

CHARTING THE COURSE: REFUGEE EDUCATION POLICY IN AUSTRALIA



**UNIVERSITY OF
AUCKLAND**
Waipapa Taumata Rau
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EDUCATION AND SOCIAL WORK

**CENTRE FOR ASIA PACIFIC
REFUGEE STUDIES**

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THANK YOU

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Thank you to the many people who took time to speak with me during the Fellowship through the consultation process. I am especially grateful to the people who gave feedback on the draft, and who provide ongoing leadership in this field. Thank you.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Pictures in the report were taken by Muzafar Ali in schools in Afghanistan and with refugees in Indonesia. <https://www.muzafar.net/>

'Muzafar Ali is a Hazara photographer and human rights activist from Afghanistan. He is director of a refugee-led education program in Indonesia and Thailand. Currently based in South Australia, Ali is studying at the University of South Australia and is an advocate for refugee rights and agency and speaks out on behalf of refugees 'stuck in limbo'.

'He started working for the United Nations in 2005, and bought a camera with his first salary. His UN roles included work in strengthening democracy, rule of law, governance, and security, as well as monitoring human rights.

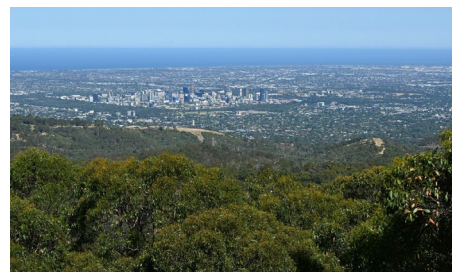
'Visiting the remote areas of the Hazarajat region of Afghanistan, Ali photographed the lives the Hazaras. He became one of the first young Afghan photographers to document his nation's progress emerging from the ashes of war. His photographs depict the beauty and simplicity of daily life of ordinary Afghans.

'Ali's UN work placed his life in danger. In 2005 the Taliban targeted his car with an Improvised Explosive Device, and he was threatened by local warlords and corrupt government officials. By 2013, Muzafar had become a refugee and journeyed to Indonesia where he co-founded the first refugee-led school in West Java. Muzafar is currently managing the Cisarua Learning program in Australia that funds refugee-led schools in Indonesia and Thailand, providing education to more than 1000 students.'

Cover photo: [Denise Jans](#)

THIS WORK WAS PRODUCED ON KAURNA COUNTRY.

I pay my respects to Kaurna Elders past and present. I acknowledge and respect the importance of connection to Country for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples around Australia who have led a tradition of education that has continued for thousands of years.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

REFUGEE EDUCATION AND THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

REFUGEES AND RESETTLEMENT

Globally, the number of people who are forcibly displaced from their homes has been rising exponentially, and this trend is likely to continue. Australia's program for refugee resettlement is world leading and provides specialised supports for people during early years of settlement. Once students transition to a local or chosen school, they may then have access to limited additional supports.

Eventually, students are expected to access supports available to any Australian student, regardless of their background or identity.

AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

It is important to recognise positive aspects of refugee-ness rather than only a deficit view. Finding a balance between recognising students' strengths and capabilities, whilst also acknowledging challenges and responding to their needs, is critical. Students from refugee backgrounds may have experienced significant barriers to education prior to their engagement with Australian schools as well as significant barriers and challenges within Australia.

POLICY PROBLEMS

STUDENT EXPERIENCES VARY ACROSS SCHOOLS AND LOCATIONS

Recently, there has been some development of refugee education policy in Australia, however, experiences of students from refugee backgrounds remain highly dependent on chance. Without policy that brings a focus on structural and systemic barriers faced by students from refugee backgrounds and the staff working with them, approaches are dependent on local context and actors.

There are significant disparities in schools' resourcing and expertise in working with students from refugee backgrounds. Some have acquired knowledge and developed positive practices over years of working with diverse student cohorts, including students from refugee backgrounds, others are doing this work for the first time and practices are reactive and ad-hoc.

BROAD, CATCH-ALL POLICIES DON'T MEET SPECIFIC NEEDS

Students from refugee backgrounds are consistently and increasingly nested within multiple policy frameworks, and frequently not identified as a distinct cohort at all. This nesting process is not explicit, rather, omission of students from policy text reflects an assumption that their needs are not different from the needs of other students. The absence of these students in data and policy also marks an assumption that their needs are being met by generalist policy approaches.

Research evidence strongly suggests this is not the case.

PRACTICES OF EXCLUSION PERSIST

Racism and discrimination are a major issue for students from refugee backgrounds. These experiences range from explicit to tacit and are not only daily experiences for students, but also structural and systemic. Barriers and challenges for students from refugee backgrounds reflect broader issues with schooling provision in Australia. With migration, transnationalism, and intercultural communication a core element of the modern world, it is critical that Australian education systems contribute to intercultural respect and learning.

LEADERSHIP FOR POLICY CHANGE

Australia could be a world leader in developing education policy that works for students from refugee backgrounds. It is time for policy development that builds from the evidence base, that focuses attention on the strengths and capabilities of students from refugee backgrounds, and that acknowledges and works to minimise practices, systems and structures of exclusion.

Australia's resettlement program, in combination with supportive practices in schools, offers safe and promising futures and opportunities for young people and families after refugee migration. Education policy development can build on these strengths by addressing multiple systemic and structural barriers.

THIS REPORT

This report details the diverse and heterogenous experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in Australian schools. It sets present day Australian education practices and (lack of) refugee education policies within a global and historical context. Policy making in Australian education has been affected over time by evolving attitudes to immigration and multiculturalism, as well as by global trends in education such as inclusive education and standardisation.

It is time for a fresh approach to educational policy making in Australia that matches the reality of multicultural modern Australia, with attention given to cultural and linguistic diversity as well as diversity of migration and settlement experiences.

By focusing on refugee education policy in particular, the needs of these students can be better met. Furthermore, by addressing these students' needs, policies and practices will more readily meet the needs of Australian student cohorts from diverse backgrounds, and with wide ranging cultural and linguistic strengths and skills.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: SUMMARY

CONNECT POLICY AND PRACTICE ENVIRONMENTS.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Recommendation 1. | Develop policies that explicitly and meaningfully connect migration and education systems. |
| Recommendation 2. | Build and maintain information sharing networks across departments, sectors, schools, and teaching areas in schools. |

INCREASE SPECIFICITY IN POLICY.

- | | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Recommendation 3. | Identify students from refugee backgrounds as an equity group in education policy at all levels. |
| Recommendation 4. | Improve data collection regarding students from refugee backgrounds at the national and local level. |
| Recommendation 5. | Include policy detail regarding practices for working with students from refugee backgrounds. |

SUPPORT STAFF WORKING IN SCHOOLS.

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Recommendation 6. | Increase capacity by improving initial teacher education programs, with an explicit focus on working with students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse refugee and migrant backgrounds. |
| Recommendation 7. | Facilitate all schools to employ cultural liaison and school support staff from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, regardless of students' English language proficiency. |
| Recommendation 8. | Recruit and retain teachers from refugee and migrant backgrounds. |

PROMOTE INCLUSION FOR STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS.

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Recommendation 9. | Expand curriculum and adapt pedagogy including in policy and practice, with support through resourcing and professional development. |
| Recommendation 10. | Develop and implement explicit anti-racism and discrimination policy, with strategies in place for ongoing evaluation and improvement. |

Detailed recommendations are provided at the [end of this report \(link to section\)](#), categorised for policy makers working at various levels of governance.

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FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Photo by [Muzafar Ali](#)



FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

REFUGEES, ASYLUM SEEKING, AND GLOBAL RESPONSES

FORCED DISPLACEMENT

The number of forcibly displaced peoples globally has grown exponentially in recent years.² At the time of writing, this figure stood close to [117 million people](#), although this is likely a conservative estimate.

The [Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees](#) developed by the United Nations (UN) in 1951 (updated in 1967)³ recognised that people required protection from human rights abuses and persecution. Developed in the aftermath of the second world war, the Convention built on consensus that those fleeing these dangers have the right to seek asylum, as detailed in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).⁴

More recently, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the [New York Declaration for Migrants and Refugees](#) (2016) and developed the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) (2018). This and other compacts were intended to provide comprehensive, contemporary guidance for responses of UN member states to the shifting needs of forcibly displaced peoples.⁵ However, they remain insufficient in enabling equitable responses; States' resistance of responsibility is an ongoing global concern.^{6,7}

REFUGEES AND SEEKING ASYLUM

Officially, the term refugee is a legal category, and a person can be identified as a refugee only by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). People may seek asylum if they are outside of the country from which they flee persecution. Asylum seekers may or may not have their claim accepted, but those whose claims are accepted by the UNHCR are then identified officially as refugees.

In 2022, more than [50 million people](#) were identified as refugees or asylum seekers by the UNHCR or the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).⁸ Most refugees live in low- or middle-income countries neighbouring those from which they fled.⁹ Excluding Palestinian refugees

under [UNRWA's mandate](#), around [24 million people](#) are in protracted situations, meaning they have been living in exile for over five years or even decades. However, these figures must also be considered within a context of new refugee flight occurring daily, from places with longstanding as well as emerging conflict including Afghanistan, Ethiopia, the Ukraine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.⁸

RESETTLEMENT

Resettlement is considered one of [three durable solutions](#) for refugees. The other two options are integration within the country of asylum, or voluntary repatriation.¹⁰ Resettlement offers refugees permanent settlement with visa status to ensure international protection, with pathways to citizenship and support for integration.^{11,12}

Individual UN member States enable resettlement through programmes developed within [each country](#). The UNHCR plays a critical role in firstly identifying asylum seekers and granting refugee status, secondly identifying those refugees eligible for resettlement according to urgent need as well as regional and global priorities, and then liaising with resettlement country governments to coordinate resettlement. Each State has the power to make decisions on how many humanitarian resettlement places will be made available, and how the process of resettlement is coordinated.

In comparison to the scale of forced displacement and numbers of recognised refugees, opportunities for resettlement are extremely few. In 2022, only 114,000 resettlement arrivals were recorded in total out of 1.47 million urgently required in that year.^{9,13} This was less than 8% of what was urgently required according to assessments by international migration authorities, and less than 1% of all refugees.⁸

In 2024 the UNHCR projects over 2.4 million people will be in [urgent](#) need of resettlement.¹⁴

FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

INTEGRATION

Integration is central to ‘durable solutions’ for refugees. The term refers to social and economic aspects of settlement, for those settling and the broader community. Integration is affected by social and cultural factors that impact feelings of belonging, social connection, inclusion, and wellbeing. Social networks are crucial elements of integration, as is access to health care, housing, employment, and education, underpinned by access to foundation rights and security of permanent residency and citizenship.¹⁵

Resettlement context shapes integration experiences.¹⁶ Anti-immigration sentiment impacts both access to, and experiences of resettlement.^{6,17} [Policies for integration](#) in resettlement are ubiquitous, but differ globally.¹⁸ They play a crucial role in facilitating positive integration, not only to provide adequate support for access to practical necessities like housing or health care, but also to shape the attitudes and actions of people within the broader society.¹⁹ Education is a critical means and marker of integration.¹⁵

REFUGEE EDUCATION

Children account for around 30% of the global population, 10% of international migrant populations (without refugee experiences), 40% of forcibly displaced populations and nearly half of refugee populations^{9,13}, and these proportions have increased significantly in recent years.²⁰

Education is a key focus for international organisations working with displaced populations, with longstanding commitments as well as new goals. However, over half of all school-aged refugees (51%) are estimated to be out of school. Enrolment of younger refugee children stands at around 65% of all child refugees. Adolescents and young people are less likely to be attending school, with only 41% of high school age children in school.²¹ Therefore it is critical to improve educational access and enrolment.

Increasingly there is also a focus on inclusive educational practices to facilitate attendance for students from refugee backgrounds in local schools with their peers in host nations, to access local curriculum in local languages, and to build relationships that enable both structural and relational integration.²² These issues require international, national and local policy development that can shape inclusion in education systems and enable longer term integration.^{23,24}

There is a need for education reform in high income countries and regions hosting refugee populations.²⁵ Both formal and non-formal education can play a role²⁶, however, it is inclusion within national systems that enable access to future opportunities²³ that are an important focus for hopes of safety and security for people from refugee backgrounds including children and families.

Policy making across the globe for education needs to align with modern trends in migration, including forced displacement; education policy must facilitate practices that support success (flexibly and broadly defined), safety and belonging for students from refugee backgrounds.²⁷

Although the UNHCR identified three durable solutions for refugees, there are substantial populations living in protracted refugee situations. Integration into a local context is increasingly the only option available for people who cannot return home and cannot access extremely limited resettlement pathways.

With estimated figures of people forcibly displaced climbing by multiple millions each year, better ways forward for local integration are critical.²⁸ Key to this process is access to and inclusion in education systems.^{29,30}

REGULATORY BARRIERS

Schools and teachers can work with students to support aspirations within the complex web of exclusions and barriers in different contexts.³¹

There may be multiple levels of structural and systemic exclusion formed by visa and migration regulations, exclusions from educational pathways due to migration status, marginalisation due to cultural hierarchies that govern curriculum and pedagogy, and both explicit and tacit experiences of discrimination at the individual level.³² At the national level, there is visa regulation and associated exclusions from national education systems or legal employment, as well as discrimination and marginalisation within the broader society if fears of the 'other' and attitudes of scarcity and resource protection are activated.³³

Further barriers include hardline border protection and anti-immigration practices, and exclusionary practices like segregation of housing that creates significant physical barriers to inclusion for children and young people because of travel distances and lack of proper sanitation or facilities for health.

Citizenship requirements further entrench disparities in migration experiences, favouring people who have 'the right kind' of qualities.³⁴ Gender and age are also important considerations; for example, adolescents may take on multiple caretaking, financial and navigational responsibilities.^{35,36}

DEFICIT VIEWS AND FRAMING

Whilst acknowledging the effects of missed schooling and language barriers to education,³⁷ it is also important to recognise that these structural barriers are created by systems rather than children or young people; as such, the framing of the problem is crucial.

Internationally, as in Australia, issues around deficit framing of students from non-majority language backgrounds have been noted.³⁸ This focus on language deficits, rather than multilingual strengths, leads students to be categorised via this lens, often leading to pressure to assimilate and monolingual teaching and learning.³⁹

Culturally and linguistically bound priorities of education systems in countries of resettlement often lead to emphasis on deficits of students. Perceptions of deficit in language means that staff may have low expectations, and only recognise students' capacity once they become proficient in the majority language. This concept is broader than just language.

Perceptions of deficit and deviance stem from culturally bounded understanding of knowledge and learning practices. Often students' stories and capabilities go unrecognised. The emphasis on language and literacy have led to practices in schools where practices of support are focused on this topic.

INCLUSIVE REFUGEE EDUCATION

Even in contexts where students may be excluded from national systems, school staff can support inclusion by working to create environments of acceptance. School can be a place where students feel recognised and understood, as well as motivated to engage through positive feedback and support from teachers.⁴⁰

Design and provision of education for students from refugee backgrounds is directly linked to opportunity structures.²³ Possible futures for students and their families impact decisions made by policy makers which impacts educational practices for support as well as funding for these supports.

REFUGEE EDUCATION AND THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT



REFUGEE MIGRATION AND AUSTRALIA

RESETTLEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

Australia has maintained a commitment to contribute to humanitarian needs of refugees since the end of the second World War and around one million refugees have settled in the country since then. [Australia enables refugee resettlement](#) via the federally governed Humanitarian Program, administered by the current Department of Home Affairs.⁴¹

Although exact figures fluctuate, in 2023, 17,875 places were made available (of 66,179 applications), via onshore and offshore components.⁴² Offshore processing is coordinated by the UNHCR, and the Australian government decides how many places to offer and to whom. Australia prioritised 50% of all places in 2022-2023 for Afghans and a further 17% for vulnerable women and families.⁴¹

The Program is affected by changing government priorities, global events and regional priorities. For example, increased numbers of humanitarian visas were announced (temporary & permanent) for: people leaving Syria in 2015-16; Afghanistan from 2021; and in response to events in the Ukraine from 2022.^{43,44} During Covid-19, the humanitarian

intake fell sharply due to Australia's extended border closures.

Resettlement offers specialised supports upon arrival in Australia including support for housing, health care and access to basic services including education. With recent changes to the program, these supports can now be for up to ten years. Often, intensive support is provided during the early phase of settlement and extended according to need. English language classes are offered for children and adults, and specialist settlement services provide help in a range of ways.

Australia's Program of settlement support is considered to one of the best in the world, but the effects of the broader societal context remain a vital component of settlement, contributing to feelings of belonging or exclusion.⁴⁵ Although specialised resettlement services are available, provision of services and programs face challenges with funding,⁴⁶ which affects former refugees' health, employment, housing and social connection, particularly depending on location in cities or regional towns.⁴⁷⁻⁵⁰

SEEKING ASYLUM IN AUSTRALIA

In recent years, policies designed to deter people from arriving by boat to claim asylum in Australia have proliferated. These policies have been noted as detrimental to health and wellbeing as well as longer term settlement outcomes.⁵¹

Most recently, these policies led to indefinite detention for people seeking asylum, often lasting years and predominantly located on small islands, hundreds of kilometres from the Australian mainland.⁵² Some people were given temporary protection visas that allowed them to live in the Australian community after their claims for asylum were accepted as valid, but with (until recently) no pathway to permanent protection and many barriers to critical life

supports such as education or employment. These issues for temporary visa holders were amplified during the pandemic.

After more than a decade, changes to policy have recently opened possibilities for people holding some of these temporary protection visas to gain permanent protection. However, Australian government responses to people seeking asylum remain punitive and negatively impact asylum seekers and their families and communities.^{53,54} Experiences of detention lead to significantly higher chance of poor mental health and long and punitive asylum processes lead to poorer overall outcomes for integration and resettlement more broadly, even for those on temporary visas living in the community.^{55, 56}

REFUGEE MIGRATION AND AUSTRALIA

ENTERING AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

School students from refugee backgrounds who arrive in Australia as part of the resettlement program are most often initially enrolled in specialist English language programs or schools, funded partially through the Humanitarian Program as an extension to the usual government funded education systems. Access to these programs or schools may be limited for those settling in rural or regional areas where there is less availability of specialised programs.⁵⁷⁻⁵⁹ Alternatively, families may choose to enrol their children in non-specialised schools, either local government schools or independent schools if financially feasible, as is their right as Australian permanent residents. For those who attend specialist programs or schools, usually this support is available for around one year and then students are transitioned into their local school or classes.

Ongoing English language support may be continued, depending on need, most often offered through a specialised class currently known as EALD (English as an Additional Language or Dialect). English language remains a central factor affecting access to resources and services, employment, social connections and ongoing settlement overall. However, this singular emphasis on English language and literacy may contribute to deficit views of students from refugee backgrounds, as explained in more detail below.⁶⁰⁻⁶²

Once students transition to a local school, they may have supports available to them in the form of EALD classes if English fluency and literacy are developing. Eventually, students are expected to access the supports ostensibly available to any Australian student, regardless of background or identity.

AUSTRALIAN SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Most students benefit from initial supports to develop English language and literacy skills; although some young people from refugee backgrounds arrive in Australia as literate English speakers, many arrive with little or no oral or written English skills, or, for some, no literacy in their spoken language(s).^{63,64} There is a need for further development of practices around specific approaches for students from refugee backgrounds, including traditional literacy practices alongside modern multimodal and multilingual approaches that enable flexible assessments and use of students' language repertoires.⁶⁵⁻⁶⁷

Schools are critical locations for students from refugee backgrounds and the school context, including overall school culture as well as location, resourcing, and relationships with people (staff and students), are all critical factors impacting educational experiences and pathways for students from refugee backgrounds.^{68,69}

Connections between schools and families and communities, as well as key service providers, can also be important for supporting positive

schooling experiences for students from refugee backgrounds. These connections can be an opportunity for staff to build on students' strengths, and supportive practices for belonging and identity can also improve experiences and outcomes.⁷⁰⁻⁷⁶

There is an ongoing lack of data regarding students from refugee backgrounds as a distinct category, and a corresponding lack of clear policy guidance to identify supportive practices. This can leave students facing barriers without the support they may benefit from regarding literacy and language, navigating education systems, or connecting with services to support mental health, for example, and access to education and employments pathways are therefore less accessible.⁷⁷

Students may face challenges engaging with academic school work within a context of sometimes low expectations of teachers,^{78,79} social exclusion, racism or discrimination,⁸⁰⁻⁸³ difficulties with family dynamics and relationships,⁸⁴⁻⁸⁷ or challenges to mental health and wellbeing.⁸⁸⁻⁹⁰

AUSTRALIAN POLICY CHANGES OVER TIME

AUSTRALIAN POLICY EVOLUTION

During the 20th century, up to the 1970s, Australia's suite of overtly discriminatory policies, known collectively as the 'White Australia' policy, specifically precluded migration from non-European countries. In addition, there were highly assimilationist and exclusionary policies and practices regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.⁹¹ These issues provide critical context for understanding present day practices.

Education practices in Australia throughout the first three quarters of the 20th century reflected culturally and linguistically homogenous ideals and English language was considered the only language that schools could teach in for much of that time. Newcomers as well as Indigenous Australians were expected to assimilate to the Anglo majority cultural and linguistic norms.

These historical contexts continue to reverberate in contemporary Australian schools. Although inclusion, celebration, and

acceptance of diverse cultural knowledges and identities may be a goal which is achieved in certain schools, in others, racist colonial perspectives persist.⁹²

Broad migration and social policies intersect with education policy development and practices which impact students. Policies impact training and development for pre- and in-service teachers and school staff, funding available to schools to develop programs and practices of support, and curriculum and assessment design. They also affect students' ability to access and engage with aspirational pathways to further training or employment following school.

The following pages provide a brief overview of the connections over time between immigration, multicultural, and education policies that have shaped the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds in Australian schools today.

POLICY INTERSECTIONS: MIGRATION, MULTICULTURALISM AND EDUCATION

Immigration and public discourse

Following invasion of British empire from the 18th century, migration to Australia was initially limited to convicts and settlers from Great Britain. There was some limited migration of peoples from non-British backgrounds, for example, from China during the gold rushes.

The Colonies

Colonial approaches to education in Australia focused generally on children from British migration backgrounds, with a focus on English language and teaching and learning practices built upon British cultural values and pedagogies.

Education policies and governance

After Federation, the Immigration Restriction Act, also known as the 'White Australia' policy, continued to focus ideals of nationhood founded on British identity and culture.

Early Federation

Policies of exclusion for immigration were mirrored in policies of exclusion in schools where no provisions for people from non-British backgrounds were made.

Racism and discrimination against Aboriginal peoples as well as non-British migrants were commonplace as well as systemic and institutionalised.

Education was governed by the former colonies' governments, with funding for education only going to government schools. However, independent schools did exist, including faith-based schools such as through Catholic or Lutheran churches.

Post WWII, the United Nations was formed (UN; 1945), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR; 1950). A process for dissolution of the mandate system and independence for former colonies began.

In Australia, aims to boost population led to relaxation of immigration restrictions with new immigration pathways for people from *some* European countries. For the first time there was a federal immigration portfolio, and an agreement for refugee resettlement was made with the UN.

Post-war

The Federal government assumed responsibility for managing funding for education, however, provision of education, including through curriculum and general management, continued to be managed by the states and territory governments.

Government funding continued to go to government schools, although numbers of students attending faith-based schools continued to rise.

In the early 70s, Western social discourse around civil rights, women's rights and equality, changed political rhetoric in Australia. There was increasing recognition of inequalities and disadvantage, and a range of economic reforms for health, education and migration were introduced, particularly during the Whitlam years (1972-75).

These changes led to the end of White Australia policies and the beginning of multiculturalism and enabled a growth of migration of people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The Grassby and Galbally Reports (1972; 1978) particularly noted the importance of cultural identities and maintenance, as well as a shared social contract amongst the broader population, and advocated for equality of opportunity.

The Australian *Racial Discrimination Act* created in 1975 protected these striking attitudinal changes, reflecting global agreements of this type, for example the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (1966).

1970s-80s

In keeping with broader social change, education policies increasingly focused on education as a means for achieving social justice, of positive discrimination to enable students from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in education.⁹⁴

Significant growth in enrolments in faith-based schools reached a tipping point and for the first time (limited) government funding went to non-government schools. The introduction of 'needs based funding' following the release of the Karmel Report (1973) was written into policy for the first time. There was a focus on funding going where it was most needed such as for disadvantaged schools, for capital works, or for extending education supports for disabled children (at that time, special education).⁹⁵

The Immigration Education Act (1971) was passed, which identified English language learning for children as a responsibility for Australia, and the Child Migrant Education Program (CMEP) received Commonwealth funding. English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching was recognised as a specialist area.⁹⁶ In primary and secondary schools, as well as in specialist schools, students were supported to learn ESL.⁹⁷

Multicultural education in the early 1980s was focused on cultural maintenance, including of first languages, with growth in funding provisions for ethnic languages and promotion of multicultural values across the school community, reflecting recognition of these values for society.^{94,98} However, by the late 80s, there was growing momentum for refocusing from social justice agendas to economic imperatives.

During these years, a focus on cultural pluralism was promoted and remains important to the ideal of multiculturalism in Australia today.⁹³ However, towards the end of the 80s, a shift in public opinion brought a shift in policy with a *National Agenda for Multicultural Australia* (1989) framing citizenship as a central tenet rather than the previous focus on cultural practices and identity.

Thus, within two decades, the reforms of the early 70s towards policies to welcome and support migration and a culturally diverse society shifted to a focus on distrust of migration and a need to emphasise 'national' values and citizenship.

Globalisation was impacting economies, politics, communication, and popular media. The rise of the internet expanded these trends, changing system dynamics across all spheres. Ideals of market individualism and neoliberalism drove policy making.

There were moves internationally to standardise and streamline education policies and governance, such as via international standardised testing through the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).

Global compacts like the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁹⁹ were being formed. Inclusive education as a concept and a globally agreed aspiration was enshrined in international frameworks and compacts, such as the [Salamanca Agreement](#) (1994), initially focused on inclusion for children with disabilities, broadening to all who experience exclusion, including those from refugee backgrounds.¹⁰⁰

Earlier ideals of being 'Australian' that emphasised cultural diversity and social unity were increasingly affected by neoliberal ideals. This was shown clearly in changes to the Australian Citizenship Act (2007) which essentially emphasised assimilating to an 'Australian' political ideology, with increased focus on English language and economic contributions of migrants.¹⁰¹

In this period, numbers of people forcibly displaced increased with global conflicts. There was also increased immigration to Australia of people from non-refugee migration backgrounds.

Though Australia continued to facilitate humanitarian resettlement, there was a negative shift in public opinion towards immigration, exemplified by the popularity of One Nation in Australia. In the lead up to the 2001 election, a focus on people arriving by boat to seek asylum centred the national focus on refugees as a 'problem'. Although Australia continued to provide resettlement via the humanitarian scheme, perceptions of asylum seekers as 'queue jumpers' were amplified by media.

1990s-2000s

The sharp refocus on citizenship, national interests, and neoliberal economic rationalism, growing in strength from the late-80s to early-90s, led to changes in educational goals and governance. Education was promoted as needing to prepare students for employment and to contribute to Australia's competitiveness on the global market, as Ball put it, there was '*increasing colonization of educational policy by economic policy imperative*'.¹⁰²

Competitive education markers like PISA further drove this pressure and contributed to moves towards national education agendas and standardisation.

Although education continued to be governed by state/territory governments and independent schools/sectors, a coalition of leaders from the federal level as well as the states and territories formed – initially called the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA; 1993), later the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA; 2009). National declarations for education were developed (Hobart, 1989; Adelaide, 1999).

In 2007, the Labor party came to the election with a promise of *Education for All* and after election the government led a suite of policy reforms over the following years in a relatively short timeframe.^{103,104} These changes were formed within a context that had slowly build over the previous decade around prioritising economic imperatives and building of human capital for the marketplace as opposed to achieving equity through social justice.

Progress in language education and EALD programs (then known as ESL), as well as regarding recognition or support of cultural diversity, was fragmented,¹⁰⁵ and funding responsibility for EALD, initially a federal responsibility was handed to the states/territories.⁹⁶ This fragmentation continues to reverberate in education policy today.

In recent years, migration and border protection policies altered significantly in some ways. In other ways, promotion of 'skilled' migration or temporary migration for work or study continued the focus on marketisation and global competition in that began just prior to the turn of the century.

For people from refugee backgrounds, the change to policy in 2012/13 had a massive impact. Many thousands of people were given temporary visas, or alternatively locked in detention, for years. These punitive policies were enacted in concert with a range of international agreements and practices that have also led to additional thousands of people stuck in places such as Indonesia with very limited rights or safety.

Globally, refugee migration has grown and continues to, with massive exoduses from Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Ukraine, to name just a few.

The covid-19 pandemic affected migration significantly, with almost a complete halt to people arriving via any means. Moreover, during covid-19 restrictions the inequities in Australian systems were amplified and brought to light. Many people from refugee and non-refugee migration backgrounds were not able to access any government systems or supports, particularly those on the temporary, insecure visas designed to punish and prevent asylum seeking.

Covid and post covid boom in immigration saw a rise in racism and discrimination. Many social service problems such as a lack of housing availability, were blamed on immigration.

The recently released [Multicultural Framework Review](#) details many of the concerns outlined in this table. In particular, the Review highlighted the evolving focus of multiculturalism in Australian policy over time, and how these changing emphases have influenced not only social policy making, but also identity and belonging for many Australian people.

2010s-
2020s

Education reform towards the nationalised agenda saw significant progress during these years. Over time, this was implemented across all locations, with year levels brought into alignment across state boundaries and a suite of policies brought in to standardise curriculum, testing and reporting. Although critical funding reform was part of this, the influence of power relations between government and the independent schooling sectors again came into play. Similar to debates stretching back decades, arguments between equitable funding versus entitlements to funding were abundant.¹⁰⁶ Although a funding structure aimed to support equity was implemented, definitions of what constituted equity had a strong impact. Regardless, the terminology of 'needs based' funding was used.

Within this milieu, explicit education policies for students from migration backgrounds, including refugee backgrounds, were not changed significantly. A focus on English language was almost the only place one might note any mention of these students – not dissimilar to what was in place since the 80s.

Sectors and schools in many locations around Australia have shown increasing interest in creating systems for support for students from refugee backgrounds. There are some programs and practices of support specifically aimed at supporting students from refugee backgrounds,

There has been a significant amount of research focused on refugee education in Australia in recent years.¹⁰⁷ Although the research points to significant systemic and structural barriers for students from refugee backgrounds and the staff working with them in schools, there has been increasingly a focus on how students, families and staff in schools work to create positive educational experiences and opportunities.¹⁰⁸⁻¹¹⁰ However, the research also outlines the various challenges in this space, and a distinct lack of policy that addresses these students.¹¹¹

CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION POLICY

THE NATIONAL AGENDA

Australia's education reform that began as a goal from the late 90s has now become a standardised system that includes curriculum, national agreements, training and accreditation, a model for funding across Australia, and standardised testing.

The state and territory education departments and other schooling sectors have a strong history of independent policy frameworks. Primary responsibility for delivering education remains with these bodies. Policy development by staff working at the state/territory/sector level is still core to education systems.

National policies developed by distant policy actors may be done without in-depth knowledge of localised context. Local policy actors wrestle to meet the needs of schools, staff and students, and are now also required to work within the confines of the national framework. This process has created challenges where new misalignments form between what is required by the national policy and what is needed in local schools.¹¹²

Schools are increasingly driven by this national policy that shapes curriculum, funding structures and competition. At the same time, the devolution of responsibility to individual schools through this system means that they are also being held responsible, accountable, and put under pressure to provide inclusive, flexible teaching and learning, and wellbeing support.

Early hints that equity could be achieved through standardised systems, and particularly through funding via the SRS (detailed in the Gonski report of 2011) have fallen short. Marked inequity in funding and outcomes has increasingly become more stark,¹¹³ with under-resourced schools

servicing the most disadvantaged communities, and disadvantaged students facing increasingly slimmer odds of completing school, finding higher income employment over time, and intergenerational disadvantage.¹¹⁴

The rationale of increasing equity through standardisation has been bound up in market driven forces, conflating the ideal of equity with a focus on investment and human capital, productivity, competition and 'choice'.¹¹⁵ Rather than equity, it is opportunity that is highlighted, without adequate consideration of the ways that access to these 'opportunities' is bound up in a range of structural barriers beyond policy text, factors that influence what goes on beyond the school gate, but also infiltrating school cultures.¹¹⁶

Students from refugee backgrounds are impacted by these intersecting policy environments. At present, students are facing challenges in schools where staff feel under resourced and stretched trying to meet competing demands. In addition, the policy directives and accountability structures retain a focus on individualised responsibility of schools, whilst failing to address structural inequalities and broader barriers that students and families face, nor the impact of social attitudes and global events.¹¹⁶

National agreements. e.g. *Melbourne (2008)*, [Alice Springs \(Mparntwe\) Education Declaration \(2019\)](#) and associated [National Report on Schooling in Australia](#), new agreement due 2024.

National curriculum. [Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority \(ACARA\)](#)

National teaching training and accreditation standards. [Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership \(AITSL\)](#)

National standardised testing and reporting on schools. [National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy \(NAPLAN\)](#) testing, reported alongside other data at [Myschool](#).

National funding structure. Based on limited data, paid from the federal and state/territory governments: [Schooling Resource Standard](#) (SRS), initially detailed in 'the Gonski report'.¹

POLICY ALIGNMENT

MIGRATION AND EDUCATION POLICIES

The Australian population is highly diverse in terms of cultural, linguistic, and experiential backgrounds. Currently, more than half the population comprises migrants or children of migrants. Nearly a quarter of the population (23%) speaks a language other than English at home, including nearly 800,000 Australian-born children.¹¹⁷

Australia is a key contributor to humanitarian resettlement and in 2023 recorded the second highest number of refugees resettled or recognised in four decades, ranking third globally for the number of resettlement arrivals and second in terms of per capita.¹¹⁸ However, Australian education policy is almost completely devoid of any mention of students from refugee backgrounds.⁶²

In the absence of explicit policy, English language classes have become almost the only setting where education policy may outline the

needs of these students or provide detail around practices for support. This focus began in the 1970s and although there have been changes in how EALD is prioritised or governed, this approach to supporting students from refugee backgrounds is limited as it does not attend to multiple barriers that these students may face, as discussed further in below sections.

It is time for contemporary Australian education policy frameworks to be updated to align with present-day political and social change and student cohorts.^{18,119} Refugee education policy is needed to respond to individual students and their families, to meaningfully engage with cultural and linguistic diversity within schools, including for students from refugee backgrounds, and to contribute to broader humanitarian responsibilities in the region and globally.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Trends towards standardisation of education policy occurred alongside global trends for inclusive education. The imperative for schools and teachers to provide differentiated and inclusive supports began through a focus on inclusion of students with disabilities in their local school. This ideology has now broadened to all students, regardless of students' backgrounds, identities, or capabilities. Inclusive education is now a ubiquitous term in policy, and pedagogies for differentiation have proliferated.^{120,121}

Teachers and school staff may be keen to promote multicultural inclusion, but policy and practice are highly variable and dependent on school context;¹²²⁻¹²⁴ notions of assimilation and cultural dominance are often still at play.^{81,125-127} Recognition of different expressions of cultural capital is hampered by the power inherent in majority culture or challenges associated with discrimination.¹²⁸⁻¹³⁰

Slee (2013) noted that progress towards inclusion, though tentatively positive, is hampered by entrenched systems of power to exclude. There can be unintended impacts of policies for inclusion that, due to complex power relations, funding structures and ideologies, in many ways translate into exclusion. For example, students allocated to separate classes for 'inclusive' education, are in reality excluded from other classrooms. Negative stereotyping of students allocated to separate classes impacts attitudes of peers and staff, and being located separately can limit opportunity for social connections and mutual cross-cultural learning.

Further tension exists between international policy trends emphasising inclusive education, and the reality of day-to-day school life for teachers and students. Staff are expected to provide flexible assessments and differentiated curricula, whilst also meeting the stringent requirements of standardised systems and testing.

AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

Students from refugee backgrounds may have experienced significant barriers to education prior to their engagement with Australian schools as well as significant barriers and challenges within Australia.

However, it is critical to recognise the strengths and capabilities that students draw on to engage with education and work towards aspirations for themselves and their families.^{70,111} People resettling after refugee experiences develop a sense of identity and belonging within and across complex cross-cultural networks. Students from refugee backgrounds may have significant linguistic repertoires, act as liaisons for themselves and their families, and have highly developed and nuanced skills in navigating complex systems and social networks.

Finding a balance between recognising students' strengths and capabilities, whilst also acknowledging challenges and responding to their needs, is critical.

Crucially, students have strengths to build from, with the right supports. Schools can be a critical location for staff to provide resources, or to help students access resources, to facilitate and enable students to work towards aspirations. In schools, and in the broader society, services for support must aim to reduce barriers and increase access to resources for people from refugee backgrounds whilst also recognising positive aspects of refugee-ness rather than only a deficit view.^{131,132}



REFUGEE MIGRATION EXPERIENCES

Many former refugees have experienced a range of pre-settlement stressors, such as deprivation or trauma during refugee flight or in protracted refugee circumstances.¹³³ Post-settlement experiences are also crucially important, such as access of services, experiences of social in/exclusion, or fulfillment of daily needs like employment or housing.¹³⁴ Access to services in combination with welcoming and supportive settlement policies is crucial, including policies that attend to the needs of children, families and people seeking asylum as well as those with permanent residency or citizenship.^{56,135-138} Interruptions or barriers to education can additionally impact engagement with school or learning in settlement for children and young people.³⁷

The complexities of both pre- and post-migration experiences are interconnected and affect engagement with education in Australia.¹³⁹

PRE-SETTLEMENT

The experience of being a refugee varies for each individual, and their personal identity in relation to being a refugee or not is constantly and individually evolving even if the label of 'refugee' may be employed by others.^{140,141} Some individuals may find their refugee journey to be a defining feature of their identity.¹³³ Others may have only experienced relative stability, being born and raised in a refugee camp^{142,143} or in urban environments with limited rights¹⁴⁴ where communities have worked with agency to build networks and to live a connected life.¹⁴⁵ These protracted refugee experiences can affect subsequent experience of resettlement in places like Australia.¹⁴⁶

Students from refugee backgrounds may have experienced a range of educational contexts before arriving in a resettlement country like Australia. Students may arrive in resettlement locations with a history of continuous education, whilst others may have had missed periods of study due to barriers to education in previous homes.¹⁴⁷ Students who arrive with limited education may encounter challenges

adjusting to Australian schools in terms of expectations and styles of teaching and learning.^{58,78,148-152} In addition, students may arrive in Australia with limited literacy in English or other languages which means they face a steep learning curve, and although students meet this challenge it can be both difficult in itself and also exacerbated if they are placed in classes with age matched peers.^{63,122,150,153-159}

POST-MIGRATION

Ongoing post-migration challenges have been highlighted by a wide literature.¹⁹ These include: effects of discrimination and racism on social inclusion;^{80,160,161} challenges in gaining employment;^{35,162-167} learning a new language;^{147,161,168,169} or, accessing key services and daily needs like housing or health care.^{49,170,171} Although these challenges affect all people from refugee backgrounds, for young people and children there are additional challenges to face as they move through key developmental stages whilst also attending to these challenges.

Over time, it has been noted that resettled refugees contribute significantly to their new home society in terms of the economy¹⁷² and through developing relationships and social connection.¹⁷³ Even so, there are also challenges to resettlement such as discrimination that affect employment prospects,¹⁶⁴ social inclusion and integration.¹⁶¹

Diverse experiences of forced displacement

- Urban - rural - camp - detention
- Acute or long-term experiences
- Refugee flight or born in exile
- Different access to nutrition, healthcare, injury, trauma
- Singular or multiple migration journeys with intermittent safety
- Separated from family or travelled together

Diverse education experiences

- Missing or interrupted schooling
- Multilingual schooling, varied curriculum

AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

TRANSITION POINTS

Transition points are key risk points for students from refugee backgrounds. This can include arrival in school for the first time, transitions between schools or on from school to further education or employment.^{148,149,174-178}

ENTERING AUSTRALIAN SCHOOL

As detailed earlier, school age students who arrive in Australia as part of the resettlement program are most often initially enrolled in a specialist English language program or school which is funded partially through the humanitarian program as an extension to the usual government funded education systems.

Access to these programs or schools may be limited for students who arrive in Australia via non-humanitarian visa types and who are also fluent in English, and for those settling in rural or regional areas where there is less availability of specialised programs.^{58,59}

MOVING SCHOOLS

Transitions from specialist schools and programs to local schools can be a key point of challenge for students.¹⁷⁹ The specialised and expert knowledge and skill of staff working in initial schools, combined with planning specifically designed to mesh with the needs of a student settling in to life in Australia, is often in stark contrast to what students encounter in a local school. In local schools, many staff may have no specialised training to work with English language learners or students from refugee backgrounds, or may feel overwhelmed by the range of learners in their classrooms and that it is impossible to meet the needs of all.¹⁸⁰

Students may feel well supported at specialist schools and experience some shock as they enter local schools and classrooms, where they may have less support whilst facing increased challenges.

Sharing of information between schools is not standard practice, and schools may not know whether students have had refugee experiences when they enrol, particularly if enrolment is not during the initial years of settlement.

Australian schooling

Early stages

- specialist programs/schools (if available)
- settlement services
- rural vs metro vs state/territory

Transition between schools

- English language learning (for many)
- expectations in Australian schools

Understanding new systems

- for school-based education
- educational pathways

Evolving migration trends mean there are both established and emerging communities.

- impacts school practices, staff knowledge
- impacts how communities are placed to provide advice and support

TRANSITION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

There are barriers to and through higher education for refugees and asylum seekers in Australia. This is for young people on temporary visas as well as those with permanent residency or citizenship. The factors influencing engagement with tertiary study are complex – even more so with the advent of COVID-19.^{181,182} Barriers include issues such as missing or interrupted schooling, visa complications that place financial and mental health burden on students, inadequate data collection and reporting mechanisms to improve support from higher education institutions, racism, and language barriers.^{77,183} Research has queried how high aspirations intersect with barriers and facilitators to education both at school, in vocational training and in tertiary settings.¹⁸³⁻¹⁸⁵

Relationships between students and staff can provide better mutual understanding and support for students to feel a sense of belonging and to work towards their aspirations.¹⁸⁶⁻¹⁸⁸

AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

LITERACY AND LANGUAGE

English language has been noted as an important factor that enables access to education. However, other foci have also been highlighted as important facilitators of engagement, such as building on students' prior knowledge or will to learn and be engaged.^{108,111} A focus on English language in isolation can mean that low English language proficiency may mask other challenges¹⁸⁹ and a community approach to inclusion that works to build belonging whilst also developing students' English proficiency is needed.¹⁹⁰ English language continues to be a focus for intervention, and it is consistently noted as a key barrier to education,¹⁸² even though the broader experiences of belonging continue to be highlighted as vital.¹⁹¹⁻¹⁹³

Even so, many students from refugee backgrounds entering Australian schools are learning English for the first time, or are

progressing earlier learning, with EALD. EALD and English language more generally is therefore a key focus for education with students from refugee backgrounds in Australian schools.

ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE OR DIALECT (EALD)

This focus begins when students arrive in Australia and are placed in specialised English language schools or classes. Students have reported positive overall experiences in programs and schools providing specialised supports,¹⁹⁴ however, once they transition away from the specialised programs they may encounter more varied support which is not always suitable.¹⁴⁹ Of note, specialised programs of support may be less available for students in regional areas.¹²³



AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

In each state and territory, sectors, and in individual schools, policies around EALD are developed and implemented differently. Earlier centralised government policy around EALD has now devolved to a decentralised approach that ostensibly enables flexibility within schools to enact effective practices within their local context. These constantly shifting priorities around language learning in Australia has led at times to an accumulation of expertise and clear policy, and at other times to a fragmentation leading to ad-hoc support.¹⁰⁵ This is made more complex by the evolving nature of migration to Australia alongside prioritisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education, and the profile of an 'EALD student' is unique to each student.

Recent policy trends to subsume specialist supports, including EALD, within broader, catch-all policy frameworks, such as policy for 'inclusion' or 'wellbeing', has further contributed to ad-hoc arrangements.¹⁹⁵ The process of resorbing specialist EALD teaching and learning into the broader remit of 'all staff' for 'all students' fails to recognise the importance of specialised practices. Without this recognition, supports across different socio-economic or geographical contexts can vary significantly and students from refugee backgrounds may not get adequate or effective support.¹⁹⁶

In the absence of refugee or migrant specific policies, EALD policies and practices are central to schooling experiences of students from refugee and migrant backgrounds. In practice, this means that students receive supports in an ad-hoc way, depending on their school and the relative expertise of teachers.

EALD: A DIAGNOSIS OF DEFICIT?

This singular emphasis on English language and literacy can contribute to deficit views of students.^{60,78} Although English proficiency is one crucial element of life in Australia, other kinds of learning regarding broader social, cultural and educational outcomes that students encounter and engage with in school are also important.¹⁹² The singular focus on English

language can detract from recognition of students' strengths and skills which is of key importance when young people are developing a broader sense of identity, belonging and achievement.^{78,197,198}

School staff may not have in-depth knowledge of the experiences, strengths and capabilities of students from refugee backgrounds; in some cases this can lead to assumptions of deficit rather than having a positive view of multilingual strengths.^{62,78,193} Teachers may have low expectations for school achievement and potential future pathways on from school.^{122,150,199}

Although some teachers draw on students' multilingual skills and encourage translanguaging practices to facilitate learning and social connections, others resist these practices and actively promote monolingual (English) classrooms.²⁰⁰

EALD STAFF ARE EXPERTS

Students often benefit from specialised EALD supports to develop English language and literacy skills; although some young people from refugee backgrounds arrive in Australia as literate English speakers, many arrive with little or no oral or written English skills, or, for some, no literacy in their spoken language/s.^{63,156} There is still a need for development of specific approaches for students from refugee backgrounds.⁶⁵ Specific approaches might draw on students multilingual skills, oral as well as written, for example. Adolescent learners of English have particularly been highlighted as in need of better resources that suit an adolescent learner, such as specialist dictionaries or glossaries suited to senior school subjects²⁰¹, rather than having to use resources aimed at children.^{58,152,157}

Furthermore, EALD environments often become spaces for belonging and connection within which students might connect with peers with shared but unique experiences of migration, and where specialist staff may be more likely to recognise and understand the strengths of multilingualism.²⁰²

AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

RELATIONSHIPS, BELONGING AND IDENTITY

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Students from refugee backgrounds are in contact with Australian systems (i.e., the education system) more frequently than parents and caregivers and engage with English language learning and use daily at school. This can mean that they adapt to Australian cultural and linguistic norms more quickly than their parents or caregivers. As a result, students may end up with responsibilities to act as interpreters or intermediaries for older family members, and older family members may feel that they cannot support their children in terms of academic work^{203,204}. This can cause a role reversal or role confusion to occur between younger and older family members in terms of responsibility and decision making, potentially causing stress or conflict within families,^{85,204-207} an issue that can be exacerbated by other intersecting factors such as unemployment, discrimination or negative perceptions from the wider Australian community^{178,207}. Young people may also develop nuanced cultural values and practices that may differ from older family members over time, with potential to cause intergenerational conflict.

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Access to technology provides global connections which may support positive feelings of belonging in multiple communities²⁰⁸ whilst simultaneously adding to complexities of worry for and memories of people left behind.^{209,210} Students' level of identification with or sense of belonging in previous homes plays a key role in settlement experiences.²¹¹

Feelings of belonging are also impacted by experiences of racism or discrimination, particularly in light of the racialized history and present-day society in Australia, and the ways in which refugees and asylum seekers are represented in the media and associated government responses.^{80,212,213} Schools can be challenging racialized spaces that students from refugee backgrounds must navigate.^{83,214}

BELONGING IN BROADER SOCIETY

Outcomes of resettlement for newcomers and receiving societies depend on the ways in which resettlement countries can offer welcome and ongoing inclusion facilitating a sense of belonging. Experiences of inclusion or exclusion may depend on people's connections to community and access to opportunities or services.^{146,147} A sense of belonging may involve not only connections with a new home, but the ways in which these connections overlap and interconnect with family and friends left in other places.²¹⁵ It is important to recognise broad systemic oppression or support (in country, in exile and in resettlement) in combination with personal experiences of resilience or belonging.²¹⁶



Photo by [Muzafar Ali](#)

RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION

Negative impacts of racism and discrimination on educational experiences and trajectories of young people from refugee backgrounds cannot be understated. Racist and discriminatory attitudes affect young people's wellbeing, feelings of belonging, social inclusion, educational engagement, and opportunities.^{58,80,92,217}

Although Australia is now widely perceived as successfully multicultural in demography and policy, colonial racialised histories continue to affect the ways in which people are treated.²¹⁸⁻²²⁰ Inclusion may be possible but cannot be assumed as an automatic process. Both tacit and explicit racism continue to play a role in the design of systems, and relationships that reinforce or reproduce inequalities.^{61,80,82,83,160,183,205,221} Schools and teachers may strive to be inclusive and supportive of students' cultural beliefs and practices, but ultimately the power inherent in the majority culture¹²⁹ or challenges associated with implementing inclusive practice¹³⁰ may make this difficult to achieve. Students may face low expectations and deficit views of educators, and exclusion or marginalisation from peers.

MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

Representations of refugees as at risk or as troubled 'others' can perpetuate challenges in resettlement contexts where they work hard to build promising futures for themselves.¹⁶⁸ Negative media attention that clearly highlights refugee-ness as a category for exclusion²¹² feeds into policy norms where students from refugee backgrounds and from non-refugee migration backgrounds are considered to be a homogenous cohort.^{217,222,223} Exclusionary attitudes portrayed in the media, combined with implementation of punitive and restrictive migration regulations, play a significant role in marginalising practices that impact students from refugee backgrounds in schools.

Research has noted the effect of attitudes and actions of members of a society towards minority individuals or groups^{224,225} which can contribute to a framing of who *doesn't* belong according to majority norms.²²⁶

Growing up in a complex world

A sense of belonging

- rights and responsibilities
- racism and discrimination
- friendships, relationships
- connection through community, faith, sport

Developmental change

- childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood
- bicultural identity

The global context

- transnationalism and diasporic belonging
- social media
- global events and local actions

Home life

- support from family *and* for family; separation from family, grief and loss, remittances

Cultural change

- different ways of doing things - language and culture; navigating different cultural expectations and environments; community connections

Learning new systems

- accessing services e.g. health: understanding Australian systems

Expectations

- navigating the different expectations from friends and family, changes in responsibility; gender-based expectations; aspirations

Everyday stressors

- finances, employment, housing

SCHOOL PRACTICES

SCHOOL CULTURE AND STAFFING

SCHOOL CONTEXT

An inclusive school culture can be supported by recognition of power imbalances and working to help students feel that they belong.^{122,227,228} Staff and students together can build shared values of respect^{58,156,229} under focused leadership that shares these goals.^{229,230} A warm and inclusive school culture assists academic engagement and improves belonging for students from refugee backgrounds.^{154,231} Schools can also build connections with families and external service providers to extend support networks and for information sharing and mutual learning.^{232,233}

However, Australian schools often require that students adapt to the school environment and expectations without explicit guidance or support.^{198,232}

STAFFING

Attitudes and expectations of school staff in multicultural classrooms can impact student experiences.^{78,154,155,176,234} Teachers may struggle to balance competing priorities of subject specific curriculum, English language learning, and supporting social connection.¹⁸⁰ Schools build capacity by connecting with families, communities and individual students.²³⁵ Not only is this a link for students and families to connect to external supports, but teachers can use the opportunity to learn from and with families and bring a culturally diverse curriculum into daily work.²³⁶ This practice can contribute to broader intercultural learning.^{198,237}

The cultural and linguistic background of Australian teaching staff does not reflect that of the general Australian population, as in many resettlement countries.²³⁸ This is particularly remarkable in places such as the United States and the United Kingdom where high levels of immigration for decades has now seen the emergence of superdiverse societies.^{239,240} Teachers often feel that they do not have the skills necessary to support students from a range of diverse migration backgrounds, and that they are not well supported by systems to do so.²⁴¹

CONNECTING THROUGH EALD

A major point of connection for students from refugee backgrounds in schools is within EALD spaces. There are benefits to these connections, such as social connection with other students from refugee or migrant backgrounds as well as support for students to access EALD teachers and bilingual staff.⁷³ Bilingual staff employed to work with students from refugee backgrounds have particularly been noted as providing crucial supports and points for connection to other support structures.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Students from refugee backgrounds have a wide range of skills and experiences and may face structural and systemic barriers that affect engagement with schooling. However, professional development regarding this work is often absent or minimal and increasingly missing from Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Combined with policy absences, staff work mostly in an ad-hoc manner to provide the supports they can. Staff may have little understanding of barriers to education for refugee backgrounds students pre-migration²⁴² or responsibilities that many students have post-migration.²³⁰

Research has consistently noted that there is a need for ITE that includes an increased focus on culture and language. This includes in terms of: training to work with students learning English for the first time or EALD; designing assessments that connect to students' cultural and linguistic knowledge and skills; working to promote multicultural respect and recognition; and to support respectful intercultural communication and understanding.^{200,243,244} A recent review of the international literature showed that teachers frequently have negative views towards working with students from migrant backgrounds and there is a need to support pre-service teachers to develop empathy and understanding of these learners.²⁴⁵ Training for pre-service and in-service teachers and school staff is critical, but not frequently available.^{81,152,155,157,234,243}

BROADER SYSTEMIC ISSUES

STANDARDISED SYSTEMS

Resources for teaching and learning continues to be an issue within schools, with complex systems for accessing additional, meagre funding, alongside the 'crowded curriculum, testing regimes and an audit culture of performance management'.²⁴⁶ Moreover, new policy problems have been created. Teaching to the test impacts the focus of teaching and learning, and there are issues with the ways that data are analysed and presented that can mislead and misrepresent trends, for example when students from refugee backgrounds' results are made invisible within the data through a lack of relevant data collected.²⁴⁷

These issues are well known across Australia but have particular impact on students from refugee backgrounds.

REINFORCEMENT OF CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC HIERARCHIES

In forming new policy agendas and developing the text and scope of such policies, including for education, it is important to be cognisant of risks associated with drawing on concepts like integration, assimilation and multiculturalism. Direct and indirect impacts of the use of these terms has historically contributed to marginalisation of people from refugee backgrounds and runs the risk of perpetuating negative stereotypes and discourses.²⁴⁸ Attitudes and actions in the general public are deeply impacted by the ways in which notions

of nationalism, pluralism, multiculturalism or integration flow from policy into practical experiences and perceptions.²⁴⁹ Development of education policy must be done with these challenges in mind, with wariness of creating dichotomous notions of 'us' and 'them', or the 'other'.^{250,251}

Data currently used to inform funding and to understand schooling dynamics are fraught with problems of cultural and linguistic hegemony, they fail to capture the full range of knowledge and skills that students may possess, and the underlying challenges can remain hidden. Test scores do not capture experiences of racism or discrimination that are crucially important for students from refugee backgrounds. They do not capture the slow and steady impact of low expectations and deficit views that students may face.

VISA AND MIGRATION REGULATIONS

Most students from refugee backgrounds continue to have interactions with international and national policies and laws. This can include ongoing issues regarding temporary or permanent visa status of loved ones, and related barriers to family reunion or security, ongoing social connections to people living in other countries and worries for safety of loved ones or simply missing people, and often drawn-out processes to attempting to reunite family and ongoing responsibilities to send remittances.



Photo by Muzafar Ali

REFUGEE EDUCATION POLICY POTENTIAL

Photo by [Muzafar Ali](#)



MOTIVATION FOR CHANGE

Australia has a culturally and linguistically diverse society, in many schools the term superdiverse is more accurate.^{252,253} Global migration is a central element of the modern world. The challenge both in Australia, and globally over the coming years is to find a way to live together that engages with dialogues of respect, safety and learning. Education systems can work in concert and collaboration with other systems including across government and services, as well as in the community, to contribute to systems that promote intercultural respect and dialogue.

Within this broader remit, there is an urgent and critical need for better systems of support from a range of sectors (for example, for housing, health care, employment), to support children and young people. School is a central element of daily life for children and young people and can play a critical role in linking up systems of support as well as providing supports directly for students from refugee backgrounds in schools.

For many people who migrate, this is a choice to face the challenges of building a new sense of home and accessing rights that continue to be thwarted by complex migration regulations. However, for refugees it is a forced push from home, and a move towards safety and security.

Forced displacement continues to grow, with many millions of people displaced each year, with children disproportionately represented in refugee populations. Children under the age of 18 comprise around 40% of the refugee population, compared to children making up around 30% of the broader global population.⁹ During and after refugee flight, in countries of refuge, asylum, or resettlement, education is key to supporting children and young people to build safe futures as they grow, for themselves and their families, and schools can play a central role in connecting children and families with services and social networks during settlement.

POLICY POTENTIAL

Research has noted continuing policy trends in social and immigration policy, and a lack of explicit policy or clear mapping of possible practices to support refugee background students in Australian schools.^{59,61} However, researchers and policy makers working in the education field are working to remedy this lack.^{254,255}

Education policy development must begin with a goal to recognise and build on students' strengths and cultural wealth, to attend to structural and systemic barriers faced by

students. Education policy can connect up with other policy silos such as immigration or multicultural affairs and connect with a range of services to provide interconnected supports for children and young people during settlement. School staff can also 'build educational learning communities' with families by respectful communication and sharing that is open to different perspectives and ways of doing things, rather than relying on longstanding practices based on historical narratives and hegemonies.^{70,122,126,256}

POLICY PROBLEMS

HOW ARE EDUCATION POLICY PROBLEMS REPRESENTED?

Policies can often be presented as responses to problems; the problem is identified, and the policy responds. However, policies themselves influence behaviours and systems and therefore policies are also creators of, or contributors to problems. How the ‘problem’ is represented is critical, as Bacchi (2009) noted,

‘the way in which the ‘problem’ is represented carries all sorts of implications for how the issue is thought about and for how the people involved are treated, and are evoked to think about themselves’.^{101(p1)}

This point is crucial when considering the development of policies to support students from refugee backgrounds in schools.

Policy development must be conducted with careful consideration of underlying assumptions about how a ‘problem’ is identified, what might be silenced by or absent from the conversation, and what might be some alternative framings of the problem/s.

Rather than only considering students from refugee backgrounds through discourses of ‘difference and deficit’,^{257(p161)} it is time to identify ‘resources for inclusion’ by working together with families and communities.²⁵⁶

Framing the policy problem carefully is important. It is critical that the policy problems are represented as systemic and structural issues, rather than placing the problem at the individual level.

IDENTIFYING THE POLICY PROBLEM/S

BROAD, CATCH-ALL POLICIES DON’T MEET SPECIFIC NEEDS

The tendency towards neo-liberal governance has led ideals of multiculturalism and broad ‘inclusion’ to be ubiquitous in education policy, with a lack of explicit frameworks for ensuring that rhetoric is supported in practice.²⁵⁸ Tying of notions of multiculturalism to nationhood and

rhetoric of celebrating cultural diversity, has influenced essentialising and stereotyping of cultures and peoples. ‘Diversity’ is only understood against a backdrop of cultural homogeneity.

In addition, definitions of what constitutes inclusion are influenced by neoliberal understandings, where inclusion is muddled by policy text that links it to acquisition of ‘skills’

that ultimately contribute to ‘productivity’.²⁵⁷

This conceptualising has led to development of education policies designed to improve access or ‘opportunity’ rather than striving to understand, respond to or alter the social and structural inequalities that feed into all systems, including schooling, thereby entrenching inequities.²⁵⁹ Although stemming from positive intentions, these trends collectively have led to creation of broad, catch-all education policies that can leave inclusion ‘everywhere and nowhere’ for students from refugee backgrounds.¹⁹⁵

Photo by Muzafar Ali



AN OVERALL LACK OF POLICY AND DATA

Research regarding the refugee resettlement experience in Australia has proliferated in recent years.²⁶⁰ Researchers consistently note the absence of Australian refugee education policies for schools and tertiary education, and a lack of data around these students.^{59,62,77} In this absence, policy makers and school staff consider students from refugee backgrounds as nested within larger cohorts, such as students with EALD, and increasingly this category is again nested within either inclusion or multicultural/cultural diversity frameworks.^{59,62,123} This nesting of needs within multiple layers obfuscates students' experiences and needs.

FOCUS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE: TOO MUCH AND NOT ENOUGH

A key positive outcome of the EALD space being, by default, the 'refugee' space is that staff and students have opportunities to develop relationships and students can find this a source of support. EALD staff often become relative experts and not only help students with regard to EALD or wellbeing, but they also support the broader staff body to understand the experiences and needs of students from refugee backgrounds.

However, the focus on English language learning as a policy response for students from refugee backgrounds is problematic on multiple levels.

Firstly, this focus leaves out students who are fluent in English (and may have been prior to arrival in Australia). Secondly, EALD teachers become the go-to for students from refugee backgrounds, including for other teachers who may think that it is not their responsibility to provide inclusive supports as the EALD staff will do it.¹⁹³ In addition, EALD as a specialist teaching area and policy priority has experienced significant devolution over the last two decades. Increasingly there is expectation

that all teachers should attend to EALD teaching and learning needs. This approach has reduced recognition of the specialised skills and knowledge of EALD teaching specialists. Funding for EALD is limited; in a recent report, the [National roadmap for EALD Education in School](#), notes that loadings for English language proficiency are '*inadequate, inequitable and tokenistic.*' Though EALD staff, including teachers and bilingual school support staff, provide a wide range of supports, there may not be leadership positions or adequate allocation of time. In the case of bilingual support staff, often their roles are highly insecure and part time or casual. Finally, in schools with no EALD experts, for example in regional areas, students may not get specialist EALD support, nor the (frequently less recognised or measurable) support for wellbeing, belonging, or connection to services.

The de-prioritisation of EALD as a specialist area has led to reduction or disappearance of EALD content in initial teacher education programs, and reductions in directed funding for EALD priority cohorts in schools. Funding that is directly linked to EALD through the government funding criteria can be redirected to a range of programs as decided by education sectors or schools. This flexibility to attend to local context is important, however, this approach can also make invisible the experiences and needs of students from refugee backgrounds.

Students learning English for the first time may be well supported during initial years by specialist teachers, and other students may attend a school with no EALD specialist classes and no teachers with expertise in EALD pedagogies. In addition, students from refugee backgrounds can remain hidden within the broader EALD cohort comprising students from refugee backgrounds, non-refugee migration backgrounds, and Australian-born students who speak a language other than English at home with family, including Indigenous students.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES VARY ACROSS SCHOOLS AND LOCATIONS

It is an interesting conundrum that students from refugee backgrounds can have highly variable experiences depending on exactly which school they attend and where, even though the national reform agenda intended to create more equal arrangements across schools and contexts. Funding structures in 2024 were seeded decades ago with the rationale of more equal distribution of government monies to support all children. Wealthier schools may now have more resources to support students from refugee backgrounds, but increasingly the least well-funded schools have the greatest numbers of these students. Schools with larger and longer term cohorts of students from diverse migration backgrounds, including from refugee backgrounds, may approach teaching, learning and inclusion very differently compared to a school with few students, but better resourcing.⁶⁹

Funding structures limit what is possible for school staff in practice within the context of broader socioeconomic disparities between schools and locations.^{194,261-263} Although changes to funding allocations and flexibility within those allocations could provide opportunity for improved inclusive practice to develop, there is still room for growth in funding that could cater to students through additional direct supports via staff, development of and access to better resources, and professional development for staff working with students.^{148,152,157,229,231,264,265}

PRACTICES OF EXCLUSION AND LACK OF BELONGING

Nationalised systems have increased responsibilities whilst failing to adequately fund schools in proportion to need. The sense of belonging across school students with disadvantaged socio-economic status has significantly dropped in recent years: from 84% in 2003 to 65% in 2015.²⁶⁶

Students from refugee backgrounds may face considerable barriers and challenges above and

beyond that of peers. There are multiple layers of systemic disadvantage, linked to lower academic and wellbeing outcomes, and students are more likely to be attending disadvantaged schools.²⁶⁶ With larger proportions of students with diverse experiences and needs attending the most disadvantaged schools, teachers and school staff increasingly lean of practices of exclusion.¹²⁰ This can mean exclusion to separate learning areas, for example as has been detailed herein with the EALD space, or school exclusion or suspensions.

Even when students are attending their local school in mainstream classes, exclusion is further reinforced through marginalising practices and behaviours of both staff and students. For example, students from refugee backgrounds may be excluded from social activities by peers, teachers may have low expectations and may not provide effective supports for students, curriculum may be focused on cultural and historical perspectives that centre British colonial narratives, or experiences of active discrimination and racism may be initiated by both students and staff.^{80,83,205}

STRUCTURES OF MARGINALISATION AND DISADVANTAGE

It is not sufficient to attend only to expansion and access to education without also improving education quality. Social mobility is dependent on education, and these effects stem from early and ongoing inequitable experiences in Australian schools; in order to support equity some argue that it is necessary that disadvantaged students benefit '*as much or more than advantaged students*'.²⁶⁶ Achieving equity may in some cases require unequal provision of supports through contextually designed and implemented policies. However, there remain questions around how to achieve broadscale equity when the contexts of schools are so different, including their student cohorts, local social contexts and funding.²⁶⁷

In Australia, there is a direct link between literacy levels in high school and potential to be neither employed nor in education or training (NEET) at age 25. There is a significantly higher likelihood that young people who migrated to Australia are NEET at this age²⁶⁶. These findings are striking and can be considered as a low estimate for young people from refugee backgrounds who are subsumed within a larger group of peers from non-refugee migrant backgrounds in the data²⁴⁷. Considering the links between being NEET at age 25, lower literacy in high school, and being from a migrant background, these trends indicate a critical need for additional supports for students from refugee backgrounds.

National multicultural policies and attitudes can have a flow on effect for how intercultural spaces evolve, including within schools. There is a critical need for education that explicitly advocates for and teaches concepts of human rights and that enables young people to learn to live together in culturally and linguistically diverse, or superdiverse, societies.^{252,268} Both in schools, and in the broader multicultural society, it is important to find a balance between a shared set of values (human rights) and distinct sets of values (core values) that people may hold due to their own cultural, linguistic and experiential background.^{269,270}

Policy to address discrimination in schools is of critical importance to children and young people, impacting their educational learning as well as access to educational pathways. Discrimination reduction through anti-discrimination policies and practices is a key focus of governments and institutions around the world, including within global agreements for education.¹²⁸

LACK OF QUALITY DATA

Research has shown that understanding the impact of refugee migration experiences on students is hampered by lack of data.²⁴⁷ Students from refugee backgrounds are made invisible within the data as there are no reliably accurate mechanisms by which to identify these students. As a result, in practice, they are often conceptualised as a cohort within broader

categories, notably as EALD students. In policy contexts, students from refugee backgrounds are rarely identified as an equity cohort, and where the term ‘refugee’ is mentioned, it often falls within broader umbrella policies for inclusion (for example in Queensland government schools), multicultural or cultural diversity policies (for example in New South Wales), or EALD (for example, in South Australia).^{62,69}

Data are critical to understanding the movements, experiences and challenges of children who have been forcibly displaced.²⁰ However, in Australian education systems, students with refugee backgrounds can become invisible in the data as most are considered as domestic students (although not those with temporary status).⁷⁷ The data collected around languages spoken at home is often the only way that students from refugee backgrounds may be identified, however, this is a fraught process. Students from non-refugee migration backgrounds and refugee backgrounds may have differing experiences at home and at school, as well as a wide range of pre- and post-migration strengths or challenges that impact educational outcomes; consideration of this group as monolithic can hide trends for specific identity cohorts.²⁴⁷

MIGRATION REGULATIONS, ENTITLEMENTS AND BARRIERS

Schools may not understand the various migration regulations and restrictions that have a lasting and in many cases ongoing impact on students from refugee backgrounds.

Students may have arrived in a school via highly diverse education and migration pathways. They may have spent a relatively brief time in a refugee camp or in urban towns and cities; some may have been born and raised in exile with no direct experiences of initial flight, whereas other students may have had very recent experiences of conflict and trauma. Students may be holders of temporary or permanent visas, or even citizenship of Australia, and family members may be separated by visa restrictions and immigration rules.

POLICY PROBLEMS

These are complex and ever-changing migration systems and migration patterns. It may not be realistic to expect all staff to understand these complexities. However, it is important to recognise that schools may not be aware of this as a policy problem. Indeed, some schools and staff may not be aware that there is any need to know this information, nor even that there is any information missing from their picture of students' lives.

Students seeking asylum in Australia may have temporary visas which significantly influence post-school options. Visas may not allow engagement in paid work or preclude access to government loans for tertiary study. Thus, these restrictions may mean students need support from school staff to plan carefully for the possible futures they have available. For example, some universities have scholarships which are particularly critical for those who are seeking asylum and thus considered as international students.

Students with permanent visas may have additional entitlements that schools are not aware of. For example, if a student arrives at a school without first entering a specialist school or program, they may still be eligible for funding support through the resettlement scheme.

COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES IS LIMITED

Social inclusion and supports, at school, in community and through family and friendship networks, are a key element of integration and can affect engagement with education and a sense of belonging.²⁷¹⁻²⁷³ However, opportunities for building wellbeing and belonging through connections between school and home require additional attention in schools.^{274,275} Connection to services outside of school can also assist students directly (for example, providing mental health support) and indirectly through providing links to support for families and by sharing information and learning between service providers and school staff to improve understanding of students' skills and needs.^{229,233,276} The role of community connections for supporting young people's

education is also critical, for example through links with faith based communities or through sport.^{277,278}

School practices to link up with families and communities, for example the [Community Hubs system](#), can help provide environments that support students in a range of ways. This includes opportunities for families to feel connected with school, for shared networks that support students, and enabling staff to learn from families.^{85,229,279-281}

Although bilingual staff in schools play a critical role in home-school bidirectional communication, these staff are not employed by all schools, nor are their roles secure.⁷³

INADEQUATE TRAINING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Policy currently homogenises and conflates students from refugee backgrounds with other minority groups.^{59,60,122,123,282} For example, they are often positioned as English language learners, alongside migrant peers without refugee experiences, Australian born peers who speak a language other than English at home, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Not only do students from refugee backgrounds become invisible within that group, but those who are fluent in English are automatically excluded in the first instance.

These homogenising policies have contributed to a lack of understanding of the needs and strengths of students from heterogeneous refugee backgrounds. Staff have insufficient training, knowledge, resourcing and support in relation to students from refugee backgrounds. Attention to these challenges and effective practices to support students is needed in courses for initial teacher education.²⁸³ Teacher training and professional development needs to include a focus on working with students from refugee backgrounds, supporting belonging, addressing racism and discrimination, practices for teaching and learning EALD, and trauma informed practice.^{284,285}

RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION ARE OF CRITICAL CONCERN

Racism and discrimination are a major issue for students from refugee backgrounds. These experiences range from explicit name calling or exclusion from social activities, to more subtle but equally as impactful stereotyping, negative expectations, feeling seen only through a lens of race, rather than being recognised as a whole person with complex perspectives, experiences and skills.^{80,81,83,205,213,219,255,286-292} Deficit views may focus on students' potential to have experienced trauma or loss, or their lack of English proficiency, for example, which detracts from recognition of their diverse skills, experiences, and capacities.^{58,60,78,122,205} Racism and discrimination contribute to the development of deficit views, in turn both indirectly and directly impacting students' sense of identity and belonging and their educational experiences.^{81,82,150,160,205,213,288,293}

INADEQUATE SUPPORT DURING TRANSITIONS

Career planning and support for aspirations is critical. Students from refugee backgrounds can be supported by sharing of information about education and employment pathways, with a focus on capacity recognition and building rather than taking a deficit approach.^{70,294}

Students may also benefit from additional supports during transitions, particularly from specialist schools and programs and into a local school and classes. Some students may be well supported through transitions, from first entry to Australian school, between schools, between EALD classrooms and specialist schools and into classes and schools with the broader student population. However, others arrive in schools that were not prepared for them, have little expertise in supporting students from refugee backgrounds, and do not understand the basic supports available through the resettlement program.

For students transitioning from school to higher education, there is growing advocacy for universities to provide scholarships for students from refugee backgrounds more generally, and particularly for asylum seeking students. However, accessing scholarships requires in-depth knowledge of where they are available, and how to navigate application processes, plus they are highly competitive and relatively scarce compared to need. The constantly changing visas and associated restrictions in Australia affect what is possible, and school staff likely have little understanding of these complexities.



Photo by [Muzafar Ali](#)

THE RIGHT KINDS OF DATA

WHAT COUNTS?

It is critical that data are collected that capture a range of factors that may impact education for students from refugee backgrounds. Without these data, students with intersecting experiences and identities, particularly those with multiple layers of disadvantage, are hidden within the larger population.^{247,295}

Within the ‘policy as numbers’²⁹⁵ systems, data analysis is a significant decision making tool. At present there is no uniform nor reliable that schools and sectors around Australia identify students from refugee backgrounds. It is important that more reliable variables are included, to bring the experiences of students from refugee backgrounds into policy view.

The questions required to accurately collect data regarding migration histories or ethnicity can be fraught. Careful selection of questions, and consideration of what might happen if these data are used irresponsibly is critical as there is potential that the data reinforce essentialised and reductionist attitudes and negative stereotypes. However, without attention to these details there remains underreporting of issues for students.²⁹⁶

NEW APPROACHES

It is unlikely that policy infrastructures currently in place will change fast. Hence, better data must be made available, to capture the diverse range of identities and experiences of students from refugee backgrounds, and to inform policy and practice.

At a minimum, it is time for policy developers at all levels to consider what kinds of data are missing and what policy problems are caused by this absence. New data may help reveal underlying trends not yet apparent.

At the school and sector level, data regarding visa could be a helpful addition to data sets.

Enrolment interviews, with interpreters paid for by the school when relevant, could enable all schools to gather not only visa information, but a more detailed picture of students’ strengths

and where they and their family are in the settlement journey. Interpreters are an important support for schools to provide rather than relying only on children and young people to act as the liaison for their family.

Data at the deidentified level can help analysts capture points of intersecting disadvantage and direct resources to reduce barriers. Data sharing for transition between schools, done with care, could help students and staff to connect-up supports across institutions. Specific data collected at the school level may be useful for staff working with students from refugee backgrounds.

Other kinds of data can also inform policy and practice in schools. For example, small scale studies and qualitative data can provide more nuanced understanding of experiences and contexts. Researchers provide a critical resource for policy making and Australian research in this area has significantly grown over recent years, even though scholars’ calls for refugee education policy are not new.¹⁰⁷

TO NAME OR NOT TO NAME?

A central issue for students from refugee backgrounds and the school staff working with them is finding the right balance between essentialising experiences to provide streamlined supports, whilst also recognising and enabling an evolving and developing sense of self and identity. Part of this process is to work towards destigmatising the term ‘refugee’ and working to reduce racism and discrimination, low expectations and essentialising practices.

Use of the term ‘refugee’ runs the risk of promoting negative stereotypes of students and families. However, the current avoidance of this term in much of education policy has led to a lack of clarity over educational experiences, outcomes and supports.

It is critical that better data are collected, and more specific policies are developed, to support effective practices of support for students from refugee backgrounds.

POLICY DECISIONS AND VISIONS

Global agreements (see inset box) attempt to bring together stakeholder to identify common goals, for example for education. The Australian [government](#) references global agendas and Australia's commitment to UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, after one brief mention of *SDG4: Quality Education* in an annual report from the federal department overseeing education in 2018, there has been no mentions since.²⁹⁷ Neither is SDG 4 mentioned in the most recent [Alice Springs Mparntwe Declaration](#) (2019), the 2019 [National School Reform Agreement](#), or the recent [Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System](#).

Education Declarations go some way to bring multiple government stakeholders together for shared decision making. However, the practicalities and complexities of education governance in Australia require Declarations to remain broad in scope, rather than very detailed and prescriptive. There remains a high level of independent policy making across state and territory government departments, and in Catholic and other independent sectors.

The new agreement due in 2024 provides an opportunity for education leaders and policy makers to come together and create a vision for education. The initial review documents released in 2024 did not explicitly detail any policies or practices regarding students from refugee backgrounds, despite submission to the review indication the need for these specificities.

Global agreements

[United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

Article 28: 'the right of the child to education'

[Convention against Discrimination in Education](#)

Article 4: States will 'formulate, develop and apply a national policy which, by methods appropriate to the circumstances and to national usage, will tend to promote equality of opportunity and of treatment in the matter of education'.

[Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#)

Goal 4: Quality Education: Obtaining a quality education is the foundation to improving people's lives and sustainable development.

[Salamanca Agreement](#)

Inclusion for all students

VISION FOR EDUCATION POLICY DEPENDS ON POSITION AND PERSPECTIVE

Education policy makers across federal and state/territory governments and schooling sectors have different perspectives that reflect their own personal histories and experiences, their job role and organisational remit, their politics and ideologies, and their relative positions of power and influence.

School staff, including leadership, teachers, and ancillary support staff, have their own perspectives and relative positions of power to affect change, with multiple responsibilities for teaching and learning. Teachers and school staff work hard to provide positive education experiences and outcomes. They do this with limited resources, prescriptive externally mandated curriculum and reporting requirements, and competitive accountability structures. School staff must also show that they can deliver flexible, differentiated, programs, to deliver academic and wellbeing 'outcomes'.

Students and families work to build a sense of belonging in Australia, to navigate the complexities of a refugee experience, and to build strong relationships that can be resources for support. Students face structural and systemic barriers that impact education, including discrimination or racism from peers or staff, with pedagogies, attitudes and curriculum that remain rooted in Anglo histories and social norms. Students face a lack of recognition of strengths and capabilities, and deficit views that devalue navigation skills and multilingual knowledge, and lack of supported processes for working towards aspirations.⁷⁰

WORKING TOGETHER

Communities, families, and students from refugee backgrounds often have few options to influence policy decisions, but their experiences and perspectives can provide critical guidance for what works.

Specialist service providers working with young people and families from refugee backgrounds also have knowledge and skills that can be useful to inform education policy making. Settlement service providers in particular are closely connected with children and families from refugee backgrounds and have significant knowledge to share.

It is also important to recognise the ways in which federal immigration regulations are directly connected with provision of education for students from refugee backgrounds. Policy making for education should be connected with policy making for a range of policy priority areas such as for immigration, multicultural affairs, health care and housing, and communication between the various governmental departments that manage these issues is needed.

LINKING UP SCHOOLS, SECTORS, SERVICES AND LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT

Settlement and other specialist service providers have specialised knowledge about refugee resettlement and expertise to share. There are numerous examples of programs run collaboratively by schools and services. By bringing specialist providers into schools, access to additional supports for students is improved, knowledge is shared between services and school staff, and programs like these can enable schools to build a broader, positive school culture.^{196,298,299}

At present, the national systems governing resettlement as well as asylum seeking

regulations do not connect with education systems effectively. Students may encounter a smooth transition from the moment of arrival, however, there are many ways in which the generalist approach to refugee education is not meeting students' needs.

WORKING TOGETHER TO MAKE POLICY THAT WORKS FOR ALL

Capturing the complexities of all opinions in policy is challenging, if not impossible. However, it is important that education policy is made with consideration of a wide range of perspectives, particularly the perspectives of people whose experiences and work are the subjects of policy.

To triangulate a collective vision for education policy, the voices of students, families and communities from culturally and linguistically diverse refugee backgrounds are crucial. In addition, specialist staff working in schools, particularly those working in EALD spaces and staff working as bilingual community liaisons or in bilingual student support have significant expertise around how to support students within the complexities of the schooling system.⁷³

Other important voices for consideration are service providers and community organisations with direct connections with children and young people from refugee backgrounds, who understand important barriers, challenges, strategies and strengths.

Research provides a clear avenue for a wide range of perspectives to be heard and included as considerations for policy making. There is a significant body of research that can inform policy, to draw in multiple voices of students and families, school staff, and other key stakeholders.

SUMMARY

GLOBAL TRENDS AND INFLUENCES FOR REFUGEE EDUCATION

AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Australian policy making has evolved in a context of multiculturalism and globalisation. Education agendas, as discussed herein, have been influenced by social, political, pedagogical and technological trends. These broader influences have intersected with shifting regulations around migration.

Australian education policy development in the final decades of the 20th century was espoused as a way to achieve social justice through equality or equity. Since the turn of the century, global policy trends and compacts have used language that highlights the importance of education for all. However, in combination with this shift in terminology there has been a returning focus on national values and English language in policy rhetoric as well as in regulatory frameworks. For example, there have been changes to requirements for citizenship, as well as for several visa types. English language proficiency is a requirement, and this focus on proficiency is linked to desired ‘values’ in Australia, with both prerequisites for belonging and social cohesion.³⁰⁰

However well-intentioned the ‘education for all’ approach, the experiences of many students from refugee backgrounds are of marginalisation and exclusion. By the early 2010s, many scholars had already noted serious issues with the co-opting of equity agendas and linking of concepts of ‘fairness’ and ‘choice’ to accountability frameworks and testing.³⁰¹ Data driven, evidence based decision making relies on data that tell the whole story. In the case of standardised testing, the kinds of data recorded obfuscate intersectional, structural and systemic disadvantages that students may face, and reduce the complexities of educational experiences to simplistic and reductionist tests.¹¹⁶

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REFUGEE EDUCATION GLOBALLY

There is a substantial international literature that focuses on education in resettlement, ^{23,61,235,241,302-309} psychosocial wellbeing and mental health or trauma,^{310,311} teaching and learning supports and the importance of a range of approaches,³¹² and experiences of student cohorts with similar regional^{217,313,314} or resettlement backgrounds.^{306,315,316} There are barriers and facilitators for engagement with tertiary education.^{77,182,317-319} Family connections with schooling and education are critical,^{136,280} as is an environment of safety and social inclusion.^{70,122,198,241} The importance of taking a strengths-based approach has been highlighted, one that recognises the capacity and strengths of young people and their families.^{70,280}

Education is a critical element of integration and policies for education are therefore central to the experiences of students and families from refugee backgrounds.^{15,18} Although specific policies targeting students from refugee backgrounds in different locations must attend to localised contexts and regulations, there are significant alignments in principles for practice across Australia and many countries where students from refugee backgrounds are attending school. McIntyre and Abrams (2021) recently noted many key principles for refugee education across European countries, for example, that closely align with the recommendations discussed in the report presented here.²⁷ (see p169-171)



SUMMARY

REFUGEE EDUCATION POLICY IN AUSTRALIA

In recent years, there has been development of education policy and practices for support in several sectors, schools, and classrooms. However, experiences of students from refugee backgrounds remain highly dependent on chance.

With a broad absence of refugee education policies, the default position for targeted supports is through English language learning. This trend of focusing on language learning has been almost the only reliably implemented additional support provided for students since these specialist teaching areas were recognised and prioritised in the 1970s.

While access to Australian systems remains bonded to English proficiency, language learning will remain a critical settlement and education priority. However, the systemic practice of defaulting responsibilities to EALD staff remains insufficient and problematic in several ways.³²⁰

Furthermore, policy trends towards broad, catch-all policy making have led to subsuming of EALD policy provisions within broader policies for multicultural inclusion or wellbeing intended to work for all students. (In some policy texts that use the word 'diversity', even the previously well used prefix 'culturally and linguistically' is disappearing). This approach has the effect of removing even that default centre of support that students from refugee backgrounds have historically had, and these students are almost completely invisible in policy.

Students from refugee backgrounds are consistently and increasingly nested within multiple policy frameworks. This nesting process is not explicit, rather, omission of these students from policy text reflects an assumption from policy makers that their needs are not different from the needs of other students. The absence of these students in data and policy also marks an assumption that their needs are being met by generalist policy approaches.

Research evidence strongly suggests this is not the case.

There are significant disparities in schools' resourcing and expertise in working with students from refugee backgrounds. Some have acquired knowledge and developed positive practices over years of working with diverse student cohorts including students from refugee backgrounds, others may be doing this work for the first time and practices are reactive and ad-hoc. Regional schools are particularly vulnerable to reactive practice as they attempt to support students who have been placed in regional towns via the resettlement scheme.

Without policy that brings a focus on structural and systemic barriers faced by students from refugee backgrounds and the staff working with them, approaches are ad-hoc and dependent on local context and actors. These issues have been well articulated by scholars.^{59-62,69,321} who suggest that the field of refugee education is 'left to chance', 'piecemeal', 'everywhere and nowhere', and a 'wasteland'.^{59,60,195,322}

Inequitable experiences may be better addressed by policy that explicitly names this cohort of students. Conversations around their needs can be more focused, rather than expecting their needs to be met within broader catch-all policies. Many students experience marginalisation on multiple intersecting levels. Inclusion 'for all' as a policy priority cannot be achieved without recognising both historic and contemporary systemic exclusions.

Barriers and challenges for students from refugee backgrounds reflect broader issues with schooling provision in Australia. With migration, transnationalism, and intercultural communication a core element of the modern world, it is critical that Australian education systems contribute to intercultural respect and learning. Part of this process requires recognition that education policy is inextricably linked with migration regulations and multicultural policies.

SUMMARY

THE RIGHT TIME FOR POLICY CHANGE

SUPPORTING HUMAN RIGHTS

Students from refugee backgrounds have a human right to equitable access and inclusion in education systems. This right is made more profound because of a refugee experience, where rights, by definition, have been violated.

It is time for policy development that builds from this evidence base, that focuses attention on the cultural wealth of students and families from refugee backgrounds, and that acknowledges and works to minimise practices, systems and structures of exclusion.

LEADERSHIP FOR POLICY CHANGE

Australia is in an excellent position to be a world leader in education policy that works for students from refugee backgrounds. The history of migration to Australia over the last 50 years is one of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity. There has been a long-standing commitment to provide humanitarian resettlement and a safe future for people after refugee experiences.

Education is a critical component of humanitarian resettlement and well-formed education policy can guide practices to support positive experiences of school. These positive supports will impact individual students from refugee backgrounds, their families and communities. This kind of policy change can help guide broader practice of change that are proactive rather than reactive, and supportive communities and school cultures can be developed for multicultural inclusion.

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PROMOTING THE STRENGTHS OF AUSTRALIAN PRACTICES

Research has highlighted a range of positive school practices for work with students from refugee backgrounds.^{228,323,324} However, existing policy and practice may have unintended effects.²⁴⁴ Staff work to develop inclusive school environments that enable a sense of belonging for students.^{325,326} Moving forward, it is important that school practices recognise students' complex cultural and linguistic heritage, and attend to developing and maintaining positive relationships in multicultural school contexts.³²⁷ It is also important to recognise students' strengths and agency³²⁸, how they seek to find ways to access inclusion,³²⁴ and social connection.¹⁰⁹ Young people find ways to cope with challenges⁷⁴ whilst also working towards academic 'success'.³²⁹ School staff also strive to work with agency within sometimes restrictive frames^{62,190,323} using creative ways to connect with students and develop a sense of mutual belonging.^{68,330-332}

Australia's resettlement program, in combination with supportive practices in schools, offers safe and promising futures and opportunities for young people and families after refugee migration. Education policy development can build on these strengths whilst also addressing multiple systemic and structural barriers.



Photo by Muzafar Ali

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT & NATIONAL LEVEL

1. Develop policies that connect migration and education systems.

- Improve policy to guide direct and timely communication between the federal department for immigration and education departments across sectors and regions.
- Connect all schools with settlement services, with stable, ongoing funding to support ongoing connections. Students benefit when these systems of support at school and through settlement services are linked up.

2. Build and maintain information sharing networks.

- Support development and maintenance of communication networks for communities, service providers, schools, education sectors, and government.
- Provide practical, administrative support for stakeholders to participate in networks, with active participation of key people from relevant federal departments such as education, immigration or multicultural affairs.

3. Identify students from refugee backgrounds as an equity group in education policy.

- Clearly identify students from refugee backgrounds in federal education policy. This can include within broader policies (for example for multicultural inclusion, or wellbeing), however, students from refugee backgrounds must be named specifically.

4. Improve data collection regarding students from refugee backgrounds.

- Link federal data around resettlement and immigration with education data.
- Work in collaboration with sectors and schools to conduct research. Investigate what kinds of data are already being used across the diverse government departments and education sectors in Australia. Identify current mechanisms being used by sectors and schools and seek novel ways to identify students from refugee backgrounds.

5. Include policy detail regarding practices for work with students from refugee backgrounds.

- Ensure that detailed policy is developed to outline the ways that education practices can be improved and adapted to meet the needs of students from refugee backgrounds.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT & NATIONAL LEVEL

- 6. Increase capacity by improving initial teacher education programs, with an explicit focus on working with students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse refugee and migrant backgrounds.**
 - Improve teacher education and training by mandating that all teachers are provided with training for work with students from a range of backgrounds including from refugee backgrounds.
 - Initial teacher education degrees must have specific courses that address intercultural respect and responsibility, and culturally responsive pedagogies must also be embedded in all subject areas.
 - Reprioritise recognition of EALD as a specialist teaching area and include EALD pedagogies in all teaching areas.

- 7. Facilitate all schools to employ cultural liaison and school support staff from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, regardless of students' English language proficiency.**
 - Disentangle funding for bilingual support staff from EALD.

- 8. Recruit and retain teachers from refugee and migrant backgrounds.**
 - Work to actively recruit teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse refugee and migrant backgrounds.
 - Actively work to reduce racism and discrimination in the education workforce.

- 9. Expand curriculum and adapt pedagogy.**
 - Shape curriculum with a focus on stories that reflect a broad range of global experiences. These changes are important for expanding the knowledge of all students in schools, to emphasise and recognise the value of students' diverse languages, cultures, and experiences.
 - Enable assessments that include a range of modes for presentation, including recognition of students' diverse knowledge systems and language repertoires.

- 10. Develop and implement explicit anti-racism and discrimination policy, with strategies in place for ongoing evaluation and improvement.**
 - Fund schools to engage staff in professional development around anti-racism, as well as funding a key staff member in each school to manage ongoing development, implementation, evaluation and improvement of anti-racism strategies.
 - Develop, implement, and support ongoing evaluation of explicit anti-racism policy in the broader society, as outlined in the recent Multicultural Review Framework.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

STATE, TERRITORY AND SECTOR LEVEL

- 1. Develop policies that connect migration and education systems.**
 - Identify ways to improve communication across and between state or territory departments, and with federal departments, with a focus on students from refugee backgrounds.
 - Connect with local settlement services, as possible, and provide policy guidance for schools to connect with these specialist services.
- 2. Build and maintain information sharing networks.**
 - Ensure information gained from government departments at the local and federal level is passed through to school leadership effectively.
 - Provide administrative support to build and maintain networks, and funded time for leadership staff to attend network meetings.
- 3. Identify students from refugee backgrounds as an equity group in education policy at all levels.**
 - Clearly identify students from refugee backgrounds in sector level policy. This can include within broader policies (for example for multicultural inclusion, or wellbeing), however, students from refugee backgrounds must be named specifically.
- 4. Improve data collection regarding students from refugee backgrounds.**
 - Work with federal departments to identify and use data sources not currently drawn upon by sectors.
 - Investigate data already being collected or accessed across the sector and identify current mechanisms used by individual schools.
 - Develop new processes for identifying students from refugee backgrounds in a nuanced way that builds on strengths and does not reinforce negative stereotypes.
 - Ensure that effective knowledge transfer across schools can support transitions for students as they move schools.
- 5. Include policy detail regarding students from refugee backgrounds.**
 - Ensure that detailed policy is developed to outline the ways that education practices can be improved across the sector as well as within individual schools, with connection to external services when relevant. Adapt practice to specifically meet the needs of students from refugee backgrounds.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

STATE, TERRITORY AND SECTOR LEVEL

- 6. Increase capacity by improving initial teacher education programs, with an explicit focus on working with students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse refugee and migrant backgrounds.**
 - Promote professional development opportunities for teachers to support work with students from a range of backgrounds including from refugee backgrounds.
 - Reprioritise recognition of the specialised work of teachers of English as an additional language or dialect. Encourage practices of support for EALD across all classrooms whilst also enabling specialist staff to work within each school.

- 7. Facilitate all schools to employ cultural liaison and school support staff from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, regardless of students' English proficiency.**
 - Provide flexible funding for schools to engage bicultural staff as school support officers. In some sectors, engagement of cultural liaison staff working across multiple schools is working effectively; for sectors not yet using this model, engage cultural liaison officers at the sector level.

- 8. Recruit and retain teachers from refugee and migrant backgrounds.**
 - Actively work to address racism or discrimination across the sector for school staff, to provide effective supports for pre-service teachers and early career teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse refugee and migrant backgrounds.

- 9. Expand curriculum and adapt pedagogy.**
 - Promote professional development opportunities for teachers to support work with students from a range of backgrounds including from refugee backgrounds.
 - Reprioritise recognition of the specialised work of teachers of English as an additional language or dialect. Encourage practices of support for EALD across all classrooms whilst also enabling specialist staff to work within each school.

- 10. Develop and implement explicit anti-racism and discrimination policy, with strategies in place for ongoing evaluation and improvement.**
 - Fund schools to engage all staff in professional development around anti-racism, as well as funding a key staff member in each school to manage ongoing development and implementation of anti-racism strategies.
 - Provide administrative support for sector wide networks of anti-racism leaders in schools, to share knowledge.
 - Develop, implement, and support ongoing evaluation of explicit anti-racism policy.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

SCHOOL LEVEL

- 1. Develop policies that connect migration and education systems.**
 - Liaise with relevant sector-level policy makers to collectively identify current practices and gaps in knowledge, with a focus on students and families from refugee backgrounds. Seek information about new students' entitlements as per immigration regulations.
 - Connect with local settlement services, to link up support structures.

- 2. Build and maintain information sharing networks.**
 - Connect with tertiary systems to understand possible pathways for students from refugee backgrounds (if they choose these pathways).
 - Liaise with sector level staff to coordinate ways to build and maintain networks, and how to manage funding for staff to attend meetings.
 - Enable families from refugee backgrounds to connect with these networks for knowledge sharing with schools and education supports.

- 3. Identify students from refugee backgrounds as an equity group in education policy.**
 - Clearly identify students from refugee backgrounds in school policy. This can include within broader policies (for example for multicultural inclusion, or wellbeing), however, students from refugee backgrounds must be named specifically.

- 4. Improve data collection regarding students from refugee backgrounds.**
 - Investigate data already being used across the sector and current mechanisms used by schools to collect information.
 - Identify and utilise data sources not currently drawn upon.
 - Develop new processes for identifying students from refugee backgrounds in a nuanced way that builds on strengths and does not reinforce negative stereotypes.

- 5. Include policy detail regarding work with students from refugee backgrounds.**
 - Ensure detailed policy is developed within the school to meet the needs of students from refugee backgrounds.
 - Liaise with key groups to make decisions around what will work best in local context, for example with local service providers and communities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

SCHOOL LEVEL

- 6. Increase capacity by improving initial teacher education programs, with an explicit focus on working with students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse refugee and migrant backgrounds.**
 - Recognise the expertise of EALD staff by providing leadership positions that enable school-wide planning for EALD work.
 - Promote EALD professional development opportunities for all staff.

- 7. Employ cultural liaison and school support staff from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, regardless of students' English language proficiency.**
 - Fully utilise all available funding to engage bicultural staff as school support officers and enable these staff to work in liaison roles as well as in classroom support. Provide secure employment as far as possible.
 - Communicate effectively and consistently with families by working together with liaison staff.

- 8. Recruit and retain teachers from refugee and migrant backgrounds.**
 - Actively provide a welcoming and supportive school culture for pre-service teachers and early career teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse refugee and migrant backgrounds.
 - Seek to employ teachers from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

- 9. Expand curriculum and adapt pedagogy.**
 - Encourage staff to work flexibly and to provide a range of modes for assessment.
 - Broaden scope for purchase of library materials and other resources that support teaching and learning regarding a wider range of global experiences and perspectives.

- 10. Develop and implement explicit anti-racism and discrimination policy, with strategies in place for ongoing evaluation and improvement.**
 - Promote and facilitate staff to engage with professional development around antiracism.
 - Nominate and support a key staff member to manage ongoing development, implementation, evaluation and improvement of anti-racism strategies.

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APPENDIX

PHD OVERVIEW

This policy paper was produced through a Research Fellowship that built upon a PhD study entitled, 'Students from Refugee Backgrounds: Experiences and Practices of Support in Australian High Schools'. The PhD thesis was completed in 2022 and the study conducted predominantly on Kurna Country in 2017-2021. The following is an excerpt from the abstract:

This sequential mixed methods investigation was conducted within a transformative-advocacy framework. Quantitative data were collected via a comprehensive survey questionnaire with n=354 high school student participants in South Australia, aged 14-26, from refugee backgrounds in three world regions: Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Qualitative semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with youth (n=23), their parent/caregivers (n=19), and school staff (n=22). Analysis employed statistical quantitative and thematic qualitative methods.

Findings showed that students' aspirations, school experiences, and identities were impacted by school practices, as well as by broader socio-ecological contexts, with implications for policy and practice. Quantitative analysis employed an ecological framework to show how social ecologies affect resilience, mental health, and wellbeing. Qualitative data analysis provided contextual insights into how students navigated social environments, how they faced challenges and what supports they drew on to do so. Social ecological theory was employed to identify relevant functions of macro- to micro-level social ecologies. The importance of social networks was highlighted, and a cultural wealth framework was employed to emphasise the capabilities and positive assets of students and their connections with families and community.

The study identified students' strengths, skills, and cultural wealth. This wealth must be recognised, built on and developed through school practices of support that promote students' strengths, and celebrate identity, heritage, and culture in a meaningful way. Discrimination negatively impacted mental health and wellbeing and hence actions are required to minimise this in the school environment; active policies and practices are needed to reduce explicit and subtle forms of discrimination or deficit views of students' capabilities and skills. It is key that staff communicate and collaborate with students and families to develop overlapping and linked networks of support, which can be facilitated by bicultural school staff. It is anticipated that study findings inform policy makers and practitioners working in government, in the education sector, or in fields relating to settlement and multicultural service provision.

Several publications were written from this study and included in the thesis: Ecologies of Resilience for Australian High School Students from Refugee Backgrounds: Quantitative Study⁷²; Recognition of refugee students' cultural wealth and social capital in resettlement⁷⁰; Practices for inclusion, structures of marginalisation: experiences of refugee background students in Australian secondary schools⁷³; and, Australian school practices and the education experiences of students with a refugee background: a review of the literature³²¹.

The PhD study was part of a larger study entitled, 'Pathways to active citizenship: Refugee youth and their transition from school to further education, training and employment',³³³ led by Prof Tahereh Ziaian at the University of South Australia in partnership with [Multicultural Youth South Australia](#) (MYSA) and the [Australian Migrant Resource Centre](#) (AMRC). The project was an Australian Research Council Linkage Project (140101023) with several publications: Family Functioning and the Psychological Wellbeing of Refugee-Background Youth in Australia³³⁴; Family influence on refugee youth education and employment aspirations and choices²⁸¹; Challenges, facilitators and enablers of conducting research with youth from refugee backgrounds³³⁵; Demographic Profile of SA Refugee Youth Population 2019³³⁶; Refugee Youth and Transition to Further Education, Training, and Employment in Australia: Protocol for a Mixed Methods Study³³³; Identity and belonging: refugee youth and their parents' perception of being Australian³³⁷; and, Refugees at Work: The Preventative Role of Psychosocial Safety Climate against Workplace Harassment, Discrimination and Psychological Distress,³³⁸