



REPORT

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# Building bridges to work

Final report on the Given the Chance  
for Asylum Seekers program

Seuwandi Wickramasinghe

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](http://www.bsl.org.au)>.

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Cover: photo by Craig Sillitoe depicts a woman who participated in the Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers program. She was not among the interviewees for this study.

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## Glossary

<b>GtCAS</b>	Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers
<b>jobactive</b>	Australian Government-funded employment services
<b>SHEV</b>	Safe Haven Enterprise visa
<b>SRSS</b>	Status Resolution Support Services
<b>TPV</b>	Temporary Protection visa

## SUMMARY

*People seeking asylum face an uncertain future. Those who arrived in Australia since August 2012 without a valid visa can only apply for a temporary visa to live and work in Australia for up to 3 years. Restrictive visa conditions create many layers of disadvantage. People seeking asylum have limited access to employment assistance, subsidised training and income support. These constraints affect their employment prospects in Australia and the opportunity to live a decent life.*

Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers (GtCAS) is a tailored employment service offered by the Brotherhood of St Laurence for people seeking asylum residing in Melbourne. Funded by a private philanthropist for the period

2013–2018, it was developed in response to high unemployment rates among asylum seekers and the limited employment assistance available.

GtCAS acted as a ‘bridge’; circumventing the challenge of constrained visa conditions and barriers in mainstream recruitment. It worked intensively with jobseekers and with employers to identify suitable job opportunities and traineeships. The program assisted many participants to find ‘stepping-stone’ jobs, which enabled them to meet their basic financial needs and enhance their knowledge and skills to navigate the labour market. It also informed Brotherhood of St Laurence advocacy for policy changes in relation to people seeking asylum and employment.

This report examines the employment trajectories of GtCAS participants, drawing on 19 interviews with program participants, program data between July 2015 and April 2018 and five employer interviews.

### Disrupted employment and uncertain futures

All the GtCAS participants interviewed had had disrupted employment plans but the extent of disruption experienced depended on their visa status. Over half of the interviewees had a tertiary qualification (bachelor’s or postgraduate degree) from their home country and nearly all had established careers in varied sectors such as human resources, forestry, education, IT. All interviewees said that on arrival in Australia they had planned to continue working in their former career, without realising the challenges that asylum seekers experienced in finding work in Australia.

Interviewees said they had experienced difficulty in finding work because, as one said, ‘[to] find any job, you know, [the employers] always ask, ‘What kind of visa do you have?’ They explained that employers were reluctant to recruit jobseekers whose visa could be cancelled at any time.

The uncertainty of their visa also affected the quality and type of jobs available to them. Even with the support of the GtCAS program, most of those who were on a bridging visa

at the time of their interview were employed in casual or part-time work in aged care, disability care, retail or hospitality. Some who had formal qualifications voiced concern about being locked in low-skilled, survival jobs that could affect their future job prospects.

People applying for a temporary protection visa could not plan for their future. Some interviewees reported that their uncertain visa status compromised their ability to gain a tertiary qualification from an Australian university as they could not access government subsidised fees/loans. They were allowed to take up a vocational course at a concessional rate but experienced financial pressure as many had only casual work with inadequate, irregular earnings. The two interviewees who had been granted a Safe Haven Enterprise visa (SHEV) reported that the permitted five-year stay in regional Australia had given them some reprieve but they were concerned about being away from friends and support networks and about their prospects beyond the five years.

## Summary continued

The six interviewees who had been recognised as refugees and granted a permanent protection visa had divergent employment plans. All had stable work (some in full-time jobs and others in part-time work by choice due to study or work/family commitments). Yet they were still employed in sectors (such as retail, food and accommodation, and care services) that did not align with their previous qualifications. Nevertheless, they all reported improved material wellbeing and access to mainstream services and resources. For these interviewees the challenge was re-establishing their career or transitioning into a new career, which required time (for study), money, careful planning and courage.

### A bridge to work for people seeking asylum

Many interviewees described GtCAS as a bridge that helped them to overcome three main challenges when looking for work:

- employer reluctance to appoint people seeking asylum due to uncertain visas
- mainstream recruitment practices such as screening
- lack of job-search know-how, skills and connections.

A few interviewees commented on a level of distrust among employers generally; as one explained, ‘No-one’s going to trust us, no-one [sic] doesn’t know how I behave, they know you are [an] asylum [seeker]’. By contrast, they pointed out that GtCAS’s direct engagement with employers enabled them to overcome the barrier of having a temporary visa.

Interviewees reported that the Brotherhood’s organisational reputation provided the necessary credibility to break down some preconceptions and negative attitudes. They were able to meet employers face to face and discuss their abilities, motivations and previous work experience. Interviewees also said that GtCAS improved their employability by providing job application support, training, advice and information on recruitment processes.

### Enhancing future prospects through ‘stepping-stone’ jobs

Jobs sourced by GtCAS can be described as ‘stepping stones’ to other job opportunities, learning and growth. Most jobs brokered by the program between July 2015 and April 2018 were in manufacturing, retail trade, accommodation and food services—sectors characterised by high levels of part-time and casual jobs.

Over half (60%) of participants who found work through the program between 2015 and 2018 were employed in casual or seasonal jobs at placement and just over half (53%) worked part-time (less than 35 hours per week); those with casual jobs worked on average 25.8 hours per week.

While such ‘stepping-stone’ jobs might not guarantee economic security, they provided some income to meet basic costs. They also provided opportunities for building communication and language skills and developing useful contacts—all of which were critical for participants’ long-term job prospects.

The few interviewees who were employed in white-collar jobs reported a positive experience in terms of career guidance, support, remuneration and flexible work arrangements. They said they had more opportunities to use existing skills, to specialise and to pursue career options, than they had in their previous low-skilled or casual jobs in Australia.

### Leveraging employer engagement

Employers were critical to the success of the Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers program. Of the 846 participants who completed intake—and consented for their data to be used in research—302 (35.7%) found work and 189 (62%) of them gained jobs brokered by the Brotherhood through the employer engagement component of the program.

GtCAS was considered as largely a ‘matching’ service by the five employers interviewed. It enabled them to recruit for entry-level jobs, trial candidates, bypass or simplify mainstream recruitment and put their corporate values into practice. They explained that they had trust in the capacity of GtCAS staff to source good candidates who were reliable and hard-working.

## Conclusions

People seeking asylum are caught in a web of uncertainty. Finding work provides income and has the potential to provide social connections; yet their uncertain circumstances make it hard to compete in a rapidly changing labour market.

Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers acted as a 'bridge' that circumvented mainstream recruitment barriers so that people seeking asylum could have a chance. Temporary or part-time jobs provided some income to meet their basic financial needs. In the short term, these jobs enabled participants to gain transferable skills, exposure to Australian workplaces and useful professional contacts. They also provided a psychological boost and much-needed routine and structure to people's lives.

As van Kooy & Randrianarisoa 2017 point out, 'survival jobs' have many intangible benefits for people seeking asylum; however, there is a risk that temporary jobs could delay/disrupt their ultimate employment plans and lock people out of their preferred careers. Programs such as GtCAS demonstrate the value of improved employment services that can offer intensive pre-employment and recruitment assistance tailored to the circumstances of people seeking asylum.

In spite of the precarity created by exclusionary immigration policies, this research highlights the opportunity to develop bridges to mainstream employment for asylum seekers. Further, there is an opportunity to go beyond survival or stepping-stone jobs. Many GtCAS participants had professional or technical skills: over half (56%) had a post-school qualification from overseas. Those who were employed by a large corporation had more options to move within or beyond the organisation. Such employers have a key role as they can offer 'bridging jobs' that equip people seeking asylum with useful contacts, cultural capital and skills that will enable them to transition into other, ongoing employment once their visa status is resolved.

Of course, program responses also need to be accompanied by continued advocacy to tackle the policy drivers of insecurity for people seeking asylum.

# 1 INTRODUCTION AND POLICY CONTEXT

Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers (GtCAS) was an employment program offered by the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) for people seeking asylum in Melbourne. Funded by a private philanthropist, the program started in 2013 and concluded in 2018. It aimed to assist asylum seekers to find employment and worked with employers to identify suitable job opportunities. It also contributed to the Brotherhood's advocacy for policy changes.

A previous report (van Kooy & Randrianarisoa 2017) summarised research findings from the program's first phase (2013–16), including the main features of the program model, and the particular employment challenges facing asylum seekers in Australia.

This report focuses on the period 2015–18 to gain insight into the program's development and impacts. We analysed program data from July 2015 to April 2018, thus excluding the two introductory years. We also interviewed 19 program participants, and analysed interviews with five employers that were conducted in April–May 2016.

The report begins by discussing the effects of restrictive immigration policies on the job prospects of people seeking asylum. It outlines the program's development since its inception in 2013 and provides a profile of GtCAS participants. It describes our research methodology and then presents key findings about participants' employment trajectories and their experience of the program. Based on these findings the report identifies opportunities for future programs to give people seeking asylum a chance of building a good life in Australia.

## Restrictive policies create uncertainty and limit opportunities

People seeking asylum face many of the same labour market challenges as other jobseekers in Australia (such as the casualisation of work, increased competition for jobs at all levels, a shift from manufacturing to service sector work and offshoring of jobs). They also face disadvantages such as undervalued and unrecognised foreign skills, qualifications and experience; and lack of familiarity with Australian recruitment practices (van Kooy & Randrianarisoa 2017).

These challenges are compounded by immigration policies that undermine their efforts to build new lives in Australia. Although most people seeking asylum have a bridging visa that allows them to work, many employers are understandably reluctant to offer a job to people whose

visa could be revoked at any time, and this compounds the uncertainty that van Kooy & Bowman (2018) refer to as 'manufactured precarity'.

People seeking asylum who arrived in Australia on or after 13 August 2012 without a valid visa are not eligible for a Permanent Protection visa. Instead, they had until 1 October 2017 to apply for a Temporary Protection visa (TPV) or a Safe Haven Enterprise visa (SHEV).<sup>1</sup> They may have been granted a bridging visa while they wait for a decision on their asylum application.<sup>2</sup> Holders of a TPV are allowed to live and work in Australia for up to three years; after that they can only apply for another temporary visa. SHEV holders are allowed to live and work in Australia for five years on condition that they spend at least 42 months working in regional Australia.

## Limited access to education support prevents recognition of qualifications and retraining

People on bridging visas and those on temporary visas (such as a TPV or SHEV) are not eligible for Australian Government programs designed to assist students with financing tertiary study, including higher education loans schemes such as FEE-HELP and HECS-HELP, and Commonwealth Supported Places (Refugee Council of Australia 2017).

Access to higher education is generally limited to those who can afford international student fees. Many universities offer scholarships, yet these may not cover the tuition fees (Hirsch 2015). Eligibility for subsidised vocational education and training is patchy and varies between states: Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and the ACT provide subsidies for some training (Blythe et al. 2018).

Different temporary visas also have different income support and other conditions which affect the holder's ability to improve their employment prospects.

## Income support and support services policies stymie attempts to gain economic security

People seeking asylum who are on a bridging visa may be eligible for financial assistance under the Status Resolution Support Services program (SRSS) funded by the Department of Home Affairs. Those who meet 'financial hardship' criteria receive about 89% of Newstart allowance. However, recent changes to eligibility for SRSS mean that those who fail a vulnerability assessment or are studying full-time will lose their payment (RCOA 2018).

1 For visa details see <<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/trav/visa-1/785>> and <<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/trav/visa-1/790>>.

2 See <<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/trav/visi/visi/bridging-visas>>.



People with temporary protection (on TPVs and SHEVs) will not receive a Special Benefit if their course of study is more than 12 months (RCOA 2018).

These restrictions on income support mean that studying to gain or improve qualifications for employment is not an option for many people on bridging or temporary visas.

### **Employment assistance for people seeking asylum is limited**

Employment support options available to asylum seekers are limited. People on bridging visas can register for jobactive, the Commonwealth-funded employment services, but they only have access to minimal (stream A) assistance. People on Temporary Protection visas have access to all streams of jobactive support, depending on Centrelink's assessment. However, jobactive has had limited success in assisting jobseekers who experience disadvantage in the labour market (see, for example, Bowman, Randrianarisoa & Wickramasinghe 2018; RCOA 2017).

In 2017 the Refugee Council of Australia identified the following limitations of jobactive:

- a lack of specialised assistance
- having to choose between learning English and looking for work
- onerous compliance measures
- limited support with résumés and interview skills
- inappropriate work for the dole (RCOA 2017).

The entitlements attached to different visa types are summarised in Table 1 on the following pages.

The challenges facing people seeking asylum as they try to obtain employment and gain economic security are multifaceted and demand multidimensional responses. Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers piloted ways of providing employment support to better meet their needs. In the next sections we describe the development of Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers and its impact.

## Introduction and policy context continued

Table 1 Entitlements attached to different visas as at July 2018

Entitlement	SATISFIED THE REFUGEE TEST		REFUGEE STATUS TO BE DETERMINED
	Permanent protection	Temporary protection (TPV, SHEV)	People seeking asylum living in the community on bridging visas
Work rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unlimited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TPV: 3 years</li> <li>SHEV: 5 years in designated regional areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Short-term (often just 3 months at a time) and work rights tethered to the refugee claims process</li> </ul>
Income support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as Australian permanent residents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Special Benefit paid at full rate of Newstart Allowance</li> <li>Eligible for supplements (e.g. Rent Assistance, Family Assistance)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Status Resolution Support Service payment (89% of Newstart)<sup>3</sup> available for those who meet 'financial hardship' criteria:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Ineligible if more than \$1000 a year transferred overseas</li> <li>– Ineligible if studying full time, but able to work</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Employment assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to all streams of Jobactive support subject to Centrelink's assessment of jobseeker needs</li> <li>Career Transition Support Pilot</li> <li>State-funded employment assistance available in parts of Vic., Qld and NSW</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to all streams of Jobactive support subject to Centrelink's assessment of jobseeker needs</li> <li>State and philanthropically funded employment assistance available in parts of Vic., Qld, NSW</li> <li>Eligibility for traineeship/ apprenticeship subsidies varies across Australia</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can register with Jobactive as a voluntary jobseeker and receive Stream A support – the lightest touch assistance designed for the most job-ready</li> <li>State and philanthropically funded employment assistance available in parts of Vic., Qld, NSW</li> <li>Eligibility for traineeship/ apprenticeship state subsidies varies across Australia. Ineligible for federal subsidies</li> </ul>
Vocational education and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eligible for loans and subsidies for vocational education and training (VET)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No income support for courses longer than 12 months</li> <li>Eligibility for training subsidies, including TAFE concessions varies (eligible for some courses in VIC, NSW, Qld, ACT)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited eligibility for SRSS income support while studying, depending on capacity to work</li> <li>Eligibility for training subsidies, including TAFE concessions varies (eligible some courses in VIC, NSW, Qld, ACT)</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> At 20 September 2018 the maximum rate of Newstart Allowance for a single person with no children was \$550.20 per fortnight or \$275.10 per week. The SRSS payment was then \$244.83 per week.

Table 1 Entitlements attached to different visas as at July 2018 (continued)

Entitlement	SATISFIED THE REFUGEE TEST		REFUGEE STATUS TO BE DETERMINED
	Permanent protection	Temporary protection (TPV, SHEV)	People seeking asylum living in the community on bridging visas
Higher education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eligible for subsidised fees and HECS-HELP.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No income support for courses longer than 12 months (unless taken part-time with continuing job search)</li> <li>Full up-front fees required</li> <li>Ineligible for HECS-HELP</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Full up-front fees required</li> <li>Ineligible for HECS-HELP</li> <li>Limited eligibility for SRSS income support while studying, depending on capacity to work</li> </ul>
Settlement support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Settlement Services Program: up to 5 years of casework support, orientation and connections to services</li> <li>Humanitarian Settlement Program: intensive case management for 6–18 months</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eligible for Complex Case Support, subject to tight criteria</li> <li>Ineligible for both the Humanitarian Settlement Program and the Settlement Services Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to the Status Resolution Support Service, which is generally light-touch support, focused on connection with other services</li> </ul>
English language support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP)</li> <li>Skills for Education and Employment (SEE)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Eligible for both AMEP and SEE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ineligible for AMEP</li> <li>Eligible for SEE program – low referrals from jobactive result in low uptake</li> </ul>

Source: BSL 2018 (unpub.), Future policy directions for Australia's 'legacy caseload' arrivals

## 2 DEVELOPING AN EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM FOR PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM

A program for people seeking asylum was first developed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in 2012 in response to their high rates of unemployment and limited access to employment assistance. Originally called the Bridges to Employment: Bridging Visa E Demonstration Employment Project, the program sought to 'demonstrate and document a cost-effective template for a national employment program for refugees and asylum seekers with work rights' (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2012).

Known later as the Asylum Seeker Employment Project (ASEP) and then as the Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers program, it was conceived as a pilot approach to 'fast tracking asylum seekers into their first job in Australia and onto an employment and training pathway' (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2012).

The program provided pre-employment advice and guidance, assisted with recruitment processes and job applications, and worked with employers to source employment opportunities and work experience. It was targeted at participants holding a bridging visa with work rights who had a basic level of English.

More recently, the objectives of GtCAS were re-articulated to highlight the role of employers and the importance of advocacy for systemic change.

These refined GtCAS objectives were to develop a model of tailored employment support that serves to:

- assist asylum seekers to enter the Australian labour market and obtain ongoing support
- assist business to recognise the economic benefits, make recruitment processes more inclusive and be champions for employing asylum seekers
- build evidence to demonstrate the economic savings and social benefits for individuals, the community, employers and government
- influence government policy to ensure ongoing work rights and tailored employment models to maximise the potential of asylum seekers to contribute to Australian society and the economy
- generate and facilitate public discourse about asylum seekers' contributions to the Australian economy and society (Brotherhood of St Laurence 2016, unpub.).

These objectives reflect the framing of GtCAS as an initiative that would demonstrate an evidence-based, costed model to government as stewards of employment services, and to businesses as employers, and promote more positive attitudes among the broader public to people seeking asylum and work.

GtCAS had two main activity streams: jobseeker support and recruitment assistance, and employer engagement and partnerships. To gain insight into these streams, below we examine the characteristics of GtCAS participants, and draw on interviews with past participants and employers. First, we outline the methods we adopted in conducting this research.

## 3 METHOD

This report focuses on the second and final phase of the research associated with this program. The first phase of the research showed that the program had assisted most GtCAS participants to find their first jobs in Australia. These temporary ‘survival jobs’ had social and intangible benefits to participants but did not guarantee longer term economic security (van Kooy & Randrianarisoa 2017).

The purpose of this second phase of the study was to understand the employment and settlement trajectories of former GtCAS participants and examine where their first jobs led in the longer term.

In this study we wanted to address the following questions:

- 1 To what extent are low-paid or insecure jobs stepping stones to better paid and more secure employment?
- 2 What role does employment play in the long-term economic security of people seeking asylum?

The study involved a mixed-methods approach comprising analysis of program data, interviews with 19 participants and interviews with five employers.

The research was approved by the NHMRC-accredited BSL Human Research Ethics Committee.

### Analysis of program data

Administrative data from the Efforts to Outcomes (ETO) program database was used to examine GtCAS participants’ demographic characteristics and employment activities between July 2015 and April 2018. This period was chosen as it offered the most detailed data on GtCAS employment outcomes. The data relate to all participants who completed intake in these years and consented for their de-identified information to be used for research.

### Interviews with participants

In June 2018, 19 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with past GtCAS participants; four of these people had previously been interviewed in 2015 and 2016. The interviews explored participants’ employment experiences and settlement situation since leaving the program.

With consent, most interviews were audio-recorded; for the others notes were taken. De-identified transcripts and notes were analysed deductively testing whether themes that had previously been identified featured in them. We also carefully read the transcripts to identify new issues.

### Sampling framework and recruitment

A heterogeneous sampling framework was constructed using de-identified administrative data. Selection criteria included gender, age, highest level of education, year of program participation and work conditions (permanent, casual and contract) at week 26 of job placement.

The research team developed a shortlist using the unique ID numbers of around 60 participants selected according to the framework. The list was sent to GtCAS staff, who re-matched it with individuals and invited them to take part in the study. Interested participants contacted the research team, who chose 19 interviewees, ensuring that GtCAS staff did not know their identities.

### Characteristics of interviewees

Thirteen men and six women were interviewed. They broadly represented GtCAS participants as a whole. Thirteen had an overseas degree while ten had a certificate III/IV in fields including disability support, security, business administration and community services.

Interviewees came from South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. At the time of the interviews, eleven were on a bridging visa, two had Safe Haven Enterprise visas and six had been granted permanent protection (as they had arrived earlier under different rules). All had been in Australia for at least 12 months. Ten had lived here for five years or more—five of these were still on a bridging visa.

All interviewees had had at least one job placement; their work status 26 weeks after placement had ranged from full-time employed to unemployed.

Most had participated in GtCAS recently (11 in 2016–17 and 1 in 2017–18). Three had participated in 2015–16 and four in 2014–15.

### Limitations

Data for employment outcomes in 2017–18 is incomplete as all data was extracted from the ETO database in April 2018, before the end of the financial year. Furthermore, not all GtCAS participants consented for their data to be used in research. Missing data relating to longer term trajectories reflects the precarious circumstances of people seeking asylum: they often use pre-paid phones and move about so follow-up is difficult.

The sample group of participants who were interviewed is small and consists of individuals who were keen to express their views. Nevertheless, the interviews provide personal insights into the GtCAS program and the employment experiences of people seeking asylum in Australia.

## 4 PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

### GtCAS participant profile

Between July 2015 and April 2018, some 1,406 people registered for the GtCAS program. Of these, 846 completed intake. Registration occurred when a person expressed interest in the program; intake was the next step and indicates participation in the program. The following analysis relates to the 846 participants who completed intake between July 2015 and April 2018 and consented for their data to be used in research. Some data were missing.

### Visa status and country of birth

Over half of GtCAS participants between July 2015 and April 2018 had arrived by boat (n= 480, 57%) and at intake most were on bridging visas (n=636, 85%) (Figure 1). The Department of Home Affairs website explains that: ‘This visa lets you stay in Australia lawfully while you make arrangements to leave, finalise your immigration matter or are waiting for an immigration decision’.<sup>4</sup>

Some 36% of GtCAS participants were from the Middle East, followed by 25% from South Asia. These major groups are similar to the overall profile of people seeking asylum who are living in Victoria. At December 2017, the largest group of boat arrivals on bridging visas in Victoria was from South Asia (41.3%) followed by a similar proportion (40%) from the Middle East (Department of Home Affairs 2017). Among the GtCAS participants, small numbers came from South America, the Pacific, Southeast Asia and Central Asia.

### Age and gender

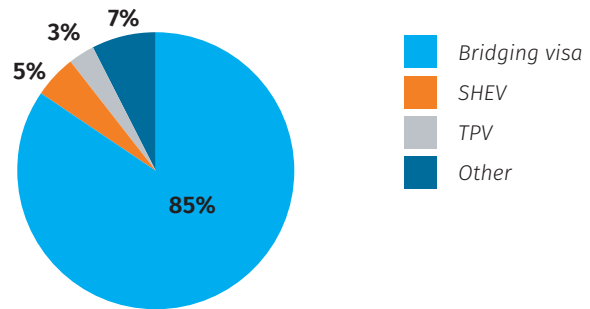
Of the GtCAS participants who completed intake, men (n= 587, 70%) outnumbered women (n= 256, 30%) (Figure 2). This is consistent with the data for Victoria, where 75% of those seeking asylum were men (Department of Home Affairs 2017). Most GtCAS participants were aged between 25 and 44 years (Figure 3).

### Level of education

Over half (56%) of GtCAS participants had a certificate or diploma and 36% had a degree from their home country. A small proportion (19%) had obtained a certificate III/IV or a diploma since arriving in Australia.

Figure 1

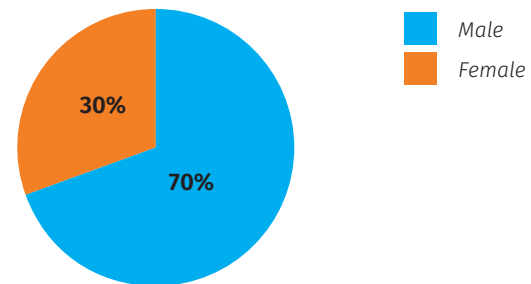
#### Most GtCAS participants were on a bridging visa



n = 749

Figure 2

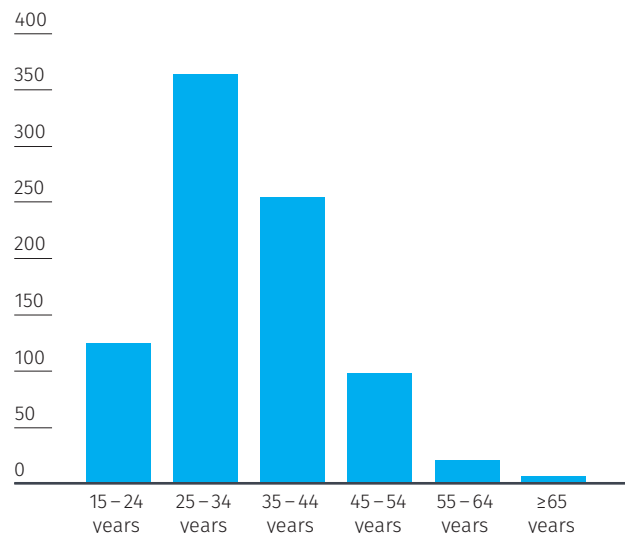
#### Men outnumbered women among GtCAS participants



n = 843

Figure 3

#### Most GtCAS participants were between 25 and 44 years



n = 845

<sup>4</sup> Viewed 10 October 2018, <<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/trav/visa-1/051>>.

## 5 FINDINGS

In this section we consider how people seeking asylum experienced the labour market challenges that we have outlined. We reflect on how the program responded to these challenges and then consider the role of employers and their perceptions of the problem and the program.

### Impacts of manufactured precarity

#### Disrupted employment and uncertain futures

Uncertain visa status was a key obstacle in finding work. People seeking asylum who were on a bridging visa could not plan for the future. For example, Hakim<sup>5</sup>, who was 47 years old and had been on a bridging visa for five years explained, 'I don't have any secure plans [until] I get any visa'. Interviewees such as Karif, a 42-year-old from Southeast Asia, said that one of the first questions asked by employers was 'What kind of visa do you have?'

Despite having the legal right to work, temporary visa holders found that employers were reluctant to hire workers whose prospects of remaining in the country were unknown. As Omar, who was 37 years old and from the Middle East, put it, 'They don't want [us] as maybe tomorrow you go and you're not here'. In this way, the temporary nature of bridging visas traps people in uncertainty, as Qasim, a 35-year-old from the Middle East, explained:

***Bridging visa is very good, yet very bad, at the same time ... [People would say to me] 'We don't know what the outcome of your visa is going to be'.***

The push for self-sufficiency driven by current immigration policies and the need for survival can trap people seeking asylum in low-skilled, low-paid casual work. The need to take up 'any job' meant that some interviewees who had arrived in Australia with formal qualifications and established careers in their home countries had to take jobs below their skill levels. This lowering of status can be difficult. For example, Qasim, a 35-year-old who had held a senior role with a large international company explained how he had had to lower his expectations in his new role as an administration and secretarial worker. He explained that people in his situation had 'to let go of a lot of their past experiences, or maybe step down in grade-wise to get a job and start from scratch and build the way up'. But lower level jobs do not necessarily lead to jobs with higher pay and more responsibility. 'Occupational skidding', where people

cannot use their skills and qualifications to gain suitable work, can lock them into low-paid jobs. Qasim was concerned about the impact on his prospects: 'It is a very big setback for me because with my previous experience and what I want to do in future, this job is so detached from both'. For Omar, short-term survival jobs also held risks for the future. He observed:

***To be a success [is] not just working now but how you're doing later. [What is] important for me is how can I improve, not just to find the solution for now.***

The two interviewees on SHEV visas, which allow them to stay in Australia for five years, provided they commit to work and/or study in a regional area, reported that the extended time gave them some capacity to plan and work.<sup>6</sup> Sharif, a 36-year-old from Northeast Africa had to move away from his friends and support network under the terms of the visa. He reflected: 'It is actually a little bit hard, but [I don't] have a choice'. Amir, a 31-year-old from the Middle East, who was working full-time in construction, also had to move but he explained, 'Anywhere I go, I can find easily a job. [You are] more confident when you have a five-year visa rather than a bridging visa'. Nevertheless, they were concerned about their prospects beyond the five years as there are no guarantees of permanent settlement.

#### Barriers to training and education

Gaining an Australian tertiary qualification could improve chances of finding suitable employment, but visas restrict access to financial support. As Hakim who had a temporary visa explained, 'With [a] permanent visa you can study in university but without [one] no, we can't do'. Priya, a 31-year-old from South Asia, recounted how her bridging visa thwarted her vocational training:

***Just because of my visa, because a bridging visa is not permanent, they don't want to have me as a student, or they do not accept me.***

Displaying remarkable foresight and resilience, individuals did what they could to gain qualifications to improve their chances, despite their uncertain circumstances. For example, Michael, a 38-year-old former aid worker with a background in psychology from eastern Africa, invested the money he had earned from previous casual jobs to study disability and aged care. He worked in a catering business as a casual employee to fund his day-to-day expenses while he studied.

<sup>5</sup> Pseudonyms are used for individuals quoted in this report.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Home Affairs website, viewed 10 October 2018, <<https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/supporting/Pages/790/shev-pathway-requirements.aspx>>.

### The contrasting impact of permanency and stability

Six interviewees had been recognised as refugees and had been granted permanent protection visas by the time they were interviewed.<sup>7</sup> All of them had stable work (some in full-time jobs and others in part-time jobs while they studied or cared for family). Yet they were still employed in sectors (such as retail, food and accommodation and care services) that did not align with their previous qualifications/careers. Fatima, a 40-year-old who had been a teacher in South Asia, worked part-time in a retail pharmacy but was keen to move back into teaching:

*I really want full-time [work] but I need to continue in my old profession of teaching, yeah, I [want to] really pursue this profession later.*

A permanent protection visa increased Fatima’s opportunities because it gave access to student loans. But pursuing her old career in a new country remained a challenge. She needed time to take up study:

*You know to do this study, it’s not easy.*

Other interviewees were like Ricky, a 39-year-old who had been an accountant in Southeast Asia and was working in retail but wanted to move into the hospitality and tourism sector: ‘I’m not really good in numbers ... but my soul was in hospitality. I like meeting with people.’ He needed support to help him find the right job so he could build a good life in Australia.

### Responding to uncertainty by giving asylum seekers a chance

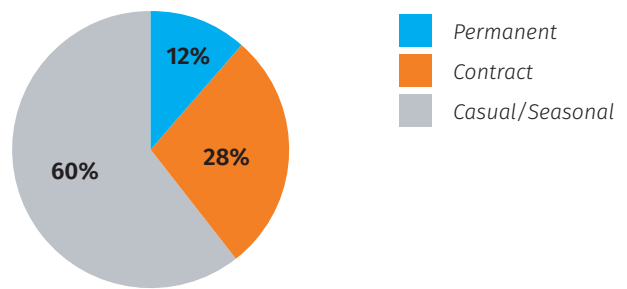
GtCAS program data for fiscal years 2015–2018 show that of the 846 participants who completed intake, 35.7% (n=302) gained work and 63% of these jobs (n=189) were brokered by the Brotherhood.

Many of the jobs sourced by the program were in manufacturing, retail, accommodation and food services—sectors that have high levels of part-time and casual jobs. While more permanent jobs might be desirable, given the challenges facing people seeking asylum—especially those on bridging visas—it is not surprising that between July 2015 and April 2018, 60% of the participants who found work through GtCAS were employed in casual or seasonal jobs at placement (see Figure 5.1). Over half of (53%) participants

were working less than full-time weekly hours; those with casual jobs worked on average 25.8 hours per week.

Figure 5.1

### At placement, most jobs were casual/seasonal or contract work



n = 270

Nevertheless, temporary work provided asylum seekers with some income to meet basic costs, as well as local work experience, networks and a first step into employment.

### Enhancing future prospects through ‘stepping-stone’ jobs

Jobs sourced by GtCAS can be described as ‘stepping stones’ to other job opportunities and learning. Reflecting on their initial employment experiences through GtCAS, interviewees considered the jobs brokered as the first step in their employment pathway. Bahir, a 29-year-old from South Asia, described how short-term jobs taught him about Australian workplace culture and increased his confidence:

*The best thing is that I have exposure. In all the jobs I had I have exposure, I have the experience. I’ve been in different sectors, totally different environments. So, I understand—I know how to work in a team, I know how to be very attentive to details. My communication skills improved. I’m more confident now, I’m more enthusiastic to meet different people.*

At the time of the interview, Bahir held a permanent, full-time position in customer service. Similarly, Fatima had initially found casual work in retail through GtCAS. Since then she had been granted a permanent protection visa and by the time of the interview had a permanent part-time role. Fatima explained the value of the stepping-stones jobs offered by GtCAS:

<sup>7</sup> Permanent protection visas are no longer available to people who have arrived onshore by boat seeking asylum.



***If you didn't have any job [in Australia] before, [you] have some options to start at least and then you can move to another job. Then you feel more confident—you're open to the job market ... For first job it's really, really good. You can start your first job and after that you can switch.***

Fadil, 26 years old from South Asia, gained some short-term Australian work experience as an issuing officer at both state and federal elections. Although this was only a few days' work, it gave him a boost in confidence and the motivation to look for work on his own, and he later found a permanent, full-time customer service job. At the time of the interview he was working part-time in customer service and studying engineering. He recalled:

***That was the first start that we had and then after that—it felt good. You get paid for your service and when you do well people appreciate it. That's [the] kind of motivation that constantly kicks in and pushes you. It's just all about the start.***

Martin, a 35-year-old from East Africa, had a contract job in banking and finance. He described the benefits of working for a large national company. It provided the opportunity to grow and specialise in a specific area, using previous experience and skills; supported his long-term career plan; paid well; provided flexible work arrangements; and offered scope to relocate to other cities or job roles. Comparing this with his previous factory job, he said:

***Before that I was just working [in] a factory, [this is] a professional job and it shows that—like the education that I've done—it wasn't for nothing. I can say it's like a reward for what we have studied because it's not something that is stressing you or just putting you down ... When you're doing a professional job it's not like a physical job. You're learning a lot.***

Having local work experience and networks will increase Martin's chances of getting similar roles.

While stepping-stone jobs might not guarantee economic security, they provide important learning and skills development opportunities, useful connections and employment experiences for people seeking asylum who would otherwise be marginalised in the labour market.

## Providing a bridge to work for people seeking asylum

The program was described by one interviewee as a 'bridge for new people coming into this country'. GtCAS helped

people seeking asylum to overcome three main challenges when looking for work:

- employer reluctance to appoint people seeking asylum due to uncertain visas
- mainstream recruitment practices such as screening
- lack of job-search know-how, skills and connections.

Many of the interviewees pointed out that the program's direct engagement with employers enabled them to bypass mainstream recruitment channels which would have excluded them from consideration, given their lack of recent Australian work history and uncertain visa status. For example, Qasim, who found a permanent full-time job in business administration through GtCAS, explained:

***So that was one of the things that Given the Chance made me skip—which is the first screening of the résumés, where the résumés are thrown away because of the visa. [GtCAS] made me skip that very silly, at the same time very critical, bit of the whole process and that is what I think Given the Chance is very good at.***

GtCAS provided participants with the opportunity to meet employers face to face to discuss their abilities, motivations and previous work experience. Interviewees talked about the job application support, training, advice and information on recruitment processes, which improved their chances of getting suitable work.

Martin explained how hard it had been previously, even though he had a postgraduate degree in IT from his home country:

***It's very hard for us, especially from a different culture, who don't speak very good English and ... our education is not Australian so it's not easy to get a professional job. I tried so many times to apply for so many jobs, but I wasn't successful [when applying for professional jobs]. I didn't even get a chance to sit for [an] interview.***

It was only when he had finished the GtCAS training that he was successful in gaining an interview—and a job. He credited his success to the program:

***I can say that this program helped me a lot. Without it I couldn't be where I am right now.***

The program also helps to overcome employer distrust of people seeking asylum. Amina, a 41-year-old from South Asia, explained, 'No-one's going to trust us, no-one knows how I behave, they [just] know you are [an] asylum [seeker]'. The Brotherhood's organisational reputation acted as a bridge between the jobseeker and the employer, breaking

down preconceptions and negative attitudes. Amir, a 31-year-old from the Middle East who had found a job in retail through the program, confirmed:

*The good thing about this agency, Brotherhood of St Laurence, they explain to the employer about our situation, our visa type, so it's much easier for us when you go to the interview, they know a lot about us. This is a big help when the agency introduces us to [an] employer.*

By working directly with employers to source jobs and job placements, the program helped people seeking asylum to overcome some key barriers.

### Leveraging employer engagement

Employers were critical to the success of the Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers program. Their motivations for engaging with the program varied. Some participated in the program because it aligned with their corporate values and business ethos, as van Kooy, Bowman and Bodsworth (2014) have noted elsewhere. Some of the employers we interviewed touched on the benefits of having a diverse workforce. Others spoke about a desire for inclusion and a celebration of diversity in their business, but said they lacked the means—in terms of both time and managerial resources—to adjust their recruitment processes.

### Cost-effective and brokered recruitment

The program gave employers access to employment channels that are both cost and time-effective for filling entry-level and low-skilled positions. All the employers we interviewed offered entry-level, often casual, positions through GtCAS—reflecting the characteristics of hospitality, manufacturing and cleaning sector jobs. Partner employers also said that the program enabled them to simplify recruitment—for example, avoiding inundation by job applications.

### Trialling employees

A major strength of the partnership flagged by the interviewed employers was that the 'interim' nature of the service provided, namely the ability to trial a candidate in house or on the job and assess their suitability for a role. This capacity to trial individuals for their fit within a business appears to be an advantage for both asylum seeker applicants, who may not have the ideal interview skills but possess skill sets relevant to the role, and the employer.

### Trust and reputation

The relationship with employers also seems to be one mediated by a trust in the capacity of GtCAS to source good candidates who are trustworthy and hard-working.

## 6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

People seeking asylum are caught in a web of uncertainty. Finding work provides income and has the potential to provide social connections; yet because of their uncertain circumstances it is hard for them to compete in an unfamiliar, rapidly changing labour market with an increase in insecure work, changing demands and the reduced employee rights and protections.

The Given the Chance for Asylum Seekers program acted as a 'bridge' that circumvented mainstream recruitment barriers so that people seeking asylum could have a chance. Temporary, stepping-stone jobs provided some income for participants to meet their basic financial needs. In the short term, these temporary jobs enabled participants to gain transferable skills and capacities, exposure to Australian workplaces and local work experience and to build useful professional contacts. They also provided a psychological boost and much-needed routine and structure to people's lives.

As van Kooy and Randrianarisoa (2017) point out, short-term 'survival jobs' have many intangible benefits for people seeking asylum; however, there is also a risk that these temporary jobs could lead to occupational skidding and effectively lock people out of their preferred careers.

Targeted support is essential to assist many people seeking asylum to break into the labour market and make use of their skills. Mainstream service providers such as jobactive rarely have the capacity to provide such intensive assistance. There are currently only a handful of philanthropically funded employment programs to assist people seeking asylum and refugees. Programs such as GtCAS demonstrate the value of improved employment services that can offer intensive pre-employment and recruitment assistance tailored to the circumstances of people seeking asylum.

In spite of the precarity created by exclusionary migration policies, this research highlights the opportunity to develop bridges to mainstream employment and to focus on jobs that match people's diverse skills, qualifications and employment plans of participants. Many GtCAS participants had professional or technical skills: over half (56%) had a post-school qualification from overseas. Those who were employed by large corporations had more options to move within or beyond the organisation.

Given the challenges facing people seeking asylum, there is an opportunity to go beyond survival or stepping-stone jobs. Large employers have a key role as they have the capacity to offer 'bridging jobs' that equip people seeking asylum with useful contacts, cultural capital and skills that will enable them to transition into other, ongoing employment once their visa status is resolved. Bridging to decent work is important given that current immigration policies extend the period of uncertainty. The longer someone stays in low-paid work, the harder it is to re-establish a career.

This study suggests the need for future research to examine the potential and value of involving larger employers in creating job pathways, and whether such jobs could offset some of the uncertainty experienced by people on temporary visas.

Of course, program responses also need to be accompanied by continued advocacy to tackle the policy drivers of insecurity for people seeking asylum.

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