at the National Symposium described their daily life as a student as “eat, survive, study”. One the students interviewed described how difficult it was to survive even with Centrelink support:

*...sometimes the money even that Centrelink were giving. It was just, 'cause I was living alone and that was money was exactly for food and just the rent.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

Other students described the great degree of stress they endured when they were suddenly cut from the SRSS scheme.

*And they didn't tell me that we were agreeing to stop. Even I worked two days in the holiday, just two days one day before, one day after but they, they cut my money and they didn't inform me of that, they didn't say we going to cease your SRSS or something.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

*They just suddenly stopped everything. I didn't have food money and I had to study for an assignment and I was really stressed. I said I'm going to have to go and make some, find food or I have to do assignment. [I was] really struggling and I was just, the problem was I couldn't concentrate. I forced myself to study...*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

Frequently, assistance from community organisations provided the only means by which students were able to survive while continuing their studies. For example:

*I went to the Red Cross ... And I told them, yeah I told them I am homeless, I am an engineering student, they couldn't believe it. They said are you serious? I say yes ... and they gave me, I think they gave me two gift cards for Coles. And they gave me \$90. I had \$200 to pay the rent. I had for one week, for one week I had some food and I say what will happen next week and this was on my brain.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

The cost of living, and a lack of financial support from the government, means that people seeking asylum who wish to pursue education even with a full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarship are required to work. Difficulties balancing work and study forces people seeking asylum into part-time study in order to have the ability to work enough to afford basic living expenses. However, at some universities, students receiving a scholarship or stipend are required to maintain a full-time study load which exacerbates the difficulty of balancing education with the hours of work necessary to pay for food and accommodation.

One student described supporting himself by working 20 hours a week in a restaurant which was a reduction from the nearly full-time job he had while he was undertaking his Diploma course. The student had to reduce his paid work because he had a "gut feeling" that he was in danger of failing if he tried to work at the same level he had been able to manage the previous year. He described never having enough money, especially since his SRSS payments were stopped without prior notification. Despite these additional pressures on his finances, however, he was adamant that nothing would stop him from studying.

Another student described the following:

*I know a lot of people are struggling with their study as well in my situation... I can say we are going through a lot of stressful life, it's not an easy life like others just coming to university and cheering up and just focussing on the study. We have a lot of other concerns as well. In my case I have to work and study at the same time. And I have to find actually a full-time job to cover my expenses so it's going to be hard for me to do my assignment and yeah get on with my study load.*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

The difficult and very specific challenges that students seeking asylum face with regards to meeting living costs was also highlighted by a number of higher educational and community organisation participants. For example:

*I just don't know how they're going to survive. [I] just worry how they're going to, I don't know how they're going to sustain it ... It's a hard flog for them but then they look at their mates and one or two of them say to me like I see my friend and some of them have worked really crappy, have been exploited in shitty jobs in Sydney where they're getting paid pittance.*

(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)

## Impacts on mental health

The stresses of adjusting to new academic life, financial difficulties, and living in an extremely precarious and uncertain situation have a significant, negative impact on students' mental health. The long-term uncertainty around their future in Australia due to the lack of access to permanent protection and the right to family reunion, the mental health impacts of detention, and living in the community for years without the right to work, amplifies the trauma experienced in their country of origin and while fleeing. These significant pressures can act as further barriers to higher education, making it difficult for people seeking asylum to focus on their studies.

*When I came here I started in my first semester, imagine ... knowing nobody and being in the shock with the [new study environment], fulltime study, ... English as a second language and studying [a difficult subject] and all that and you get a letter from the Department [of Immigration], you may apply [for refugee status] and you have no money to get a lawyer to help you. I did my application myself, and my statement, I had a draft of the statement and I had to work on it and it was the most depressing year of my life.*

(Student Participant: Individual Interviews)

*... a person who came here on a boat and had some trauma in the past, the journey was traumatic, detention centre is trauma, living in Australia and in limbo for years is traumatic, sometimes it's even worse than what you experience in life because when you're in [your home country] ... when you come here you don't work and study, you have all this time to think about all that happened and all that is happening to you and it is a lot more difficult and you're in a country with no contact, with no community, no family support. It actually is very hard when you are here and sometimes when people complain Australians get offended and I've seen that, that they go oh you're not being grateful. But it is the reality no one really wants to come out like that. No one wants to come in like that and no one is proud of the fact that they had to arrive somewhere illegally as they call it.*

(Student Participant: Individual Interview)

People seeking asylum also have to endure not seeing their families who remain in the country they fled and not knowing when—or if—they will ever see them again. Some have endured separation from family members after they arrived in Australia.

*I got depressed because they separated my brother and I at the first day coming out of detention.*

(Student Participant: Individual Interview)

The negative mental health impacts of living in extreme uncertainty were also noted by community organisation participants.

*The stress of not knowing about what's going to happen in your future. And that visa processing can take you know up to five years or sometimes longer. Depending on the situation and what's decided, it really does take a huge toll on people and their mental health. And can cause things like depression and anxiety which then again has an impact on peoples' ability to engage in education and employment.*

(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)

Mental health pressures and pre-existing trauma are exacerbated by the lack of time for self care. High study and workloads leave little time for people seeking asylum to create a work/life balance. Greater financial support was identified as one way in which students could reduce their hours in the workplace and maintain a healthier and more sustainable lifestyle. When asked if the provision of government assistance would mean that they would no longer need to work full-time, a student participant replied:

*Well I probably would part, work part-time just to support myself if I can, not enough but I would work part-time*

*(Student Participant: Individual Interview)*

### **Support for people with disability, health challenges, and family responsibilities**

As raised at the National Symposium, students with ongoing health concerns and disability were a particularly vulnerable group of people, especially in regards to accessing appropriate and affordable health care and support while undertaking studies. More information needs to be collected about the numbers of students seeking asylum who struggle with ongoing health and disability issues and the official structures in place to support such students.

For people seeking asylum with responsibilities to financially support family members either in Australia or elsewhere, there is the added barrier of needing to find employment given the lack of access to student financial supports. People seeking asylum with children, particularly women, who are not able to access affordable childcare also face further barriers to accessing higher education. This highlights the need for research that focuses specifically on issues of gender and access to higher education for people seeking asylum. Exploring how sociocultural attitudes to gender interact with the unique circumstances and restraints imposed on people seeking asylum will provide greater insight into the complexities of accessing and successfully completing higher education for this vulnerable group.

### **The importance of language support and the need for brokers**

A lack of English language proficiency is a key barrier to higher education for people seeking asylum and a source of social isolation and marginalisation. Community organisations indicated the need for greater and more specialised English language support as a chief priority. Students who were non- or semi-literate in their first language(s) were particularly impacted:

*Some of the boys are illiterate in their own language let alone in English so I think you could really see when it came to that level of the ones who really struggled.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*

A number of student participants highlighted the importance of key people, such as a trusted broker or friend, to help at all stages of the process of accessing higher education including locating courses, scholarships, writing and submitting course and scholarship applications, and transition into university life.

One student who had a disability described that successful transition to university had only been possible through having a mentor and friends. Another student who was present at the National Symposium spoke positively of the profound impact that key people within community and university sectors have had in enabling access to higher education: "I am an example of what the community can do ... when the community takes responsibility for others".

## **The role of higher education in the settlement of people seeking asylum**

Another common theme across all data sources was the importance of viewing higher education in the context of successful settlement in Australia. Some community organisation and student participants articulated the need to provide career support and guidance, along with scholarships and stipends, in order to ensure that the choice of degree would not only satisfy the interests of the student but would provide them with a realistic pathway to ongoing employment. This would help to address the situation in which students undertake a course of study because it is dictated by the terms of their scholarship, or because it was a strategic choice in their country of origin, without any knowledge of the Australian job market and professional prospects.

*It's about successful, successful settlement basically. So what we want to see is social inclusion and people being able to participate fully in their new community.*

*(Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview)*



## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This first Australian-wide study highlights that people seeking asylum face complex and specific challenges and barriers to higher education access and enrolment. A major barrier is that their only pathway to accessing higher education is being granted admission as an international student given the temporary nature of the visa they are issued by the Federal Government. This means that they are ineligible for Federal Government programs designed to assist students with financing tertiary study including the HELP, Commonwealth Supported Places, and concession rates. Therefore, for most, this entry-point is financially prohibitive.

Another significant barrier that originates at the federal policy level is the lack of access to student or other income supports for people seeking asylum. Our research highlighted that this put students from asylum-seeking backgrounds at even greater risk of destitution and homelessness and placed substantial pressure on them to try to balance work and study while living with extreme uncertainty. Further barriers given their temporary visa status included difficulties in accessing enabling courses and a lack of access to affordable English language courses. In addition, people seeking asylum are forced to endure a policy landscape that is not only hostile but changeable with very little or no warning which creates considerable stress and confusion.

These barriers are experienced by people seeking asylum as a compound set of injustices. In addition to the financial implications of the barriers, they are also causing considerable distress and eroding the hopeful possibilities that engaging in education can offer.

A range of Australian universities have responded to these restrictive Federal Government policies by implementing mechanisms to support access to higher education coupled with community sector advocacy and support. Our research highlights that these efforts have resulted in more than 204 people seeking asylum studying in 23 universities across the country on scholarships that meet their full tuition fees. Some of these universities also offered living allowances (ranging from one off case-by-case payments to \$7,500 per year), language supports, and other measures. Other institutions offer partial scholarships.

These measures are seen as critical and welcome responses by our participants. The advocacy of community organisations for the establishment of such scholarships and income supports, and the critical bridge they provide between people seeking asylum and the complex admissions and scholarship application process, are also seen as critical.

However, there are many other people seeking asylum who remain unable to access a scholarship and/or meet the university entry requirements. There are also challenges related to the effectiveness of scholarships and other measures as well as the retention, participation, success of, and support for people seeking asylum in their studies.

It is clear that university scholarships for people seeking asylum that meet full tuition fees, coupled with a living allowance and other supports, have enabled access to higher education for more than 204 people across Australia. The determination and commitment of these students to their studies, while living in situations of extreme uncertainty and receiving minimal supports compared with most other students in Australia, is clearly evident and needs to be lauded. The university and community organisations responsible for the scholarships and other supports are also to be commended. However, further measures are needed to be provided by many other universities to ensure that these students receive supports that are necessary for their retention, participation, and success in their studies.

In addition, the Federal Government policies underpinning the most significant barriers that people seeking asylum face in accessing higher education need to be addressed including the need for permanent protection visas to be issued to all who have been recognised as a refugee. Efforts directed at realising this are clearly needed, including engaging with federal

Members of Parliament to elevate their awareness of the impacts of these policies, as well as the relevant federal party policy development forums.

### **Federal Government Recommendations**

- Grant permanent visas to all people currently on TPVs and SHEVs.
- Expedite the processing of refugee claims for those yet to be finalised.
- Ensure that all people seeking asylum and refugees have access to income and student supports on par with other Australians.

### **University Recommendations**

#### ***Policy and practice development***

- Provide opportunities for people with lived experience of seeking asylum to inform policy and practice.
- Allocate one staff member as a central point for students from asylum-seeking backgrounds.

#### ***Full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships***

- Until permanent protection visas are issued, establish and continue to expand the number of full fee-paying/waiver scholarships to people seeking asylum.
- Offer scholarships that allow people seeking asylum to study postgraduate studies.
- Offer part-time and flexible options for scholarship holders.

#### ***Financial support***

- In the absence of access to government funded income support, include supports for meeting living expenses in scholarship offerings.
- Offer subsidised accommodation for students who receive scholarships.
- Provide opportunities for students for employment on campus such as paid workplace experience to help establish networks and enable access to employment after university.

#### ***Alternative entry pathways and transition supports***

- Offer alternative entrance pathways such as enabling programs or diploma pathways to facilitate access to undergraduate programs.
- Tailor services and supportive pathways through the provision of mentoring.

#### ***Application process***

- Offer the opportunity for students to apply face-to-face rather than fully-online.
- Train university staff with roles relating to scholarships, equity, and admissions on the specific needs of students seeking asylum.
- Collaborate and coordinate with other universities to streamline the application process across institutions and ensure parity of information shared with potential applicants.
- Avoid requiring applicants to disclose their financial situation to access scholarships and/or living allowances.
- Avoid requiring applicants to demonstrate that they will be able to complete their qualification due to their temporary visa status.

#### ***Academic and language support***

- Offer tailored academic support (for academic language, literacies, and cultural navigation) for people seeking asylum.
- This support should consider whether students have had established careers and qualifications in their country of origin or completed schooling after arriving in Australia.

#### ***Support for people with disability, mental health issues, ongoing health challenges, and family responsibilities***

- Provide on-campus refugee-specific mental health support and counselling services.
- Provide training for all front-line staff on issues dealing with people seeking asylum.

- Implement official structures to support such students.
- Offer people seeking asylum with young children access to affordable childcare.

***Sector advocacy***

- Collaborate and coordinate with other universities and community organisations to advocate for Federal Government policy change to ensure that people seeking asylum recognised as refugees are given permanent protection visas, and all people seeking asylum access appropriate income supports.

**Community Organisation Recommendation**

***Sector advocacy***

- Collaborate and coordinate with other community organisations and universities to advocate for Federal Government policy change to ensure that people seeking asylum recognised as refugees are given permanent protection visas, and all people seeking asylum access appropriate income supports.

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