Refugee Education Australia

MYAN multicultural youth advocacy network (australia)

# The state of refugee education in Australia

# Refugee Education Australia

Refugee Education Australia (REA) is a national organisation of people from the community, higher education, vocational education, and school sectors who support educational opportunities for students from refugee backgrounds. Established in 2024, REA is a Public Benevolent Institution with DGR status.

Our vision is an education system that is inclusive and actively supports' refugee students to thrive and achieve their potential.

The mission of REA is to work with refugee communities, government department, settlement agencies, and education providers to support people with lived experience of forced migration to access, participate, and succeed in education, from early childhood to higher education. To this end, REA:

**a** Works with refugee, community and education communities to support people with lived experience of forced migration to access, participate, and succeed in education in Australia, from early childhood to higher education.

**b** Creates a national network of people and organisations to support people with lived experience of forced migration to access, participate, and succeed in education.

**c** Fosters awareness in the education sector of issues relating to the experiences of people who have experienced forced migration through training, workshops and sharing of educational resources and good practices.

**d** Fundraises to provide educational assistance and bursaries for educational study for people with lived experience of forced migration.

**e** Advocates with and for people with lived experience of forced migration to participate in education in Australia.

# Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia

The Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN) is the national peak body representing the rights and interests of multicultural young people. Established in 2007, MYAN works in work in partnership with young people, government and non-government sectors across Australia providing policy advice, capacity building, and leadership and advocacy opportunities for young people.

Our vision is that all young people from multicultural backgrounds are valued and supported so that they thrive in Australia.

To this end, MYAN:

**a** Works in partnership with young people, government and civil society to promote the rights and interests of young people from multicultural backgrounds and ensure these are recognised in policy and practice.

**b** Facilitates national connections between young people, academics, policy makers and practitioners to drive systemic change through impactful, evidence-based research and policy advice.

**c** Empowers young people to develop their leadership skills, champion their communities, and engage in local and national advocacy efforts.

**d** Builds the capacity of organisations and individuals to effectively engage with and support young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds through comprehensive training programs and resource development, including the National Youth Settlement Framework.

**e** Plays a pivotal role in fostering strong local and international relationships and knowledge sharing to support the youth settlement sector.

# Contributors and partner organisations

This report was made possible through the collective efforts of multiple REA members and the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN). The following people contributed to the writing of this report:

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Refugee Education Australia. (2026). State of Refugee Education Australia. https://refugee-education.org.au/state-of-refugee-education-in-australia

# Terminology used in this report:
## Who is a 'student from a refugee background'?

Students from refugee backgrounds (SfRB) are individuals who may identify as refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, or from refugee-like backgrounds. A refugee, as defined by the 1951 Refugee Convention, is someone outside their country of origin with a well-founded fear of persecution and unable or unwilling to return due to that fear[1]. An asylum seeker is a person who has applied for refugee protection and is awaiting a legal determination of their status[2]. Students from refugee-like backgrounds may have experienced forced migration, lived in refugee camps, or suffered trauma without having been formally recognized as refugees in Australia[3]. These individuals may have arrived in Australia on non-humanitarian visas such as student or tourist visas[4].

While SfRB are a non-homogeneous group, it can be said that they are individuals who had to flee their home country because of conflict, persecution, violence, or human rights violations, and are now either seeking or have received refugee status in a host country.

As a student, they are enrolled in some form of an educational program. In Australia, SfRB may study:

- Early childhood education (3-year and 4-year kindergarten or 5-year pre-school,
- Primary school (Years K–6)
- High school (Years 7–12)
- Adult Migration English Program (AMEP)
- Vocational Education and Training (VET)
- Higher education

Under Australia's complex refugee visa system, any individual SfRB may be subject to a range of legal conditions. At one end of the spectrum of these conditions, they might hold legal citizenship status, have no need for a visa nor formal restrictions, with equal provision of government funding. At the other end of the spectrum, they might be on a short-term visa with intermittent legal rights to study and no access to welfare or government funding of their education.

**What is common to all refugee students, however, is the need for a safe, stable home and the opportunity and sufficient support to attain educational success[5]**

# Foreword by Professor Peter Shergold AC

In 2025, Australia welcomed the one millionth refugee to be resettled in our wonderful country since 1947. At a time of record numbers of people displaced because of conflict, persecution, or political unrest, the need has never been so urgent for wealthy countries like ours to offer pathways to long-term safety for traumatised people who have been forced to leave their homes and their families.

As the 'land of plenty', with "boundless plains to share", Australia is a key resettlement provider, with significant investment in making sure that when refugees arrive, they are provided with access to supports and services to help them find their feet. As a country of migrants living on lands that were never formally ceded, Australians should be proud that we have accepted so many people in need of safety and secure footings to build new lives. Compared to 65,000 years of Aboriginal cultures, all of us who trace our origins to this continent to 1788 or beyond are newcomers.

There is much to celebrate in Australia's long history of — and future commitment to growing — the resettlement of refugees. However, there remain significant challenges with regard to helping forced migrants to thrive. Despite generous per capita investment by the Commonwealth and State/ Territory governments in resettlement, and the committed support of community organisations, the stark reality is that many first generation refugees don't thrive; many simply survive, placing their hopes for success on their children.

There are many complex and multi-layered challenges that make it difficult for new arrivals to flourish, but these are compounded by siloed sectors, which create gaps for refugees to fall between.

Education is a key example of this. Refugees often experience lower school attainment, less access to vocational and higher education, and lower rates of employment. One of the main problems is that we just don't collect any longer-term data on refugee and migrant students, meaning our understandings of their achievement and metrics at any level (local, state/ territory, or national) are limited.

The situation for people seeking asylum and refugees with temporary protection is even more dire. Locked out of tertiary education opportunities because of the temporariness of their visas, the future looks and feels bleak for people who sought to seek asylum here. For this cohort, Australia must surely feel more like the 'unlucky country'. The 'fair go' has a hollow ring. This much we do know. Research tells us that one-size fits all education models work poorly for new arrivals. We need to address the myriad (but surmountable) issues related with (forced) migration that complicate things for students, parents, educators, schools, and communities. In spite of progress, the dial is not being shifted far enough on poorer retention, achievement and postgraduate outcomes for our newest Australians.

While second generation migrants generally do succeed, we are squandering the talent and potential of tens of thousands of newly-arrived refugees by not working to close the gaps that exist between government departments, between sectors, and between different states/ territories. If we don't, we not only risk losing billions of dollars in untapped wages, spending and tax revenue, we continue to create weak spots in our social fabric.

It's not all doom and gloom. We have seen some green shoots of hope with the expansion of fee-waiver scholarships at a record number of universities across the country (with almost every state and territory having at least one sanctuary scholarship), and with the development of the new Refugee Student Settlement Pathway. But so much more needs to be done. With the right combination of governments, industry, and civil society partners, we can make the kinds of changes that will really make a difference for refugees and people seeking asylum.

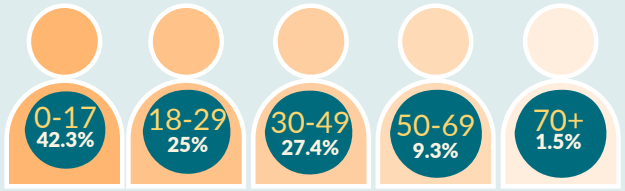
It is for these reasons that I endorse the recommendations made in this report. Australia needs to take educational access and success seriously if it wants to make a real difference for economic, social, and community inclusion reasons. It is a key part of a successful settlement strategy. By investing in the educational success of refugees, we are investing in the future of Australia.

Professor Peter Shergold AC
NSW Coordinator-General of Settlement
Chair, Australia for UNHCR
Patron of Refugee Education Australia

# What's the state of refugee education in Australia in 2025?

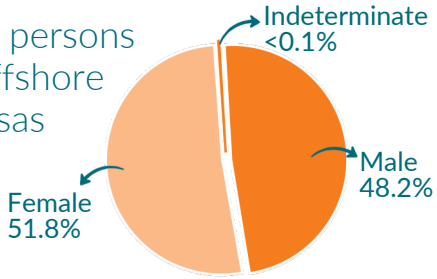
Refugee Education Australia

## Age of persons granted refugee visas to Australia (offshore program)

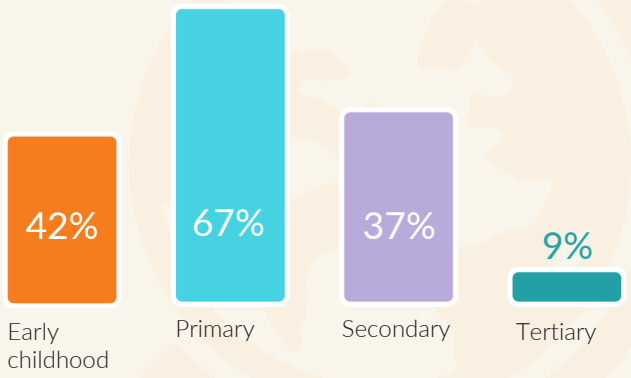



⅔ of persons receiving offshore grants between the ages of 0 and 29

## Gender of persons granted offshore refugee visas (2023/24)

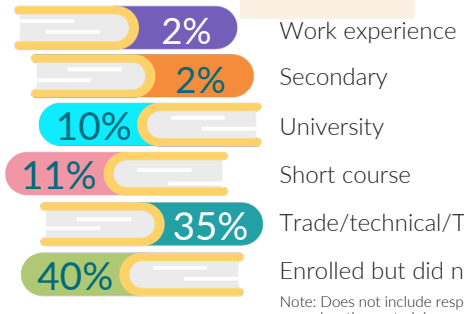



## Global education enrolment rates (2025)




Source: UNHCR (2025).

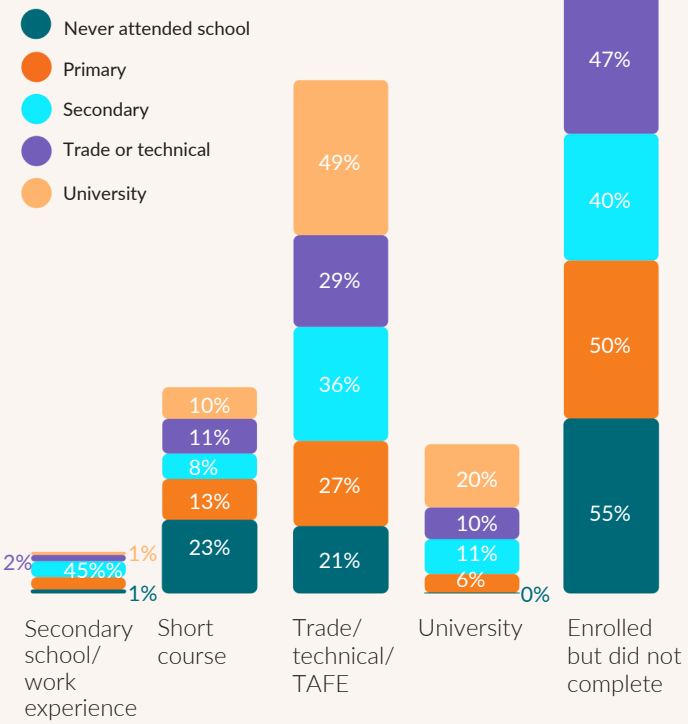
## Educational completion after 10 years of permanent residency




Note: Does not include respondents who never enrolled in any education or training.

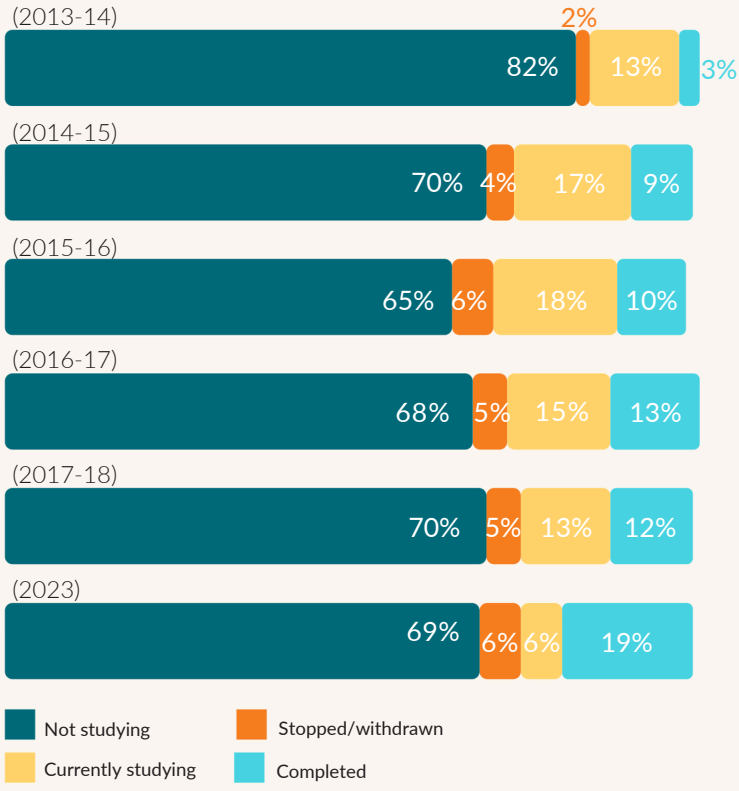
Source: Building a New Life in Australia, Wave 6.

## Educational completion by level of pre-arrival schooling




Source: Building a New Life in Australia, Waves 1–6.

## Educational participation of humanitarian entrants




Source: Building a New Life in Australia, Waves 1–6.

The Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) was a longitudinal study of 2,399 humanitarian migrants who were granted permanent protection visas in Australia in 2013. The sample included both recognised refugees who were granted visas offshore (200, 201, 202, and 204 class—typically via UNHCR referral) and those granted onshore protection visas (including 'unauthorised maritime arrivals' or 'UMAs', and 'non-UMAs'). The sample was broadly representative of the Australian Humanitarian Program intake in the 2013–14 fiscal year, in terms of country of birth and visa class. BNLA was commissioned by the then-Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) and subsequently administered by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) under the direction of the Department of Social Services (DSS). With an expected rate of attrition as the study proceeded, by Wave 6/Year 10 of the study, 1,223 respondents remained (approx. 51% of the original sample). BNLA is the largest, longest, and most comprehensive study of refugee settlement in Australia.

The BNLA questionnaire included a wide range of items including household composition, health, education, housing, employment, social connections, life satisfaction and other domains of settlement, and was administered annually for the first five 'waves' of the study, with a sixth wave conducted in participants' 10th year of permanent residence in Australia.*

Weights: Survey weights are used in this report to account for discrepancies between the eligible humanitarian population and the BNLA sample, incorporating several socio-demographic characteristics. For more information on how weights were calculated, see the BNLA Data User Guide (Stevenson & Rioseco, 2024).

For a comprehensive summary of settlement outcomes in the BNLA cohort, please see van Kooy et al. (2024).

# Executive Summary

In this report, Refugee Education Australia (REA) and Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN) argue for more careful attention to educational planning, (co-)design, delivery, and evaluation for SfRB. Our recommendations are based around three primary arguments:

1. We call for the **development of a unified national refugee education framework**. This framework should provide targeted attention to key areas, including access, inclusion, transition, support, success, and the effective use of data.

2. We advocate for students from refugee backgrounds **to be formally recognised as an equity cohort across all levels of education in Australia**. To support consistent identification and targeted support, REA recommends that all education sectors adopt the following definition for this equity cohor

   **" The equity cohort of students from refugee backgrounds includes individuals who arrived in Australia on a Permanent Humanitarian Visa or Temporary Protection Visa; asylum seekers on Bridging Visas; those who arrived on non-humanitarian visas (such as skilled or student visas) but have a refugee or humanitarian background regardless of their current citizenship or residency status and those who became Australian citizens after previously holding any of these visa types"**

   This inclusive definition recognises the intergenerational impact of forced migration and enables the identification of students with refugee or refugee-like experiences, irrespective of their residency or citizenship status. By adopting this broader definition, educational institutions can better identify a diverse cohort of students who may share experiences of forced displacement, allowing for tailored support that addresses individual needs and aligns with Australia's contemporary migration context.

3. We advocate for more **detailed data collection** from the cohort of students from refugee backgrounds at all levels of education to enable educational institutions to identify diversity so that this targeted support can be provided accordingly.

# Cross-cutting solutions:
## Priority policy and practices to underpin progress in refugee education

### Policy recognition

A nationally consistent policy framework is needed to formally recognise SfRB as a distinct equity group with specific educational needs. While some SfRB may also fall under existing categories such as low SES or EAL, the unique challenges associated with forced migration require separate and explicit recognition in education policy.

Although the responses to these needs will differ across early childhood, school, vocational, and higher education settings, a coherent national approach is essential. This recognition must be embedded in policy across all jurisdictions, federal (for higher education) and state (for VET, schools, and early childhood education), to ensure both systemic and context-specific practices are informed and aligned.

### Ongoing English language support

Long term, adequately funded English language support is essential until students achieve functional parity in both Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive and Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

### Nationally coordinated data: Quantitative and qualitative

Nationally consistent, culturally appropriate measures and practices are needed to identify students from refugee backgrounds throughout their entire educational journey across all sectors. This enables continuity of adequate resourcing and effective support.

### Professional development for educators

Compulsory professional development should be implemented to build educators' understanding of the common experiences and educational needs of students who have experienced forced migration. This should include mandatory accreditation for educators across all sectors, beginning with primary and secondary school teachers, and extending to those in vocational and higher education; and,

Trauma-informed, culturally appropriate professional development and support should be embedded in training for Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary school teachers.

### Recruit more refugee background teachers

Develop and resource targeted pathways for refugees into teacher education (for all sectors) and support their employment as teachers, particularly in areas with high populations of refugee students.

# Recommendations for inclusions in a unified national framework for refugee education

| Sector | Key Recommendations | Specific Actions |
|---|---|---|
| Overarching Framework | Policy Recognition | Establish unified national framework identifying refugee students as distinct equity group; address access, inclusion, transition, success, and data collection |
| | Professional Development | Mandate trauma-informed care and culturally responsive teaching training; implement granular data collection practices |
| Early Childhood | Access & Resources | Develop multilingual information platforms; support community services to acquire educational materials and equipment |
| | Workforce Diversity | Incentivise ECE training for diverse linguistic/cultural backgrounds; implement strengths-based trauma-informed training |
| Schooling | National Framework | Create coordinated integration system: data collation, funding guidelines, communication protocols, intensive English support (18 months), leadership roles |
| | Curriculum & Culture | Develop inclusive curriculum reflecting diverse backgrounds; implement national anti-racism framework separate from anti-bullying policies |
| | Student Support | Formalise mentorship programs; ensure access to extra-curricular activities with transport assistance/subsidies |
| | System Coordination | Formalise data categories and resources; provide transition pathway information for families |
| Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) | Tailored Instruction | Conduct needs analysis; provide multilingual/trauma-informed pedagogy training; shift funding to attendance-based model |
| | Access & Flexibility | Provide childcare, flexible scheduling, transport options; ensure digital access with devices and data |
| | Youth Strategy | Mandate youth-specific classes; develop broad curriculum (art, sport, music, maths); create outcomes framework with performance metrics |
| Vocational Education | Pathway Support | Clarify recognition of prior learning; provide targeted digital literacy support; strengthen industry mentorship links |
| | Community Engagement | Develop public education campaigns promoting vocational pathways in collaboration with local communities |
| Higher Education | Equity Recognition | Formally recognise refugees as distinct equity group; develop integrated data tracking systems for citizenship changes |
| | Support Programs | Design culturally responsive programs: academic mentoring, language support, cultural orientation, peer networks |
| | Holistic Services | Address non-academic barriers: financial aid, housing assistance, childcare support, healthcare services, trauma-informed staff training |

# Forced displacement and refugee education: What's the international picture?

With each passing year, the number of people forcibly displaced from their home reaches record numbers. Atthe end of 2024 the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that over 123.2 million people had been forced to flee their homes due to war, conflict, persecution, violence, human rights violations or events that have seriously disrupted public order[7]. This figure includes over 31 million refugees currently registered with the UNHCR.

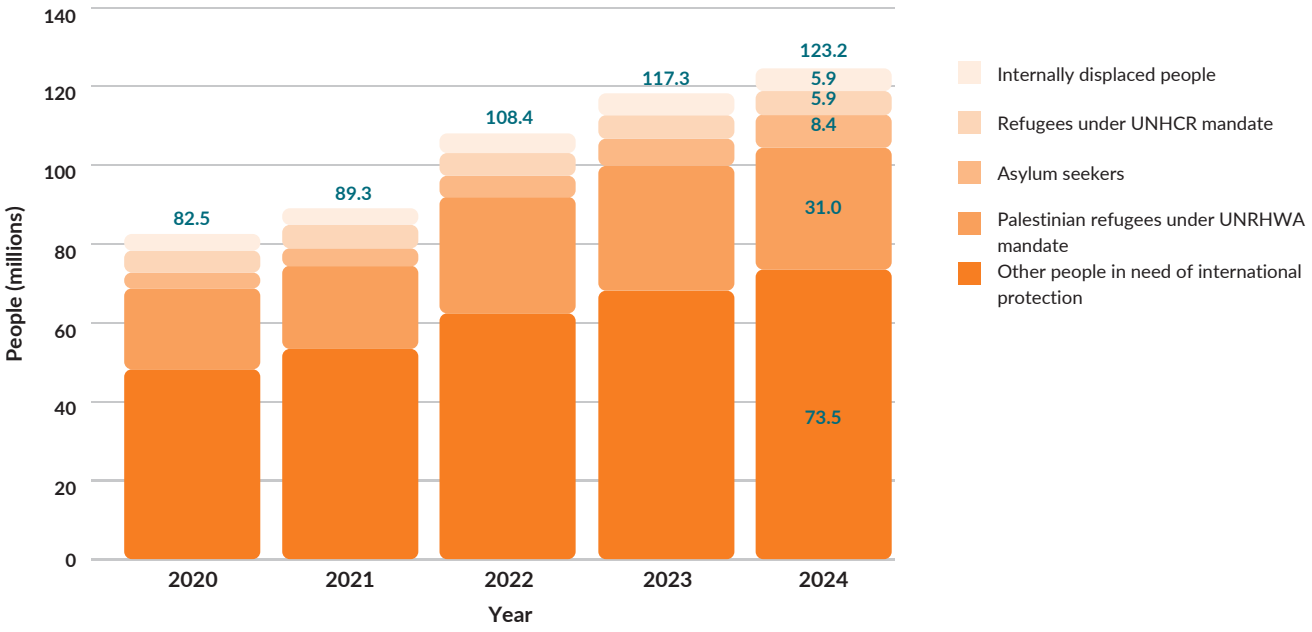



**Figure 1.** Global displacement figures from the UNHCR for 2020-2024. Created in CANVA and PowerPoint using UNHCR data[7–11].

Education rates for refugees and other peoples displaced by war and conflict remain alarming low. In 2024, the UNHCR estimate the following enrolment rates:

- 37% of children are enrolled in some form of early childhood education
- 65% of primary school-aged children have access to primary schooling.
- 42% of secondary school-aged children have access to high school[12].

Unsurprisingly, tertiary education access is even more limited; only 7% of refugees have access to higher education, compared with 37% of non-refugee populations. This represents an impressive increase from 1% in 2019, but the persistent bottlenecks and highly uneven access, shaped by country of asylum, gender, and duration of displacement make this an enduring area of global advocacy.

In 2019, the UNHCR established its 2030 Refugee Education Strategy[13], which aimed to promote multilateral responsibility sharing and encourage investment from states, non-government organisations, education institutions, private sector, and refugee communities to enhance educational access and participation globally. This strategy …paved a way forward that would ensure the inclusion of refugee children and youth in equitable quality education, contributing to their resilience and preparing them for participation in cohesive societies[12] (p. 8).

However, the challenge extends beyond simply getting refugees and displaced people into education. It is also about ensuring meaningful participation and positive learning experiences and about creating pathways that lead to durable solutions, whether through resettlement, integration, or safe and voluntary repatriation. This includes access to employment opportunities aligned with their field of study which can support long-term stability and independence.

# Refugee resettlement and education in Australia: A story of varied and disadvantaged access

Australia has a long history of welcoming refugees and will have resettled over a million refugees by the end of 2025. Most refugee resettlement in Australia occurs via the offshore humanitarian program, although a small number of individuals receive protection after making a claim once onshore. In 2024, approximately two thirds of individuals granted an offshore humanitarian visa were under the age of 30, including 42.2% of people under the age of 1714. Most individuals that lodge a claim for protection after arriving onshore in Australia with a valid visa are also relatively young[15]. With so many refugee young people arriving in Australia each year, it is critical to ensure that equitable access to education remains a priority. However, as shown in table 2 (below), humanitarian entrants' rights to education in Australia differ depending on whether they have received onshore or offshore protection.

Refugees who are resettled through the offshore humanitarian program with permanent protection have full access to public education, including access to Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) and tertiary education fee-deferral loan schemes such as HECS-HELP. By contrast, people who claim asylum onshore (e.g., those with temporary protection visas or from refugee backgrounds who arrive on a non-humanitarian temporary visa) face significantly restricted access to education. They are often classified as international students and must pay full international fees without access to government subsidies or loans.

Most Australian citizens or permanent visa holders, who have held one of the onshore or offshore protection visas listed in the following table, sponsor their spouse and child/children using temporary or permanent partner visa (Subclass 801 and 820). Children of these families, who are 16 years old or younger, generally have the same rights as the children of permanent humanitarian visa holders to access early childhood education and primary and secondary school in Australia. However, young people over the age of 16 face significant education and financial barriers when trying to access Intensive English Language Centre (IEC), senior colleges, TAFE, and higher education. For example, in states like NSW, some have experienced months-long waiting periods to enrol in senior colleges. Many of these families rely on a single income and are ineligible for Centrelink or other government assistance during their first four years in Australia. Some older children face transportation and financial barriers that prevent them from attending senior secondary education or even free TAFE courses.

More importantly, these young people are not eligible for subsidised university places or HECS-HELP loans in the first four years of their arrival, even if they meet the required English language proficiency requirements. As a result, many talented and well-educated young people are forced to take up low-skilled employment, rather than pursuing long-term, highly skilled careers. This educational exclusion shapes their early experiences in Australia and has lasting personal and professional consequences, impacting their identity, sense of belonging and integration into Australian society. As Danso succinctly notes,

> How a society receives and welcomes its new members goes a long way to affect the life chances of the newcomers...If, at the initial stages of resettlement, the refugees were placed before insurmountable obstacles and found themselves in conflict situations with the new society without getting assistance, they would return to their former patterns of behaviour, thus hindering their development or even totally eliminating the possibility of ever attaining a sense of 'rootedness and belongingness (p. 8). [16]

**Table 2.** Humanitarian Entrants' Right to Access Education in Australia.

| Place of Visa Application | Mode of Arrival | Humanitarian Visa Program | Right to Education | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Early Childhood Education (3-year and 4-year kindergarten or 5-year pre-school) | School (Grade 1-12) | Higher Education (subsidised places through HECS-HELP) | TAFE | Adult Migration English Program (AMEP) |
| **Offshore Protection (visa applicants apply for an Australian humanitarian visa from outside Australia and mostly from outside their country of origin)** | By air on an Australian humanitarian visa | Global Refugee Category (i.e., mostly referred by UNHCR for Australian protection) | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| | | Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) (proposed for protection by an Australian citizen and permanent visa holder or an organisation based in Australia) | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| | | Community Support Program (CSP) (Australian individuals, organisations and businesses sponsor refugees and pay for their pre-arrival costs such as visa fees, flights, health checks and etc.) | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| | | Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP) (Group of Australians support with the resettlement and integration of refugees who have been referred by UNHCR for Australia's protection) | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| **Onshore Protection (visa applicants apply for a humanitarian visa after arriving in Australia)** | By air on an Australian valid visa (i.e., visitor, work, student, and another visa) | Onshore Protection Visa (Subclass 866) | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| | | Bridging Visas (i.e., whilst the protection visa is assessed) | Y | Y | No | Y | Y |
| | By boats without a visa (i.e., the last cohorts who are in Australia arrived in 2013) | Resolution of Status (RoS) Visa (permanent visa for holders of 3-year Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) and 5-year Safe Heaven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) [1] | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| | | Bridging Visa (Boat arrivals waiting since August 2013 for final outcomes of their protection or appeal applications | Y | Considered as 'international students' and required in some states to pay fees to attend public schools. But, in practice, they have been exempted from paying school fees in all states/territories. | No | Different access right to state-fundedTAFE programs in each state or territory. | Y |

# What is the state of play for refugee education in Australia?

While there is broad consensus that education is essential to the integration of refugee-background-students in Australia, the experiences of teaching and learning for these students are overwhelmingly characterised as challenging. There is limited, targeted attention to refugee education in areas such as planning for new arrivals (particularly in new resettlement areas[17]), providing support beyond initial enrolment, promoting long-term language and literacy development beyond functional English, and facilitating career planning. This absence of coordinated attention arguably stems from a lack of high- level policy dialogue between key government departments, most notably, the Departments of Home Affairs and Education.

Some of these issues can also be explained by policy-level misrecognition. The exclusion of students from refugee backgrounds (SfRB) as a distinct equity group with specific educational needs diminishes the imperative to plan, fund, and resource for their educational needs and preferences. In the secondary sector, one of the most significant issues is the conflation of SfRB with other Culturally and Linguistically Marginalised (CALM) student groups, such as students from Language Backgrounds Other than English (LBOTE) and students with English as an Additional Language (EAL/D) in Department-wide policies18. While SfRB may have similarities with other CALM students, their pre- and post-migration experiences often present distinct challenges that impact their educational needs[19].

Similarly, in the higher education sector, refugees are not formally recognised as an equity group, as they are frequently conflated with other students in the low SES category[20.] This policy misrecognition of SfRB has direct implications on their access and participation in education, as it limits the provision of targeted interventions and support at the institutional level for these students. As Molla argues, the misframing of SfRB "reproduces injustice" by leading to the "maldistribution" of resources, the "misrecognition" of SfRB, which results in institutional and systemic bias, and the "misrepresentation" of their needs in equity policy debates, where SfRB are often rendered invisible[20] (p.22). This challenge within education policy reflects a deeply embedded ideology of refugee invisibility as an equity group within the Australian education system.

Challenges in identifying people from refugee backgrounds pose significant barriers for educational participation and success. The absence of consistent and standardised identification measures across educational continuum (early childhood, primary school, high school, and higher education) creates significant challenges that impact these students throughout their educational journey. Inconsistent identification undermines the continuity of support, resulting in missed opportunities for early interventions, tailored support, and access to appropriate academic and social services at every stage.

These gaps can hinder educational progress, leave critical needs unmet, and reduce opportunities for success, regardless of when students enter the Australian education system. Moreover, the inability to consistently track students across educational sectors complicates the development of effective policies and programs and makes it difficult to evaluate the long-term outcomes of interventions designed to support these students. Addressing this issue is crucial for ensuring equitable access and fostering positive educational outcomes for SfRB across all levels of education.

Language plays a critical role in shaping educational access, engagement, and achievement. Humanitarian entrants represent a variety of linguistic backgrounds and literacy levels; the vast majority are multilingual yet arrive in Australia with limited English proficiency[21]. Proficiency in host language is essential for accessing vital settlement information, educational opportunities, and academic resources across all age groups[22–24]. As such, both initial language support during the early months of settlement and ongoing language development throughout the education journey are crucial for enabling meaningful participation and success in education. In addition to Intensive English Centres and AMEP classes, more targeted and extended language support are needed to develop proficiency beyond 'functional' levels. These supports should address the diverse and evolving language-related needs of increasingly heterogenous refugee populations. Examples include language tutoring, speech therapy, community language teaching, IELTS preparation for university and employment access, English for Academic Purposes [EAP] and English for Specific Purposes [ESP] courses).

There is also a need to equip language educators with trauma-informed and strengths-based pedagogical approaches, methods that recognise both the therapeutic potential of language learning and the linguistic resources that SfRB bring into the classroom[25,26]. However, further research is necessary to challenge language-related stereotypes and to inform more inclusive and responsive education policies and practices.

Other barriers that hinder refugees access to and engagement in education in Australia stem from fragmented connections across multiple levels of policy and practice. For example, there is a persistent lack of coordination between immigration and education departments, as well as misalignments between policies funding mechanisms, and implementation at federal, state/territory, and local government levels.

These disconnections are further compounded by the limited involvement of educational stakeholders in resettlement planning and policy discussions across Ministerial, Departmental, and local levels. This absence results in a lack of sustained funding for cross-sector partnerships, minimal collaboration between schools, families, and settlement services, and weak integration between formal education and informal community supports. Critically, there is also a shortage of specialist staff, including liaison officers and educators, trained to support students with experiences of forced migration.

In what follows, we offer a critical review of the academic literature on challenges that people with forced migration backgrounds experience with:

- Early childhood education
- Schooling
- Adult Migration English Program (AMEP)
- Vocation Education and Training (VET)
- Higher education

# Early childhood education

Early childhood education (ECE) is increasingly recognised as a critical foundation for lifelong learning, as well as for children's social, emotional, and cultural development[27]. National reforms have signalled a shared federal and state/territory commitment to universal preschool access, aiming to provide all children with 15-hours per week in the year before formal schooling[28]. In 2024, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimated 90 per cent of four-year-olds and 22 per cent of five-year-olds were enrolled in preschool programs[29]. However, data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) highlights the underrepresentation of children from migrant and refugee backgrounds in both accredited and community-based early childhood programs[30]. A persistent 8 per cent participation gap between these communities and the general population was recorded from 2009–202127. Eligibility for subsidised ECE, such as the Child Care Subsidy (CCS), also varies by visa status. While the CCS is available to permanent residents and certain temporary visa holders, State/Territory programs also support inclusive access. Queensland's Kindy Uplift scheme offers fee exemptions for children on refugee or humanitarian visas[31], and Victoria's Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) provides free or low-cost programs for eligible three-year-olds[32].

Despite these policies, children from refugee backgrounds remain underrepresented in ECE, which contributes to critical challenges in education, health, and wellbeing. Limited early learning access is linked to reduced engagement with health and developmental services, especially for children with disabilities or trauma-related conditions[33,34]. These participation gaps negatively impact on school readiness, foundational learning, and social-emotional development[35]. Moreover, lack of access can hinder families from building essential social support networks[36,37].

## Early childhood education challenges

**Information Access**

There is limited accessible information for parents/carers about formal and informal early childhood programs (e.g., playgroups, libraries, community language schools). Prevailing assumptions that all parents understand the Australian ECE system result in poor communication about its benefits, particularly for families with different early learning experiences.

**Financial and Logistical Barriers**

Even in fees-free programs, transport difficulties, work commitments, and added costs (excursions, supplies) reduce participation. Community-run programs also struggle with securing suitable spaces and affording educational materials.

**Engagement Barriers in Mainstream Settings**

In mainstream centres, families report staff lack awareness of refugee children's trauma, multilingualism, and health needs. Sleep issues, anxiety, and emotional regulation are often misunderstood. Multilingualism is often viewed as a barrier rather than a strength. In contrast, community-based programs are described by families as "safe, familiar spaces" that support home language and culture, replicating early childhood education networks from their countries of origin.

# School

Access to primary and secondary school among refugee children particularly at compulsory levels (Years K–10) remains high. However, for more than two decades, Australian research has highlighted persistent schooling challenges for students from refugee backgrounds and the teachers working with them[18]. There is a lack of specific training for school staff in either initial teacher education programs or ongoing professional development, leaving teachers with little understanding of the barriers these students face or their capacity to navigate complex social and systemic challenges[6,38,39]. With limited resources and high pressures from standardised curriculum and testing, teachers struggle to balance competing priorities of subject- specific support, English language learning, and social connection, while schools face ongoing challenges with racism and discrimination that affect students' sense of inclusion and belonging[40,41].

Research has identified promising practices to address these challenges. Teachers and school leaders can build on students' multilingual strengths while attending to prior trauma exposure or periods of missed schooling that impact learning and engagement[42]. Schools can develop inclusive environments that enable belonging, recognise students' complex cultural and linguistic strengths, and acknowledge that students actively seek academic success, inclusion, and social connection[43,44]. Building capacity through family connections, support networks, and intercultural learning, along with professional development that fosters positive attitudes and high expectations rather than deficit views, can significantly improve outcomes[45].

There remains a lack of policy explicitly addressing the structural and systemic barriers faced by SfRB and school staff[46]. The ongoing lack of alignment between education, migration, and multiculturalism policies in Australia impacts schools and students significantly[47]. Without policy guidance and associated resourcing and training, approaches depend entirely on localised contexts, location, resources, and individual teachers' knowledge and motivation, resulting in highly diverse student experiences that vary dramatically based on where they live and attend school[44].

## School Challenges

**Lack of a unifying policy framework to support SfRB**

There is a lack of policy responding to the needs of students from refugee backgrounds in schooling systems. This includes gaps at the local level and across sectors, states/territories, and nationally. The supports available within schools are often inconsistent and ad-hoc, and students miss out if staff and/or schools are not aware of eligibility for support (and how to access associated funding), or what kinds of support might be most useful.

**Data visibility relating to refugee status**

Data available to identify students from refugee backgrounds is insufficient, as the students are often considered within larger cohorts such as English language learners or within broad multicultural or inclusion policies. This means that policy and practice responses are not tailored to the specific needs of students with refugee experience.

**Insufficient strategies to address racial discrimination**

Racism, discrimination, negative stereotyping, and low expectations significantly affect students from refugee backgrounds. There is an overall lack of anti-racism policy across sectors, with NSW being the only state department to have an explicit anti-racism policy at present.

# Adult Migrant English Program

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) has operated since the mid-1940s, supporting newly arrived migrants in developing English language skills to functional level as defined by the Australian Core Skills Framework[48]. Unlike other educational initiatives, AMEP is administered by the Department of Home Affairs and is available to all permanent migrants and humanitarian entrants aged 18 and over 49. Previously, eligible visa holders had a five-year window to enrol in 510 hours of free English tuition, but the program faced criticism for limited success in helping migrants acquire necessary employment-ready English skills.

Evidence consistently showed that the allocated tuition hours were insufficient for many learners to reach functional proficiency, with inconsistent attendance resulting in participants not completing their full allocation. The estimated average number of completed hours was just 289 out of the available 510[24]. Following evaluations by multiple stakeholders that identified program inefficiencies[24,50–52], the Australian Government introduced significant reforms in 2020, including removing the 510-hour limit, extending eligibility from functional to vocational English, and allowing access for visa holders who were in Australia on or before 1 October 2020[53].

Prior to the 2020 reforms, women comprised 65 percent of all program participants, with the majority holding family visas and around one-third on humanitarian visas. Despite refugees accounting for less than 10 percent of Australia's overall immigration intake, more than one-third of AMEP students identify as refugees[54]. While providers have introduced flexible options such as distance learning and evening classes, refugee women, particularly those not literate in their first language, face significant barriers including limited access to digital devices, lack of online learning skills, transportation challenges, and rising living costs that push many into immediate employment rather than language learning[55–58].

## Adult Migrant English Program Challenges

**Inadequate programs for youth who arrive in Australia between the age of 18 and 25**

Some young refugees are willing to do more study in universities, but the existing AMEP programs are less relevant for their needs up and do not meet the proficiency level required to comfortably study above Certificate III level. There are also significant wait lists for people to access to AMEP, especially in inner city suburbs with a high number of new arrivals. In regional and remote areas, where governments are keen to encourage migrant settlement, provision of the AMEP is increasingly under threat.

**Inadequate structure, content, and pedagogy**

Research shows that providing unlimited training hours without additional structural modifications to the language program can lead to learner demotivation and failure to progress beyond basic language proficiency, ultimately limiting meaningful employment opportunities. The evidence suggests that a one-size fits all approach fails to accommodate diverse learner needs through multilingual and trauma-informed instruction and fostering digital literacies and ongoing professional development for teaching staff to support these changes.

**Complexity of attendance for refugee women**

Refugee women encounter additional challenges which impact their participation in AMEP and their ability to benefit from the AMEP pathway to employment. These barriers may include discomfort with formal school environments, mixed gender classrooms, or tutors from the same community, alongside practical challenges such as public transport access or a lack of childcare facilities, or family-imposed restrictions on attending classes due to caring responsibilities, cultural and/or religious matters.

# Vocational Education and Training (VET)

Although research on refugee experiences in vocational education and training is limited, eligibility for subsidised places varies by visa status and state policy. Victoria offers the Asylum Seeker Vocational Education and Training (ASVET) program, enabling eligible humanitarian and refugee visa holders to access government-subsidised TAFE courses in priority employment areas like health, education, and construction. The government provides resources to providers through the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, including professional development and guidance on visa conditions, while New South Wales offers subsidised places through the Smart and Skilled program with targeted qualifications up to Certificate IV, plus the Asylum Seeker Employment Skills Support (ASESS) program for employment guidance and mentoring.

Data on refugee participation in Australia's VET sector remains severely limited, with the Joyce Review[59] making only minimal reference to humanitarian migrants' engagement. This data gap stems from inconsistent categorisation of equity groups and failure to track long-term outcomes after visa status changes. While a 2019 Brotherhood of St Laurence report found 14.1% of VET students came from non-English speaking backgrounds, this doesn't disaggregate by refugee status[60]. Government-funded language programs like AMEP often fail to deliver the specialised language and digital literacy support needed for successful VET participation, and there's increasing recognition that VET educators need training in trauma-informed teaching approaches.

Major barriers include confusion around recognition of prior learning, difficulty accessing up-to-date eligibility information, and time and financial constraints. Some students report being advised to enrol in unnecessary or irrelevant courses, highlighting the need for clearer guidance and better support for student advisors. The cost of studying at TAFE or other Registered Training Organisations remains prohibitive even with subsidised places, as students must pay service fees and purchase essential equipment like laptops, creating additional financial barriers to access.

## Vocational Education and Training Challenges

**The perception of VET as a less desirable study option**

A persistent challenge for VET is the perception that VET is considered a 'lesser' option (compared with higher education) for many CALM communities, especially by parents who are keen for their children to get into professional careers, such as medicine, engineering, and law. This suggests a prevalent absence of public information and education about pathways to careers, including vocational programs and apprenticeships.

**The implications of policies that are designed for Australian born/ English-speaking students**

While VET is a softer pathway to further education, especially for refugees who arrive in Australia in late adolescence or as adults, policies such as the minimum standards in NSW are creating barriers to VET access for CALM students including young refugees.

**Lack of support with careers and employability barriers**

With apprenticeships or work-ready programs, there is often insufficient support for refugees to overcome barriers to understanding workplace rights and responsibilities, limited access to industry networks, and career guidance. Refugees entering the workforce often experience tacit (if not explicit) discrimination and bias.

# Higher education

Students from refugee backgrounds are not currently recognised as an official equity group in Australian higher education and are not specifically targeted under federal equity funding schemes like the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). However, the recent Universities Accord acknowledged that RBS "experience significantly lower higher education participation and attainment outcomes" and recognised them as an emerging equity group, recommending the collection of more granular data to enable effective monitoring of their progress and outcomes[61] (p. 117). Current university systems that rely on visa status at enrolment are insufficient, as they fail to identify refugees who have since become citizens or those who entered on bridging or non-humanitarian visas, significantly limiting institutions' ability to respond to their specific needs[4].

Evidence shows that more SfRB on permanent humanitarian visas have enrolled in Australian higher education in recent years, with consistent increases in both commencing and total enrolments between 2011 and 2019[62]. While commencements remained strong in 2020, total numbers declined due to reduced resettlement during COVID-19, and despite recent increases in refugee arrivals, numbers have not returned to pre-pandemic levels[62]. Participation and completion rates remain concerning, particularly for groups such as Refugee African Youth (RAY)[63] and humanitarian migrants from Iraq[64]. Over 20 years, only one in ten RAY aged 18–30 transitioned to higher education within five years of arriving in Australia, and just one in five who enrolled completed a qualification, suggesting educational inequities extend far beyond access alone[63].

Common barriers identified in the literature include disrupted prior education, past trauma, racism, language barriers, limited support networks, and difficulties navigating new academic culture. Refugees on temporary protection visas face additional barriers due to high international student fees, though 26 universities now offer full-fee waiver scholarships[65]. Research highlights the need for comprehensive, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive support systems including scholarships, academic onboarding, English language support, mentoring, mental health counselling, and employability training[66]. The literature also supports scaling up initiatives like the Refugee Student Settlement Pathway to provide more durable and inclusive educational opportunities for refugees in Australia[67].

## Higher Education Challenges

**Lack of recognition as an equity group**

Without formal recognition as an equity group in Australian HE equity policy, the distinct needs, challenges and strengths of SfRB may go unrecognized by universities. While the low socioeconomic status (SES) equity group may capture some SfRB, it fails to account for factors that intersect with financial hardship to compound disadvantage, such as racism, trauma, language barriers and limited prior education. A lack of tailored support may contribute to the high dropout rates observed for some refugee groups, such as RAY.

**Data visibility relating to refugee status**

Universities can identify students on permanent humanitarian visas at enrolment, but they are unable to track students that successfully transition to citizenship or students that have refugee or refugee-like experience on bridging or non-humanitarian visas. This makes it difficult to develop an accurate picture of refugees' access, participation, success, retention and completion outcomes in HE.

**Navigational challenges and institutional unresponsiveness**

SfRB often face significant navigational challenges when transitioning to and progressing through university including unfamiliarity with academic systems, course requirements, support services, administrative processes, and digital platforms. Additionally, students who transition to citizenship or change visa status may no longer be eligible for certain support services designed specifically for refugees, leaving gaps in the assistance they need.

# Recommendations

## Recommendations to Address Cross-Cutting Issues in Refugee Education

### National Framework for Refugee Education

• Policy Recognition: Establish a unified national framework that identifies refugee students as a distinct equity group. This framework should ensure targeted support by addressing access, inclusion, transition, success, and data collection.

• Ongoing Academic Language Support: Provide long-term, adequately funded English language support to help achieve parity with basic interpersonal and cognitive academic language proficiency.

### Data Collection and Professional Development

• Granular Data Collection: Implement nationally coordinated quantitative and qualitative data practices to identify refugee students, ensuring continuity in support throughout their educational journey.

• Professional Development for Educators: Mandate training in trauma-informed care and culturally responsive teaching, beginning with educators in areas with high populations of refugee students.

## Recommendations for Specific Educational Sectors

### Early Childhood Education

1 **Information Dissemination:** Develop multilingual, multimodal platforms for sharing information about program availability and supports.

2 **Resource Acquisition:** Support community-based services to acquire essential educational materials, sports equipment, and other resources.

3 **Professional Learning Programs:** Implement ongoing, strengths-based training in trauma-informed care and cultural responsiveness.

4 **Greater Diversity:** Incentivise Early-Childhood Education training for students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to increase the representation of diverse centre directors and staff. This will ensure that Early Childhood Education Centres better understand and address the perspectives of parents, carers, families, and children, particularly in regional areas of Australia; and ensure that programs are culturally appropriate, inclusive, and provide safe spaces for parents, carers, and children.

### Schooling

1 Identification of Students from Refugee Backgrounds: Clearly identify these students within federal education policies, ensuring their needs are recognised and addressed. This can include within broader policies (for example for multicultural inclusion, or wellbeing).

2 A National Framework for Refugee Education: a national framework is necessary to enable a coordinated and cohesive integration of refugee background students into Australian schools. A national framework would need to consider aspects such as:

• Develop and resource targeted pathways programs for adults of refugee background to undertake Initial Teacher Education and secure employment as teachers, particularly in schools with high refugee student populations.

- Collation of data on students, who are they, where are they, and who is responsible when students move schools or locations.
- Guidelines on what funding is available explicitly for refugee background students, how is this accessed and what accountability mechanisms are in place for how this is spent
- Communication to schools and sectors on student and family arrivals and locations, as well as details of eligibility for support at school and outside of school.
- National guidelines on intensive English language support in the initial 18 months after arrival (who is responsible, how is this coordinated).
- National guidelines for school and classroom specific needs of RBS within the first 5 years of arrival (i.e. language learning needs, responses to interrupted schooling, wellbeing needs, family and community needs).
- The creation and maintenance of key leadership roles within sectors and state/territory departments that have responsibility for responding to the needs of students from refugee backgrounds and families.
- More support and information are needed for refugee students and their families to better understand the education systems in Australia including transition pathways to diverse tertiary education pathways.

3 **Data and Resource Coordination:** Formalise nation-wide data categories and resources tailored to the needs of refugee students, ensuring access to information and funding.

4 **Inclusive Curriculum Development:** Develop an inclusive curriculum that reflects and values the diverse cultural backgrounds of refugee students that includes multicultural perspectives in the teaching materials and curriculum content, and the recognition and celebration of different cultural heritages and languages within the school environment.

5 **Leadership:** Create leadership roles within educational sectors to focus on refugee student needs.

6 **Mentorship programs:** Facilitate the establishment of formalised mentorship programs where students from refugee backgrounds can connect with peers who share similar experiences, better supporting the transition process and fostering a supportive school community.

7 **Access to Extra-Curricular Activities:** Ensure refugee students have access to extra-curricular activities that promote integration and personal development. This involves providing support and resources to help refugee students participate in sports, arts, and other enrichment programs and offering transportation assistance or subsidies for families to ensure students can attend after-school activities.

8 **National Anti-Racism Framework for Australian Schools:** implement a national anti-racism framework across schools, that includes anti-racism policies as separate to anti-bullying policies.

## Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP)

1 **Needs Analysis and Tailored Instruction:** Conduct analyses to tailor content to learner goals, ensuring professional development for educators in multilingual and trauma-informed pedagogies.

2 **Flexible Access:** Provide access to childcare, flexible scheduling including on-line and in-person options, and transport options to accommodate diverse learner needs.

3 **Digital Access:** Where online program delivery continues, ensure students are equipped with the data and technology/devices they need to undertake their studies remotely.

4 **Develop an AMEP Youth Strategy and Outcomes Framework:** The strategy and framework should include:
- Clearly defined goals for the delivery of youth specific classes and specifically the factors that further social integration and English language and related upskilling.
- Mandatory minimum requirements, which require providers/contractors to commit to either contract-based or organisation-based youth participation/ engagement targets.
- Established metrics against which impact performance will be audited, monitored, measured, and learnt from over time.
- Deliverable services, service standards, or key performance indicators.
- Review curriculum for younger students and include more support for experiential learning and excursions.

## Vocational Education and Training

1 **Pathway Clarity and Support:** Clarify recognition of prior learning, provide targeted digital literacy support, and strengthen industry links for mentorship opportunities.

2 **Public Education Campaigns:** Develop campaigns to promote understanding of vocational pathways in collaboration with local communities.

## Higher Education

1 **Recognition as an Equity Cohort:** Formally recognise students from refugee backgrounds as a distinct equity group to facilitate targeted support and resource allocation.

2 **Data Collection and Monitoring:** Develop and integrate data tracking systems that accurately capture changes in residential status for refugee students who have obtained citizenship.

3 **Culturally Responsive Support Programs:** Design specialised support programs tailored to the unique needs, challenges, and strengths of students from refugee backgrounds. Include services such as academic mentoring, language support, cultural orientation workshops, financial aid, peer mentorship networks, and counselling services to address socio-emotional needs. This should also include peer mentoring and trauma-informed training for staff.

4 **Holistic Support Services:** Provide holistic support services: that address non-academic barriers to success, such as financial aid, housing assistance, childcare support, and healthcare services.

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