



REPORT

Humanitarian migrants, work and economic security on the urban fringe

How policies and perceptions shape opportunities

Martina Boese | John van Kooy | Dina Bowman

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is a non-government, community-based organisation concerned with social justice. Based in Melbourne, but with programs and services throughout Australia, the Brotherhood is working for a better deal for disadvantaged people. It undertakes research, service development and delivery, and advocacy, with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating learning into new policies, programs and practices for implementation by government and others. For more information visit <www.bsl.org.au>.

Martina Boese is a lecturer at La Trobe University, John van Kooy is a PhD candidate at Monash University and was previously a Research Fellow at the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and Dina Bowman is a Principal Research Fellow in the Work and Economic Security team in the Brotherhood's Research and Policy Centre.

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ABN 24 603 467 024

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SUMMARY

Australia is in the midst of a national conversation about population growth and immigration, with a focus on social cohesion and integration. At the same time, Australia's humanitarian program has shifted towards an emphasis on temporary protection, place-based resettlement and prioritising the economic contributions of refugees and people seeking asylum.

Fast-growing urban fringe localities, with significant pressure on services and infrastructure, are often at the forefront of dealing with these challenges. We draw on 23 interviews with service providers, local government personnel, policymakers, employers and community-based organisations

in the City of Hume. We asked them about their perspectives on policy and regulatory influences on the economic security of humanitarian entrants, and local responses to humanitarian settlement.

Our analysis considers local stakeholders' various understandings, roles, capacities and constraints in the context of federal policies and national debates. This report offers insights into how service providers, community groups and policy makers respond to increasingly diverse local populations, including newly arriving humanitarian migrants¹, to foster economic security and social inclusion. Rather than focusing solely on employment, we use a broader definition of 'economic security' that also embraces the economic and social protections that enable people to plan for the future (Bowman & van Kooy 2016).

Policy priorities and place-based resettlement

By focusing on employment outcomes for humanitarian migrants, Australian governments increasingly collapse humanitarian protection responsibilities into economic development priorities. Current policies are based on the notion that place-based resettlement provides local economic benefits, and that humanitarian migrants can (and should) take up any available employment. This assumption of a win-win scenario is particularly evident in regional resettlement initiatives, which are often treated as a solution for both local labour market gaps and refugee unemployment in metropolitan locations (Boese 2009). The Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) directs humanitarian migrants to designated areas to fill regional job vacancies, justified by 'principles of rewarding enterprise' and contributing to 'a strong regional Australia', but without pathways to permanent residency (Australia, House of Representatives 2014).

Emphasising the economic participation of recent humanitarian migrants can also obscure settlement challenges. It can take several years for refugees to become 'oriented, established, integrated and independent' in Australia (Department of Social Services 2016). During this time of adjustment to a new country, refugees require social support while their employment status fluctuates, including periods of unemployment and underemployment, or of low-paid, insecure work (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2007; Correa-Velez & Onsando 2009). In some cases, it is not until the second generation—the children of refugees—that sustained employment and the biggest 'demographic dividends' from resettlement are realised (Hugo 2014; van Kooy 2017). People who have not yet had their asylum claims finalised face persistent insecurity and uncertainty, compounding their difficulties in finding employment (van Kooy & Bowman 2018).

Place-based resettlement of humanitarian migrants puts demands on local governments, service providers, community organisations and employers. Successful

¹ Refugees and people seeking asylum

Summary continued

settlement and employment outcomes (even if temporary) depend on the resources, actions and perspectives of these local stakeholders as much as the individual enterprise and capacities of migrants (Boese 2015; Boese & Phillips 2017; Glick Schiller & Çağlar 2008; Hinger, Schäfer & Pott 2016). Local governments and host communities thus have a key role to play in responding to the challenges that in-migration presents for effective delivery of social services and maintaining community cohesion.

The City of Hume: high diversity, high service density, high unemployment on the urban fringe

The City of Hume provides a useful case study of the issues relating to humanitarian migrants' employment and settlement. The city is a 'growth corridor' on Melbourne's north-west fringe, a major destination for recently arrived refugees and asylum seekers, and a prime example of Australia's changing demographics and local labour market dynamics. Hume's diverse, multicultural population is growing quickly, with the majority of recent migrants coming from non-English speaking countries of the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia. In the last decade, the balance of new arrivals has tipped towards those on humanitarian protection visas, rather than skilled or family entrants.

While historically the area was a manufacturing hub, the closure of car manufacturing plants has reduced employment opportunities and significantly affected the local economy (Barnes 2016; Jacobs 2016). The City of Hume has a comparatively low labour force participation rate and a higher unemployment rate than Victoria and Australia overall. Nevertheless, in-migration continues because of housing affordability and availability, access to services and the presence of established communities with migrant backgrounds.

Settlement, work and economic security

Dominant policy discourses in Australia emphasise migrants' self-sufficiency and individual enterprise. Jobseekers in general are expected to be 'motivated, capable and ready to work' when a local job opportunity arises (Hume City Council 2017). Proposed amendments to the Social Security Act mean that if they do not find work, new permanent migrants will face longer waiting times to access welfare payments and social services (Australia, House of Representatives 2018). Humanitarian migrants are unlikely to be exempt from the expectation to be independently 'work ready': people

seeking asylum, for example, are now facing tighter eligibility criteria for income support and being expected to support themselves while their immigration status is resolved (Commonwealth of Australia 2018).

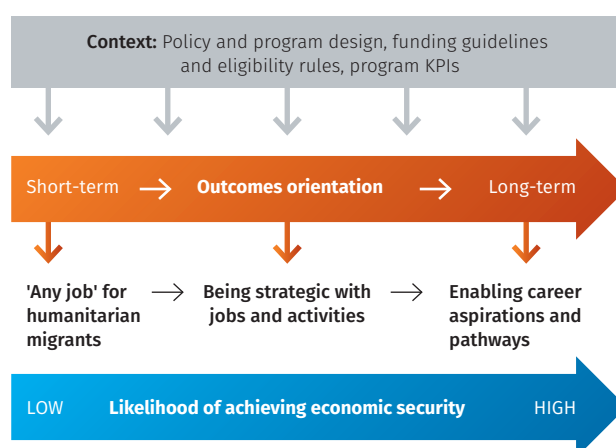
Many of the respondents in our study, particularly employment services staff, reflected a view of employment for humanitarian migrants as a short-term prospect, and saw taking 'any job' as necessary just to meet the costs of living. Unfortunately, this short-term focus exacerbates the risk that migrants may fall into poverty or exploitative forms of work.

The service providers we interviewed often linked restricted employment prospects to the labour market limitations that affect all jobseekers in Australia, including the possibility of temporary, casual and precarious work arrangements.

We identified three main understandings of the work-related needs of humanitarian migrants; with individual variations they can be situated along a continuum (see Figure 1.1). How service providers, in particular, understand these needs and respond to them influences migrants' experiences of seeking work and achieving economic security.

Figure 1

Perspectives on work and economic security for humanitarian migrants



At one end of the continuum is the view that humanitarian migrants should accept any job that is available. This perspective reflects the demands on employment services to find 'quick-fix' solutions to their clients' unemployment. It draws on the providers' assessment that motivation (or desperation) and an attitude of 'being realistic' are important influences on the employment outcomes of individual jobseekers.

In the middle of the continuum is the more pathway-oriented position that there are certain jobs or activities—such as training, volunteering or work experience—that humanitarian migrants can do to improve their long-term prospects. This view reflects the notion of work, paid or unpaid, as a ‘stepping stone’ to longer term employment and influences service providers of different sizes and types that encourage jobseekers to take up employment-related activities sooner rather than later.

Most of the interviewees in our sample lean towards the short-term points on this continuum. This orientation is shaped by awareness of pressures on migrants to secure an income as soon as possible. That settlement service providers did not share this view points to the influence of program targets on perspectives on work and economic security.

At the other end of the continuum is the orientation towards assisting humanitarian migrants into long-term career pathways. This view places a stronger emphasis on migrants’ education and skill levels, their prior employment experience and, importantly, their aspirations. These respondents acknowledged the negative psychological impact of status loss for some humanitarian migrants and viewed employment as one of several dimensions of settlement. Critically, some service providers understood their role as enabling the development of long-term pathways, rather than working only on quick fixes.

Impacts of federal policies and programs on local service responses

Local stakeholders’ attitudes and approaches are affected by federal and state policy priorities on humanitarian settlement and employment. As with the SHEV in regional areas, the emphasis on migrants’ individual self-sufficiency in areas like Hume may work at cross-purposes to supporting long-term humanitarian resettlement. In this context, local service providers develop operational strategies that reinforce, reproduce or challenge these policy tensions to varying extents.

Our study asked interviewees to consider their roles in supporting the employment outcomes and aspirations of refugees and people seeking asylum. While many participants acknowledged the availability of a variety of services and supports in Hume, they also identified external constraints.

Creative responses to constraints

The responses of different types of service providers reflected how government contracts and funding conditions often limit the possibilities for supporting the longer term career aspirations of humanitarian migrants. In employment services, these constraints appear to compel providers to rapidly place service users into any available job. Interviewees described how providers adopt a range of quick fixes, a churning-out mentality, and in some cases, apply pressure to jobseekers to meet their activity requirements. These insights match other studies that have highlighted inherent challenges for mainstream employment services assisting disadvantaged jobseekers (Bodsworth 2015; Bowman et al. 2016; Randrianarisoa & Bowman 2018).

Several service providers identified localised efforts to work around these systemic issues to help humanitarian migrants gain employment. For example, a case worker from a settlement service provider described how they would independently source mentors for refugee jobseekers. A training provider described the inclusion of highly skilled humanitarian migrants into an employment support initiative designed for skilled migrants. Another independently funded service provider explained that the purpose of his role was to balance the short-term financial needs and long-term career aspirations of humanitarian migrants (particularly those with high skills).

While gaining paid work can contribute to successful settlement, settlement services and employment services have historically been designed and delivered separately. In the past few years, there has been a move to focus on employment services as a part of settlement support. This can be enabling. For example, the new Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP) prioritises developing employment skills as part of settlement assistance.² And the Youth Transitions Support pilot, funded by the Department of Social Services and delivered by the Brotherhood of St Laurence with local partner agencies in the City of Hume, assists newly arrived young refugees to plan pathways to transition into education and employment by teaching ‘employee skills’, résumé writing and interview techniques, as well as providing information about the labour market in general and specific jobs.

However, a focus on employment within settlement support can also be disabling. For example, premature emphasis on self-reliance can undermine progress towards economic security, especially if people do not have the opportunity to develop their English language skills (BSL 2018).

² At the time of this study, efforts to combine these services had been piloted but not yet delivered on a larger scale.

Summary continued

Policy reform and local coordination for inclusive employment and economic security

Our study offers important insights into how the dominant expectations at the federal government level of humanitarian migrants' employment and self-sufficiency shape policies and practices at all levels, while constraining effective local support for long-term economic security. We argue that there is a need to move beyond 'workarounds' and 'quick fixes' in service provision.

At the local level, coordination of services is essential, particularly given the range of services and supports available in well-serviced locations like Hume. Local government can be a source of leadership, knowledge sharing, coordination and collaboration with employers.

However, an essential step towards building economic security for humanitarian migrants is a redesign of mainstream employment services and contracts that enables providers to appropriately assess migrants' needs and capacities and offer tailored support that is geared towards their long-term settlement pathways.

Better outcomes for this group can only be achieved by an improved design of relocation and resettlement initiatives at the policy level. A key change would be a shift in underpinning rationales from a quick-fix, short-term orientation to a medium and long-term perspective on employment pathways for new arrivals. Such a change in perspective would require federal and state governments to critically assess settlement locations with the specific demographics of new arrivals and the available employment opportunities in mind. While humanitarian entrants from rural backgrounds and with farming expertise might thrive when they can apply these skills, most likely in a regional or rural area, others may arrive with skills or knowledge that require updating to the Australian context through accessible training and could be better used in metropolitan settings. Such informed consideration of possible pathways may require more initial planning but would achieve significantly better returns for both new arrivals and host communities in the medium and long term. Without such forward thinking, the goal of economic security remains a distant dream for many humanitarian migrants.

Finally, governments must not abandon the goals of social equity and economic security for all in favour of short-term policy objectives like reducing welfare expenditure and responding to perceived local labour shortages. We are concerned that, even with additional resources directed to social service delivery, areas such as Hume will struggle to offer prospects for economic security to newly arrived humanitarian migrants. Informed and consistent advocacy is needed to ensure public investment in the social infrastructure that can enable the flourishing of inclusive, sustainable communities.

1 INTRODUCTION

While much attention has been given to the perspectives and experiences of humanitarian migrants in Australian communities (see, for example, Colic-Peisker 2009; Correa-Velez, Spaaij & Upham 2013; Fozdar & Hartley 2014), less attention has been paid to the perspectives of service providers, employers and policy makers on how to meet the needs of this group. It is these perspectives, however, that shape practices affecting migrants' employment and economic security. To fill this gap, this study explored how these stakeholders understand and respond to the issues that affect the employment and economic security of refugees and people seeking asylum. We focused on the City of Hume—a fast-growing, culturally diverse area on the north-western fringe of Melbourne. The study contributes to Brotherhood of St Laurence's ongoing research on migration, employment and economic security.

Economic security, not just employment

Our study reflects the Brotherhood of St Laurence's understanding of social disadvantage in marginalised communities as represented not solely by economic indicators but by a multidimensional view of people's lived experiences. In this study, we adopt a definition of economic security (based on Bowman & van Kooy 2016) that recognises not only the importance of waged employment, but also the broader economic and social conditions that enable people to meet their needs and to plan for the future.

We use this definition to critically analyse the perspectives of local service providers, policy makers, community organisations and employers that affect the opportunities of humanitarian migrants in the City of Hume to gain employment and economic security.

We use the term 'humanitarian migrant' to embrace both recognised refugees (on either temporary or permanent protection visas) and people seeking asylum in Australia.

Employment and place-based settlement

Australian immigration policies increasingly encourage the settlement of refugees in outer-metropolitan and regional areas, arguing a win-win scenario for migrants and host communities. Federal politicians and local organisations alike have advocated for humanitarian migrants to be settled in rural locations with skills shortages and dwindling populations (Dufty-Jones 2014; Hassall 2016; Remeikis 2015;

Stünzner 2017). Department of Social Services (DSS) data shows that 79% of all permanent humanitarian arrivals to Victoria in 2017 settled in areas classified as outer-metropolitan or regional (Department of Social Services 2017b). The Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) grants people seeking asylum permission to temporarily work or study in Australia, provided they do so in regional areas. More than 6000 SHEVs have been granted to applicants Australia-wide since the scheme was introduced in mid-2016 (Department of Home Affairs 2017) to replace permanent residence pathways for asylum seekers.

However, policies that relocate refugees based on economic criteria carry numerous challenges (Boese 2009). The DSS considers the refugee settlement period to be the first five years of residence: 'a time of adjustment' in which new arrivals 'seek to become oriented, established, integrated and independent' (DSS 2016). During this adjustment period, engagement in paid work often fluctuates. For example, only 21% of permanently resettled humanitarian migrants responding to a recent DSS survey said they were in paid employment three years after arriving in Australia (Department of Social Services 2017a). Moreover, not all employment ensures economic security (Bowman & van Kooy 2016). Australian research has shown that refugees can often be found in low-paid, insecure employment, and that employment in jobs that do not match skills or qualifications is common (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2007; Correa-Velez & Onsando 2009).

Place-based refugee resettlement also creates responsibilities for local governments, service providers, community-based organisations and employers (Boese 2015; Boese & Phillips 2014). The UNHCR guidelines for refugee resettlement, for instance, recognise that host municipalities directly mediate employment preparation and labour market opportunities for new arrivals (UNHCR 2011). However, some municipalities are better equipped than others to deal with the demands on social infrastructure and institutions and the impacts on community cohesion (Boese & Phillips 2017). Successful settlement and employment outcomes (even if temporary) are shaped by the resources, actions and attitudes of these local stakeholders, as much as the agency and capacities of migrants themselves (Glick Schiller & Çağlar 2008; Hinger, Schäfer & Pott 2016).

Introduction continued

The City of Hume

The City of Hume provides a useful case study of the issues relating to humanitarian migrants' employment and settlement. The city is a large local government area (LGA) ranging from 15 to 45 kilometres from the Melbourne central business district. It includes both suburban and rural localities, some of which fall outside the metropolitan boundary.

The total population residing in Hume as at 30 June 2017 was estimated at 216,000, an increase of nearly 4% over the previous year (compared with increases of 2.3% statewide and 1.6% nationally) (ABS 2018b, Table 2). Hume is home to more than 57,000 foreign-born residents, some of whom are refugees and people seeking asylum. In the calendar years 2016 and 2017, 49% of the 8,310 new migrants who settled in Hume were from the humanitarian stream (DSS 2017b). The city has the second-largest intake of humanitarian migrants of all LGAs in the country and the largest in the state of Victoria. Additionally, around 7.5% of the 8,200 asylum seekers in Victoria (who arrived by boat and held 'bridging' visas) resided in Hume as of December 2017 (Department of Home Affairs 2017).

Table 1 shows some of the cultural and linguistic diversity in Hume. Compared with Victoria and the rest of Australia, Hume residents are more likely to be born overseas, have both parents born overseas, speak a language other than English at home, and have arrived in Australia after the year 2000. Major birthplaces represented include Iraq, India, Turkey and Lebanon, with major language groups including Arabic, Turkish, Chaldean and Italian (ABS 2017b).

Table 1 Selected Census statistics, 2016

Characteristic	% of total population		
	Hume LGA	Victoria	Australia
Country of birth: all overseas	42.3	35.1	33.3
<i>Iraq</i>	5.4	0.3	0.3
<i>India</i>	4.4	2.9	1.9
<i>Turkey</i>	3.1	0.3	0.1
<i>Lebanon</i>	1.8	0.3	0.3
Both parents born overseas	54.4	38.5	34.4
Non-English language spoken in household	46.2	27.8	22.2
<i>Arabic</i>	8.3	1.3	1.4
<i>Turkish</i>	6.8	0.5	0.2
<i>Chaldean</i>	3.3	0.1	0.1
<i>Italian</i>	2.9	1.9	1.2
	% of overseas-born population		
Arrived before 2000	46.7	49.1	n.a.
Arrived since 2000	53.3	50.9	n.a.

n.a. = not available Source: ABS 2017a; 2017b

Table 2 shows some of the historical shifts in the composition of Hume's overseas-born population. Migrants who arrived from the 1950s to the 1990s are more likely to have been born in the United Kingdom or southern Europe, while since the turn of the century most migrants have been from the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia and New Zealand.

Table 2 Top 20 countries of birth by decade of arrival in Australia, Hume LGA

Country of birth	1956–1975	1976–1995	1996–2016	Total 1956–2016
Iraq	13	1,430	8,973	10,416
India	278	476	7,578	8,332
Turkey	1,659	2,440	1,873	5,972
United Kingdom	1,857	711	752	3,320
Lebanon	481	1,347	1,441	3,269
New Zealand	90	617	2,462	3,169
Sri Lanka	160	697	2,150	3,007
Philippines	54	905	1,608	2,567
Italy	2,248	172	134	2,554
Pakistan	3	68	1,951	2,022
Vietnam	9	838	414	1,261
Greece	737	114	114	965
Malta	718	98	38	854
Fiji	15	325	507	847
Egypt	346	156	327	829
Iran	18	128	654	800
China	28	141	584	753
Croatia	516	103	49	668
Malaysia	26	129	259	414
Germany	161	79	96	336
Total	9,916	11,822	33,806	55,544

Source: ABS 2017a

Employment in Hume

The Hume LGA has had a higher unemployment rate than state or federal levels in recent years, though it has fluctuated (see Figure 1). The local labour market has been characterised by the following trends (ABS 2018b; Department of Employment 2014; Neville 2013):

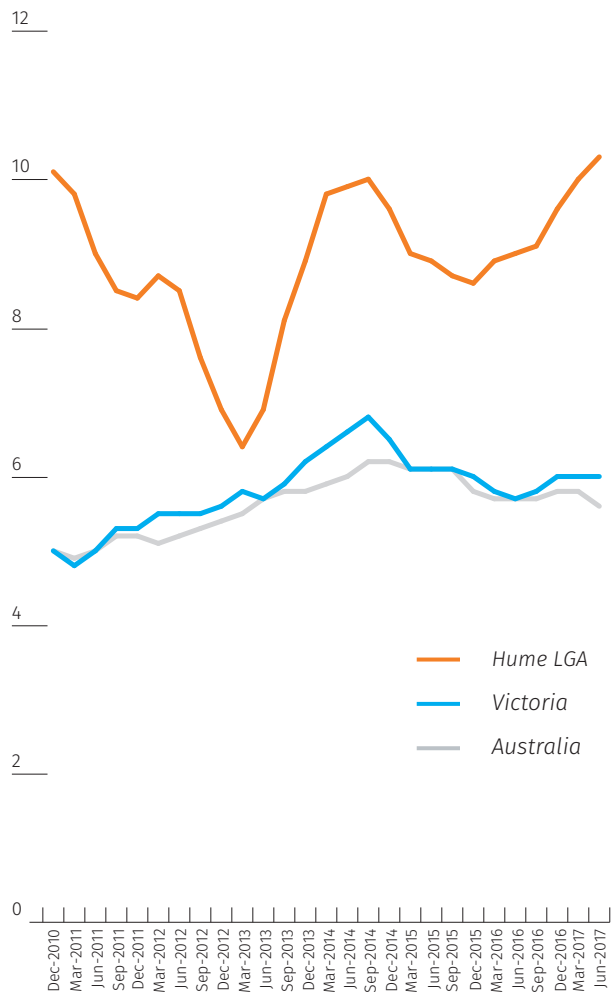
- sustained high population growth
- substantial decline in manufacturing, motor vehicle and retail jobs
- weak employment growth in lower skilled occupations
- softer labour demand, with fewer employers expecting to recruit in the short term

- very high competition for remaining local jobs (21 applicants for every vacancy in 2013)
- nearly half of all those employed travelling outside the region for work (i.e. not working locally).

Clearly the region encompassing the Hume LGA has not recovered from these structural economic changes. By June 2017, the unemployment rate had risen to post-GFC highs of more than 10%, compared with 6% for Victoria and 5.6% for Australia overall (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Unemployment rate (%), December 2010 to June 2017



Sources: ABS 2018a, Table 1 and Table 5, trend data; DJSB 2018c

Introduction

continued

Table 3 shows the main industries of employment in North Western Melbourne (the employment region in which the City of Hume is located) compared with overall Australian figures. North Western Melbourne has higher proportions of people employed in manufacturing and in transport, postal and warehousing than the national proportions, and a lower proportion in health care and social assistance.

Table 3 Employment distribution by top-ranked industries (% of all employed), August 2017

Rank	Industry	NW Melbourne	Australia
1	Health care and social assistance	11.2	13.0
2	Retail trade	10.7	10.2
3	Manufacturing	10.3	7.5
4	Education and training	10.2	8.1
5	Construction	9.6	9.1
6	Transport, postal and warehousing	9.1	5.1

Sources: DJSB 2018a

In Hume on 2016 Census night, around one-third (33%) of all men and nearly half (48%) of all women (including people who worked part-time) earned less than \$650 per week—below the full-time minimum wage in Australia, which at the time of writing was \$694.90 for a 38-hour week. Some 11.4% of women and 7.7% of men in Hume reported nil or negative income (ABS 2017a). The proportions of men and women in these low-income categories in Hume are all higher than the state and national levels.

The 2016 Census showed that Hume City scored 947 on the SEIFA Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage, ranked 69th out of 80 LGAs in Victoria; only Brimbank and Greater Dandenong ranked lower among outer-metropolitan LGAs (ABS 2018c, Table 1).

Migrants in the workforce in Hume

Among overseas-born respondents in Hume on 2016 Census night, 46% reported not being in the labour force—higher than the percentages for Victoria (41%) and Australia overall (38%). Australian-born residents in Hume were much more likely to be employed, either full-time or part-time (see Table 4).

Table 4 Labour force status (% of overseas-born and of Australian-born), 2016

Hume LGA			
	Not in labour force	Unemployed	Employed
Overseas-born	46.2	5.4	48.4
Australian-born	32.0	5.4	62.7
Victoria			
	Not in labour force	Unemployed	Employed
Overseas-born	40.6	5.0	54.4
Australian-born	32.5	3.9	63.6
Australia			
	Not in labour force	Unemployed	Employed
Overseas-born	38.2	4.8	57.0
Australian-born	33.9	4.2	61.9

Source: ABS 2017a

Table 5 shows the labour force status of Hume residents who speak a language other than English at home according to their English language proficiency. Only 15% of those who spoke English 'not well' or 'not at all' indicated that they were employed in the week before the Census (compared to 24% for Victorians and 27% for all Australians). Some 81% of the same Hume group were not in the labour force.

Table 5 Labour force status by English proficiency (% of those who speak a language other than English at home), 2016

Hume LGA		
Level of spoken English	Very well or well	Not well or not at all
Employed, worked full-time	33.1	8.1
Employed, worked part-time	18.8	5.8
Employed, away from work	3.3	1.1
Unemployed looking for full-time work	3.6	2.4
Unemployed looking for part-time work	2.8	1.7
Not in the labour force	38.4	80.9
Victoria		
Level of spoken English	Very well or well	Not well or not at all
Employed, worked full-time	36.8	13.0
Employed, worked part-time	19.6	9.9
Employed, away from work	3.0	1.5
Unemployed looking for full-time work	3.0	2.4
Unemployed looking for part-time work	2.9	2.3
Not in the labour force	34.6	70.9
Australia		
Level of spoken English	Very well or well	Not well or not at all
Employed, worked full-time	37.9	13.8
Employed, worked part-time	19.8	11.4
Employed, away from work	3.0	1.7
Unemployed looking for full-time work	3.1	2.4
Unemployed looking for part-time work	2.8	2.4
Not in the labour force	33.4	68.3

Note: Spoken English proficiency is self-assessed. Source: ABS 2017a

These statistics, drawn from the 2016 Census, suggest that overseas-born residents of Hume—particularly those with low proficiency in spoken English—fare worse in the labour market than their Australian-born counterparts, while the figures also compare unfavourably with both the state and national statistics.

There are no recent, reliable employment data for refugees or people on humanitarian visas at the LGA level. However, the Australian Census and Migrants Integrated Dataset (ACMID), based on 2011 Census data, does reveal some differences between people on different visa types within the Hume LGA (see Table 1.6). As of 2011, humanitarian visa holders in Hume were much less likely to be in the labour force than family or skilled migrants. Moreover, only 19% of humanitarian visa holders were employed, compared with 45% of family visa holders and 72% of skilled migrants. Again, these proportions are lower than for Victoria or the rest of Australia.

Table 6 Labour force status (% by migration stream), 2011

Hume	H	F	S
Employed full-time	10.3	27.5	55.5
Employed part-time	8.7	17.4	16.3
Unemployed	5.9	7.6	5.9
Not in labour force	75.1	47.5	22.3
Victoria	H	F	S
Employed full-time	18.0	35.9	55.8
Employed part-time	11.6	18.0	18.4
Unemployed	9.4	7.2	5.5
Not in labour force	61.0	39.0	20.3
Australia	H	F	S
Employed full-time	18.2	36.0	56.3
Employed part-time	12.5	18.7	19.0
Unemployed	9.3	6.8	5.1
Not in labour force	60.1	38.5	19.6

H=Humanitarian; **F**=Family; **S**=Skilled

Source: ABS 2014

Department of Jobs and Small Business statistics show that by the end of March 2018, the number of refugees accessing jobactive (public employment) services in North Western Melbourne was 2662, or around 22% of the total caseload—whereas only 5% of the national jobactive caseload are refugees (DJSB 2018b).

2 THE STUDY METHOD

The study aimed to identify the local influences on the employment and economic security of recent humanitarian migrants from the perspectives of service providers, local government, policymakers, employers and community-based organisations. It considered questions such as:

- What helps or hinders local responses to humanitarian settlement and economic participation?
- What place-based and broader political and regulatory factors shape the economic security of humanitarian entrants, and in what ways?
- What policy and practice insights can be drawn from the City of Hume to inform a broader inquiry into refugee resettlement and employment in regional and peri-urban areas?

The project provides much-needed insight about key stakeholders' perceptions of the kinds of barriers that prevent humanitarian migrants from getting and keeping quality jobs.

Recruitment and sample

To ensure a representative spread of research participants we identified stakeholders in:

- all levels of government (local, state and federal)
- different types of service (settlement, employment, health, education)
- different types of organisation (formal and informal)

We adopted various recruitment strategies, starting with existing contacts and networks through BSL services, snowballing and cold calling. We also introduced the study and spread our call for participants at two local meetings of key stakeholders in the settlement and youth employment fields in Hume.

Over four months in 2017, we conducted 23 interviews with representatives from:

- 5 community-based organisations
- 4 settlement service providers
- 4 government departments
- 4 local employers
- 3 employment service providers
- 2 education and training providers
- 1 health provider.

Interviews

In this study we asked participants about:

- available services and service gaps in the area of employment support in Hume
- job barriers and enablers for humanitarian migrants
- local job opportunities for humanitarian migrants
- the potential of these jobs to lead to economic security
- their own understandings of economic security
- policy issues and challenges that affected the economic security of humanitarian migrants.

Most interviews were conducted face to face, and a few by phone, based on the interviewee's preference. All interviews were recorded with the participant's consent and then transcribed. The de-identified transcripts were coded thematically based on the collaborative identification of themes in a workshop and supported by qualitative analysis software.

Ethics

Ethics approval was granted by both the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee (ref. no. E17-071) and the NHMRC-accredited ethics committee at the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

Limitations

The geographical focus of the study on Hume means that the findings need to be read with its local characteristics in mind: specifically, a peri-urban location with a culturally and linguistically diverse population, a high share of recent humanitarian arrivals and a high saturation of services. While this may distinguish Hume from other settlement contexts, we draw insights that are useful for considering the implications for place-based settlement elsewhere.

The small size of the study means that some stakeholder groups may have been missed. We aimed to counter this limitation by ascertaining from each interview participant which other stakeholders would be critical informants.

The study is constructed as an exploratory pilot study aimed at indicating key issues impacting on employment and economic security of humanitarian entrants. It is our intention that the findings be used to develop a larger comparative study.

3 WHAT'S THE PROBLEM? POLICIES, PROGRAMS AND PERCEPTIONS

Local practice is shaped by policies at different levels, including those that apply to federal employment and settlement services, and state government-funded programs. Each of these policy domains is informed by particular understandings of 'the problem' of refugee (un)employment. Understanding 'what the problem is represented to be' is a useful step towards a critical interrogation of public policy, with the aim to identify unexamined assumptions and logics (Bacchi 2009). This section discusses our interview findings, starting with practitioners' perspectives on the federally regulated settlement and employment support frameworks within which local organisations are operating, and ending with how local service providers, employers and policy makers understand and respond to 'the problem' within policy and program constraints.

Constraints for service providers

Hume is home to a wide range of publicly funded programs and services, as well as local community and volunteer-led initiatives and networks. Services include mainstream and targeted employment services, settlement programs and non-employment specific support. Local service providers and other stakeholders operating under different funding frameworks and guidelines highlighted both the constraints and opportunities for action in a specific location.

Constraints on local service provision often emerge from external sources such as the design of federal service contracts—in particular, the separate funding and delivery of employment and settlement support, and the lack of flexibility of mainstream employment services to cater for the needs of many humanitarian migrants. Local service provision thus takes place at the interface of service contract requirements and local networks, and practitioners have to find workarounds and patchwork solutions that are often localised and short-term. Another influence on local practice is individual perspectives on jobseekers and job opportunities, both in Hume and the wider labour market.

Tensions between settlement and employment support

A key tension for many service providers is the conflicting structures and designs of federally funded employment and settlement services. Traditionally, employment services have neither been part of nor aligned with Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS), formerly Integrated Humanitarian

Settlement Services (IHSS). In October 2017, HSS were replaced with the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP), which nominally prioritises employment skills as part of settlement assistance. The impact of this recent change remains to be seen. This report necessarily relates to practices and perspectives during the operation of the HSS.

Humanitarian Settlement Services included support for clients to find housing and get started as a household; assistance in accessing government-funded health services and schools; English language classes through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP); and counselling for those who had experienced torture and trauma. These services were provided by community organisations subcontracted by AMES, which held the HSS contract for many years in Hume, and now holds the HSP contract. Both the HSS and the HSP are aimed at supporting refugees and humanitarian entrants in the first 6 to 12 months after their arrival in Australia.

Additional settlement support has been available through initiatives funded under the Settlement Grants Program (SGP) administered through the Department of Social Services, and prior to that, through the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

A key gap in settlement services until very recently has been the limited scope for mainstream providers to offer employment support. Service providers in Hume mentioned different attempts to combine settlement and employment support, but those were typically 'one-off' programs and not integrated in the mainstream provision of either employment or settlement support.

Limitations of mainstream employment services

There was wide agreement across our interviewees that the support provided to humanitarian migrants through jobactive is insufficient. Refugees migrating to Australia through the permanent humanitarian stream may be referred to jobactive providers by Centrelink if they are in receipt of income support. However, asylum seekers do not qualify for that support, and must rely on other forms of employment support provided by community organisations.³ The current model of public employment services is perceived as poorly designed and underresourced. A fundamental flaw of the current system identified by participants is the short-term orientation of services, geared to rapid placement into jobs rather than pathways to achieve sustainable employment and economic security.

³ Changes made to Status Resolution Support Services since this research was conducted indicate that asylum seekers may soon be eligible for voluntary jobactive support.

What's the problem? Policies, programs and perceptions continued

As one state public servant noted, many of the problems in mainstream employment support affect a much larger group than humanitarian migrants. Nevertheless, there appear to be inconsistencies in how refugees specifically are supported within jobactive. According to one interviewee, problems include the jobseeker classification instrument (JSCI), which puts refugees in the 'too hard to place' basket while leaving them without adequate tailored support. Conversely, recent research conducted by the Refugee Council of Australia indicates the JSCI has led to incorrect streaming of newly arrived refugees into the lowest—not highest—support category (Tahiri 2017).

Our interviewees indicated that high caseloads in employment services also lead to a 'churning-out' mentality:

You hear stories of people having caseloads of 200 jobseekers and it's so transactional. Come in, have an appointment, go back, apply for more jobs, come back and see me. [State public servant]

Service providers identified the focus on short-term employment outcomes as problematic because it does not recognise education as a step towards longer term employment and economic security:

They're asking us to provide them with 20 jobs—and it's all bureaucratic ... OK if this student [is] going and doing school, like four days a week or three days a week, how would he have the opportunity to look for 20 jobs [per month]? [Settlement service provider]

Another critique of mainstream employment services related to the 'pushy' and uncompromising approach of their staff towards clients, which signalled a lack of competency in assessing and responding to individual training and support needs:

One client got very, very stressed out and she said, 'I cried there because they pressured me so much, I didn't know what to do. And they're telling me, you need to sit behind the computer and do this and that'. She said, 'I don't know how to use the computer. How am I going to do this and that?' [Local ethnic community stakeholder]

The unsatisfactory support offered by mainstream employment services is also evident in the practice of placing humanitarian migrants in what one respondent described as 'random' training courses, instead of developing a long-term career pathway with them, building on their past experience and skills.

As one training provider argued, an arbitrary list of certificates in a job applicant's résumé does not increase their employability; on the contrary, it suggests a lack of direction and diminishes the applicant's chances of securing employment. This provider had experienced a poor employment matching exercise in the past and argued strongly for the need to develop career paths for jobseekers who lacked qualifications and to introduce those with qualifications to businesses.

These concerns reflect wider criticism of jobactive's limited ability to meet the needs of those marginalised in the labour force, such as mature age jobseekers (BSL 2017).

How local stakeholders understand the problem of employment and economic security for humanitarian migrants

Service providers, community groups, policy makers and employers in our study had varying perspectives on the prospects for employment and economic security of humanitarian migrants. Some pointed to the lack of entry-level jobs due to the decline of sectors such as manufacturing, while others framed the problem as one of imperfect matching of supply and demand. Respondents often linked the restricted employment prospects of humanitarian migrants to the labour market limitations that affect all jobseekers in Australia. However, they also revealed particular expectations of humanitarian jobseekers.

Interpretations of economic security also varied. Asked what they understood by the term, participants suggested a range of meanings, with economic security seen as either objective or subjective, and as a relative or universal measure. Most participants understood economic security as related to adequate income, rather than job security. Some respondents viewed economic security as equivalent to 'independence' and thus conditional upon having waged employment and not relying on social welfare payments. For example:

I'd say employment's central for everybody, but ... there's been a history through many years, that motivation of refugees to really build their base in Australia often [comes] through employment. So, it's about economic independence and security. [State public servant]

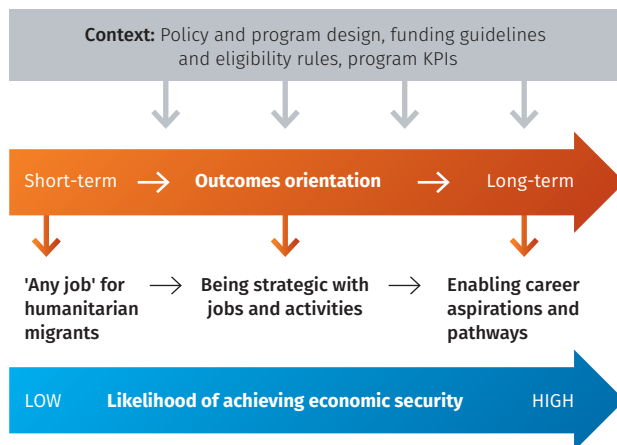
Of course, the conditions that enable such independence and security are required. Focusing on the historical integration of refugees into Australian economic and social life often overlooks the changed policy context.

A continuum of perspectives on work, time frames and economic security

We identified three main ways that respondents understood the employment-related needs of humanitarian migrants (see Figure 3). These are not mutually exclusive, and participant responses might reflect a blend of more than one perspective.

Figure 3

Perspectives on work and economic security for humanitarian migrants



The top bar shows the nominal rules such as program aims, funding guidelines and eligibility rules that collectively lead service providers to prioritise some orientations over others. The second bar shows, along a continuum, the temporal focus of service providers. Each point on the continuum reflects the conditions—funding, practice approaches or organisational contexts—in which stakeholders operate. Timeframes for addressing the 'problem' of unemployment are a pertinent example of the differences in service delivery shaped by different funding frameworks. These range from orientations to very short-term to long-term solutions.

Most of the interview responses in our sample lean towards short-term orientations. They tend to be accompanied by the suggestion that humanitarian migrants should accept work in any job that is available. This perspective reflects not only the aim to support people to gain economic independence but also the demands on employment services to find quick-fix solutions to their clients' unemployment.

In the middle of the continuum is the more strategic view that there are jobs or activities—such as training, volunteering or work experience—that humanitarian migrants can do to improve their long-term prospects. This

perspective reflects the notion of work, paid or unpaid, as a 'stepping stone' and informs service providers of different sizes and types who encourage jobseekers to take up employment or a variety of employment-related activities sooner rather than later.

At the other end of the continuum is the orientation towards assisting humanitarian migrants into long-term career pathways. Compared with the other positions on the continuum, this perspective places more emphasis on migrants' education and skill levels, their prior employment experience and, importantly, their aspirations. Respondents in this group were settlement service providers who acknowledged the negative psychological impact of occupational status loss for some humanitarian migrants and viewed employment as part of successful long-term settlement in Australia. Critically, this approach is oriented towards 'enabling' the development of long-term pathways, rather than working on quick fixes.

'Any job is better than no job' for humanitarian entrants

Stakeholders who suggested that humanitarian migrants should do 'any jobs' available drew on two main perceptions:

- motivation (or desperation) – some jobseekers are more 'motivated and willing' than others
- being realistic – pre-arrival experience generates 'unrealistic' expectations about employment prospects in Australia.

Neither of these ideas challenges the status quo. Instead, both require humanitarian entrants to change their expectations. For example, one service provider explained that there were jobs for those who 'really wanted them':

A lot of people we work with are quite motivated. They want to work, they want to do well for themselves, and so they kind of push themselves to achieve and work hard ... We don't have as many Bhutanese now as we did a few years ago, but a lot of them came from ... terribly destitute backgrounds in Nepal where they were not allowed to work and [were] really treated very poorly, and for them, when they came here they were willing to do anything. [Community-based service provider]

This service provider ascribed a superior work ethic to humanitarian jobseekers who had a negative pre-arrival experience and/or a more urgent need for income.

What's the problem? Policies, programs and perceptions continued

The second, related idea was that humanitarian migrants should do any job as a first step to break into the job market. Not doing this was considered as 'being unrealistic'.

Service providers are well aware that pre-arrival experiences, including employment experiences, influence the expectations of humanitarian migrants. As one stakeholder put it, this leads to some people having 'unrealistic expectations'.

Newly arrived migrants who have been doctors or lawyers or whatever ... They don't necessarily like the idea of cleaning. [Community-based service provider]

A critical point is that the employment-related expectations of professionally qualified humanitarian migrants are assessed against a different benchmark than those of equally qualified Australian-born jobseekers. This is evident in the long-held expectation and acceptance that new arrivals 'do it tough' for the benefit of the second generation:

it's probably a bit stereotypical but [there is] that whole notion of refugees right back from postwar refugees who come, do any job, despite the fact that they're professionally qualified, do any job in order to settle their families, buy a house, put their kids through school, who become that next generation of young people who are often going to university and so on. [State public servant]

A key point to note here is that long-term employment pathways generally do not enter these assessments. A job is viewed as an answer to unemployment, rather than a stepping stone to a rewarding life or a means of achieving economic security. As one settlement service provider put it when he was asked if economic security could be achieved through working in child care: 'Maybe if you own a childcare centre'. Of course, these challenges are familiar to low-paid workers in Australia. Humanitarian migrants face these in addition to the challenges of making a new life in a new country.

At best, assisting with 'quick fixes' provides some income but it is unlikely to offer economic security. A small number of service providers suggested that economic security does not come from the quality of a specific job but rather from the likelihood of finding another job if necessary and maintaining independence from government support. They saw the contemporary job market as the context that workers need to adapt to and navigate, rather than as an obstacle to economic security. For example:

I'm trying to define if it's not a full-time, ongoing job, what it means ... If this job finishes you would know how to go about getting [another one] so you minimise the gaps between your employment. In the current environment, it's a bit hard to ask for more than that, in a way. [Settlement service provider]

This statement notes the increasingly precarious nature of many jobs, which also affects Australian-born jobseekers. What is interesting is that some service providers had lower assessments of what was acceptable for humanitarian migrants than they did for skilled migrants. The lower bar for humanitarian entrants suggests that their readiness to accept 'any' job can be mistaken as a lesser need for economic security.

I think, this is also why it's so important where people are sailing from. If they have been in a refugee camp for 20 years, or if they come from a war-torn country, even those conditions are for us really unacceptable, for them can be quite acceptable because they think, 'Okay, well it's better. This is a good place where I can raise my kids' ... I think everyone has a different perception of economic security. [Community-based service provider]

Being strategic with jobs and activities

In the middle of the continuum of perspectives on jobs for humanitarian entrants is the pragmatic position that there are jobs—or at least activities—that humanitarian migrants *can* do as part of a strategy towards better employment opportunities. This perspective underpins some service providers' efforts to encourage jobseekers to take up employment or unpaid work sooner rather than later, even if the immediate job does not directly offer a long-term career pathway.

One stakeholder, who has worked with different community groups and has a refugee background, pointed out that refugees can open small businesses such as a retail business, even without speaking English. Others spoke about the merits of volunteering, with one noting the differential readiness to do unpaid work among humanitarian jobseekers:

I would also always encourage them to do some volunteer work because that's where they will get exposed to the work environment in Australia. Sometimes they would agree, other times they [won't] ... because it's not something that they are used to, so they might be reluctant to do it. [Local community-based stakeholder]

Economic security is not the immediate objective in this view, but the orientation towards 'stepping stones' is more geared to achieving upward job mobility than the previous focus on short-term fixes.

What sets this medium-term focused strategic approach apart from the 'any job is better than none' perspective is the consideration of the manifold sources and dimensions of insecurity which humanitarian entrants are facing:

Having worked in settlement, I know the level of security is not very high ... if they've got employment it's a couple of sick days or it's a bill they weren't expecting or a system they don't know about, away from being, yeah, being very tenuous. [Settlement service provider]

This strategic approach to employment assistance is associated with the notion of a pathway or trajectory to economic security over time. One community representative described how this pathway started for humanitarian migrants with 'putting food on the table' until they slowly established themselves. What distinguishes this conception of economic security from the intergenerational one, mentioned above, is that it is considered as achievable progressively within one person's life.

Jobs that humanitarian migrants 'should be enabled to do'

At the other end of the continuum (and least prevalent in the responses from our interviewees) is the perspective observed mainly among settlement practitioners that is oriented towards assisting humanitarian migrants into long-term career pathways. This perspective recognises the skills, education and experience of humanitarian entrants, as well as the psychological impacts of unemployment and loss of occupational status. For example:

The clients always feel that, how can I put it, they kind of lost their dignity in a way because maybe back home they were wealthy or well off or they had a really good career; then when they come to Australia they have to start from zero or from scratch ... The recognition of overseas qualifications takes a long time and there is no real pathway ... [Settlement service provider]

Most importantly, this perspective on humanitarian migrant jobseekers sees the role of assistance as 'enabling' the development of long-term pathways, as opposed to achieving 'quick fixes'. This is accompanied by an understanding of economic security for humanitarian

migrants as a universal right and thus equal to that of Australian-born people. For example:

Well it is being safe and secure and having work. You know, ... we all want that. I don't think newly arrived families are any different. They've just got a whole lot of extra barriers and potentially a whole lot of trauma they're overcoming. [Training provider]

Participants' approaches to assisting humanitarian migrants

Participants were invited to comment on what they thought worked well or did not work so well in the current service landscape. Their reflections demonstrated that local practice commonly involves workarounds within the constraints of program designs and local labour market conditions. These workarounds reflect in themselves certain perceptions of 'the problem' of refugee employment which may differ from the problem definitions inherent in policies.

Person-centred, tailored support

The perceived failure of mainstream employment service providers to respond to the complex and varied needs of humanitarian migrants was widely noted. Settlement service providers in particular and some employment service providers argued for a 'person-centred' approach, which is the opposite of the performance target-based approach of mainstream employment services.

Proponents of a person-centred approach used terms such as 'finding out where someone's at' and 'looking at the personal need', informed by education and English language levels, prior employment experience and other personal and environmental factors (such as family circumstances). Practitioners acknowledged that such an approach requires more time investment than a standard approach to placing unemployed people in a training course or 'any' available job. It may even require forgoing what looks like a good opportunity to the practitioner if the client is not ready to take it up due to other competing life events:

So sometimes we can kind of see the trajectory would be good for someone on this pathway, but their own kind of perspective at the time is different, and you know, you can't force someone if they don't think that that's what they want to do, of course. [Settlement service provider]

Involving mentors to support the process of developing a job pathway was described as a successful example of personalised support:

What's the problem? Policies, programs and perceptions continued

I've found mentor[s] ... who have a great ability to read people, to work with them, to know who they are skill-wise, and ... to actually then work them into some work placements, to then find work. [Settlement service provider]

Such an approach to addressing 'the problem' of employment resonates with the more holistic approach of settlement services.

Strategic support for sustainable career development

A key ingredient of successful service provision mentioned by several participants is planning for long-term and sustainable outcomes—which, it is argued, mainstream employment services are currently failing to do. As noted earlier, completing multiple training courses does not guarantee employment but can be evidence of lacking a clear plan or trying to 'tick a box'. The pathway to economic security thus requires considering each migrant's pre-arrival education, training and/or employment trajectory, rather than treating the person as a 'blank slate' who has to start at the bottom end of the labour market and accept 'any job' available.

Providing strategic support is complex. Some practitioners in employment and settlement services highlighted the challenge of balancing immediate job support with long-term career support. Some services struggled to support humanitarian migrants who arrived with higher qualifications. Placing the latter in 'any' available job that did not relate to their skills and experience meant that they became further disconnected from their career history and less likely to secure a job that matches their qualification in the future:

You want that support to wait an extra six months but get the right job, the right career, instead of working for six months in a job that you don't care about and then you forget completely about your [previous career] ... I think here especially, a lot of the people that come with degrees and stuff ... don't know what to do with them. [Settlement service provider]

Depending on the mandated role of the service provider and the design of the program, practitioners have to balance clients' immediate or short-term income needs with their aspirations for a long-term employment pathway or career. One specialised employment service provider described his role in terms of the difficulty of 'find(ing) opportunities that are aligned with long-term aspirations, and not just entry-level jobs' and saying 'Well, these

opportunities aren't available at the moment, but there are other roles that ... will pay your bills'. This respondent highlighted that the tension between short-term and long-term outcomes is also difficult for service users, who juggle the need to cover daily living costs and the desire for satisfying work.

Targeted employment support for specific groups of humanitarian migrants

A promising approach is targeted initiatives that combine employment pathways support for humanitarian migrants with elements of settlement support. Responsiveness to both employment and settlement needs is more likely to achieve sustainable employment outcomes than employment or settlement support in isolation.

An intensive 12-week English program that provided participants with language skills geared to particular employment contexts was an example offered by one respondent. Called *Beyond the Classroom*, the program was based on collaboration between a migrant resource centre and an employment service provider and was aimed at providing migrants with skills and employment experience.

Another example of attending to employment needs of recent humanitarian migrants, the *Youth Transitions Support* pilot program, assists young refugees aged up to 25 years, within their first five years of settlement, to plan pathways and develop their skills to transition into education and employment. Activities include teaching 'employee skills', résumé writing and interview techniques, as well as providing information about the labour market in general and specific jobs. The pilot is funded through the DSS and delivered by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, in partnership with five other community organisations.

Another ongoing example of bridging the divide between traditional service 'silos' is the inclusion of highly educated humanitarian migrants in an employment support initiative designed for skilled visa holders. This demonstrates the role of service providers' workarounds in providing meaningful support not based on, but in spite of, funding rules.

A whole-of-community challenge

Our study found a variety of understandings of the problem of humanitarian migrants' employment, its relationship to economic security and responses to that problem. These underpin the professional practice of the different stakeholders from government, non-government and community sectors. Of course, individual employment outcomes are not direct outcomes of any single understanding. They are shaped by the combined roles of local actors who may have different understandings of how to influence employment outcomes in a specific local context. In Hume there are formalised and informal networks and strong local government leadership which extends to supporting targeted employer engagement.

Communities of practice

Coordination between services is a promising element of service provision in Hume. Several participants highlighted the merits of a 'community of practice' approach involving multisectoral stakeholders at the local level. The establishment of different formal networks demonstrates the efforts of service providers to collaborate. However, some interviewees also noted that the marketisation of service delivery and the consequent competition between providers could potentially work against such a collaborative effort:

I think there's a plethora of employment services in Hume. There's probably 30 or 35 services if you include the job network [Job Link] as well. How well do they all work together in a competing marketplace, I'm not sure. But ... I think this local service sector actually navigates that system pretty well. [Training and employment provider]

Beyond formal networks, respondents noted several examples of how working relationships between settlement service providers shape their everyday practice of supporting humanitarian migrants. While not focused on employment support, referrals within local networks also led to employment outcomes, for example:

we constantly work with mainstream service providers, work with employment agency, even we stretch our approach a little bit further and we are working with even private recruitment agencies in order to find some work for the people that we are working with. [Settlement service provider]

Another example of coordination between stakeholders was settlement service providers acting as guarantors for newly arrived humanitarian migrants to help them access private rental accommodation.

The coordination evident in Hume is not without challenges, but it illustrates how local communities can work together to meet the needs of humanitarian migrants.

Local government leadership

Local government plays a key role in addressing employment issues through a collaborative, whole-of-community approach. This relates, for example, to the participation and leadership of the Hume City Council in local initiatives such as the Volunteer Gateway, as well as the support of the Job Link program and 'Local Jobs for Local People'. The role of the council was valued:

Local government contributes to having a joined up service sector. So the Job Link program is supported by local government. Local Jobs for Local People is, you know, the main course for local government. Local government has credibility when negotiating new employment opportunities with employers. So they're a key contributor to that. [Training provider]

Hume City Council's Local Jobs for Local People program, which has become a model and guide for other LGAs, positions the council at the centre of a labour market facilitation process. Hume's published guide on the model argues that the council can be 'a neutral and trusted broker between employers, developers, community organisations, education providers, employment service providers and local residents who are looking for work' (Hume City Council 2017).

The political leverage of the local council makes it a valuable contributor in the business liaison work of employment intermediaries, as evidenced by an employment engagement officer who was employed by a community sector organisation but seconded to the council's economic development team.

What's the problem? Policies, programs and perceptions continued

Employer perspectives

We interviewed a small number of local employers in Hume who had experience hiring humanitarian migrants specifically, and migrants generally. Several interviewees from other stakeholder groups also made comments on engaging with employers on the issue of refugee employment.

Job 'fit', risk and employer apprehension in hiring humanitarian migrants

Employers make careful decisions in the recruitment process based on perceptions of risk attached to individual candidates. In the case of migrants and people from refugee backgrounds, perceived risks expressed by interviewees were linked to the effective use of English language in the workplace or 'cultural incompatibility' with other workers. According to one service provider, employers viewed these potential risks or 'downsides' as weakening migrants' competitive position in the labour market.

In extreme cases, refusal to hire people from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds can take the form of outright abuse; one service provider cited an experience of a client talking to a prospective employer, where the applicant was verbally abused for speaking with an accent.

Other respondents focused on the cultural backgrounds of humanitarian migrants—linked to ethnic or religious customs and practices, or to their reasons for forced migration from the home country. An apprehension about incompatibility with the existing mainstream workforce was clear from these reflections:

I think also as an employer you've got to be really careful because there's always a lot of baggage. People coming to your workplace carrying the baggage of oppression and cultural differences and the politics of the countries back home. [Employer]

You might see humanitarian migrants bringing with them a very deep cultural tone, which might not necessarily be conducive to the workplace [State public servant]

By contrast some hiring managers and supervisors expressed a personal stake or interest in supporting migrant workers to gain a foothold in the labour market, because of either their own family's migration experience or a broader social value placed on migrant employment. In some cases, this interest was also reflected in an expression of company identity.

Support during the recruitment process

Several respondents acknowledged that some migrants (not necessarily refugees or asylum seekers) would struggle with typical recruitment practices used by Australian employers, such as job interview questions.

Identifying these gaps, one employer expressed the need for support through an intermediary between recruiting business and jobseeker, addressing barriers for the candidate while ensuring a smooth, cost-effective process for the employer:

What might an incentive for an employer look like? Look, somebody doing the hard yards and doing all the recruiting. Somebody so closely aligned with a business and knows what their business requirements are and has done the reference checking and they are transparent, honest ... [Employer]

As stated earlier, Hume's Local Jobs for Local People program is an example of this kind of facilitation and recruitment support provided by council to match jobseekers with local employers (Hume City Council 2017).

4 DISCUSSION

Despite best intentions, service providers face limitations

In addition to acknowledged labour market constraints—which affect everyone, but humanitarian migrants disproportionately—participants in our study articulated several limitations on the capacity of service providers to help refugees and asylum seekers to realise their employment aspirations:

- Although employment is a critical element of successful migrant settlement, mainstream employment and settlement services are designed and delivered differently and often have competing policy rationales (quick job placement and ‘self-sufficiency’ versus long-term social integration). Efforts to combine these services have typically been experimental and are not yet delivered on a larger scale.
- Contract and funding conditions in employment services often limit the possibilities for servicing long-term career aspirations, directing providers instead to rapidly place service users into ‘any available job’, which can lead to skills wastage, atrophy and sustained job insecurity. ‘Quick fixes’, a ‘churning-out’ mentality and the ‘pushy’ approaches of frontline staff were mentioned as negative features of the mainstream employment system.
- Balancing the short-term financial needs and long-term career aspirations of humanitarian migrants (particularly those with high skills) was an identified challenge for service providers, who are obliged to provide help as quickly and as cost-effectively as possible instead of providing intensive support.

Better cooperation could strengthen employment support for refugees

Despite the acknowledged limitations of the labour market and the service environment, some promising developments and innovations point to future solutions. Participants identified a multitude of service providers and available support programs in Hume across different social and economic domains (not only employment-related). While this partly reflects levels of disadvantage in the area, the presence of these organisations and programs offers an opportunity to address the multidimensional nature of disadvantage that affects humanitarian migrants specifically, and other populations more broadly.

Participants noted the potential for local communities of practice and similar coordinated approaches to assist

refugees and asylum seekers. Such coordination is ideally underpinned by the understanding that rapid placement into any available job is not a sustainable answer to unemployment, but could be a stepping stone to greater overall wellbeing, if it is combined with other support. Key to the communities of practice approach is an orientation towards complementarity between services in the network that contribute to employment outcomes, including:

- facilitating volunteering opportunities
- assessing jobseekers’ existing skills and matching to possible career pathways
- connecting with employers and finding opportunities in the local job market
- support during recruitment (e.g. with résumé writing, interview practice)
- mentoring parallel to employment
- social inclusion through facilitating connection to community groups
- acting as institutional guarantors (e.g. to help individuals secure housing or other services).

One current initiative that takes a networked, community-based approach is the Youth Transitions Support program, which works with newly arrived refugee young people and is delivered in partnership between the Brotherhood of St Laurence and five settlement service providers in the City of Hume.

Local government leadership—in acting as a conduit for job information and facilitating strategic connections between service providers and employers—was also identified as a critical element of local coordination to create job opportunities for humanitarian migrants and other groups in Hume. This can be achieved, for example, through dedicated personnel in the council whose role is to identify employment opportunities in local businesses.

5 CONCLUSION

Key to supporting refugee settlement and integration are the specific roles and capacities of local stakeholders—service providers, local governments, employers and community-based organisations—who collectively form a network (or community of practice) which is able to welcome and support new arrivals. In Hume, council departments, service providers and other local stakeholders are working hard to create a supportive ecosystem in the midst of contract and funding limitations on their work.

However, as more than a decade of research and evaluations of refugee resettlement in regional areas has shown, access to employment pathways is a critical precondition of successful and sustainable settlement alongside catering for new arrivals' cultural and social needs (Galligan et al. 2014; Piper 2007, 2009; Schech 2013; Taylor 2005; Taylor & Stanovic 2005). Our analysis in Hume indicates that the presence of an established culturally and linguistically diverse population serviced by an assortment of community and government organisations does not necessarily make it easier for new migrants to gain a foothold in the labour market.

Despite the best efforts of many people in local support networks, and a longer term perspective on economic security shared by some settlement service providers, economic conditions still influence employment outcomes. Recent structural changes in Hume's local economy, combined with continued high population growth and rising socioeconomic disadvantage have made it a challenging context for humanitarian migrants to find entry points that can lead to sustainable employment. Although some employers—perhaps motivated by a sense of social obligation—may be willing to consider employing recent arrivals, with low relative demand it is likely that perceptions of additional recruitment risk will disadvantage most refugee jobseekers. Asylum seekers will struggle even more, given their limited eligibility for state support, precarious visa status and uncertain long-term settlement prospects.

Recent moves by the federal government to further restrict asylum seekers' eligibility for income support and other services and extend waiting periods for new migrants to access welfare payments (Commonwealth of Australia 2018a; Doherty 2018), are indicative of broader designs to shift the individual responsibility for employment wholly to migrants, while disinvesting from the social infrastructure that could assist them to settle well.

In the current policy climate where government increasingly calls for settling refugees in regional locations with local labour gaps, it is important to draw attention to the limitations of short-term fixes to refugee unemployment.

All settlement service providers and some employers who participated in this study highlighted the merits of investing in developing pathways for refugees that are based on their varying education, skills and experience and take into account the specific barriers many jobseekers with refugee backgrounds are facing. There was wide agreement on the failure of current federal employment services to provide adequate support for this group. A key change would be a shift in underpinning rationales and perspectives from a quick-fix and short-term orientation to a medium and long-term perspective on employment pathways of new arrivals.

An appraisal of the local social and economic conditions and the broader economic context is also critical to understanding the potential for migrants to realise aspirations of economic security in a particular settlement location. This report has described Hume as a well-served area with a high level of coordination between government, service providers and employers and between employment and settlement service providers, all of which is necessary to pool different sets of knowledge: of new arrivals' needs and capacities; of pathways support into work; and of available opportunity structures in a geographical area. Yet these efforts take place within the limitations of the local labour market. Furthermore, even if more jobs could be created this would not in itself guarantee economic security for humanitarian migrants. Outcomes for humanitarian migrants depend also on immigration policies, particularly the regulation of their entitlements through visas, and the policies shaping the support they receive.

Finally, the findings from this place-based study in Hume indicate the potential for local stakeholders to address refugee unemployment as a community of practice, by working towards service coordination and even joint action between the community sector, local government and employers. However, the prevalence of short-term perspectives over long-term pathway planning among service providers highlight the restricting influences of funding and program design at the federal policy level. Economic security for refugees then appears as a distant dream rather than an achievable goal in the current economic and political context.

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Contact us

Research & Policy Centre
Brotherhood of St Laurence

67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Australia

T (03) 9483 1183
E research@bsl.org.au

Dr Martina Boese
La Trobe University

Kingsbury Drive
Bundoora, Victoria 3086
Australia

T (03) 9479 1397
E m.boese@latrobe.edu.au

bsl.org.au/knowledge