

# 'My study is the purpose of continuing my life'

The experience of accessing university for people seeking asylum in Australia

**Lisa Hartley**

Curtin University

**Sally Baker**

University of New South Wales

**Caroline Fleay**

Curtin University

**Rachel Burke**

University of Newcastle

People seeking asylum in Australia face complex and significant barriers accessing higher education. Due to the temporary nature of their visa, their only pathway to university is being granted admission as an international student, which is financially prohibitive. This paper focuses on the lived experience of people seeking asylum with regard to accessing higher education, and identifies six major themes: the importance of accessing studies; the stress of struggling to meet living expenses while studying; mental health issues; support for people with disabilities, health challenges, and family responsibilities; the importance of language support and navigational brokers; and the role of higher education in the settlement of people seeking asylum. The research indicates that more university and community support is needed to foster access and participation, but the priority should be on addressing the Australian Federal Government policies that underpin the most significant barriers facing people seeking asylum in accessing higher education. This recommendation is most pressing in light of the re-election of the Coalition Government in May 2019, which has committed to continue these restrictive policies.

*Keywords: refugees, asylum seekers, international students, temporary visas*

The United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated in 2017 that only one per cent of refugees have access to higher education, compared with 36 per cent of the global population (UNHCR, 2017). Without access to higher education, refugees and people seeking asylum – those who have sought protection as a refugee, but whose claim for refugee protection has not

yet been finalised – are denied opportunities to develop the capacities and knowledge to sustain their livelihoods and to contribute to their communities and host societies. The lack of access to higher education is particularly complex in the Australian context where refugees and people seeking asylum are afforded different rights and entitlements based on their mode of arrival to Australia.

For example, refugees and humanitarian entrants who are resettled to Australia through the offshore component of Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program have access to services and entitlements that are denied to people seeking asylum who arrive to Australia without a valid visa (the majority of whom have arrived in Australia by boat) (Hartley & Pedersen, 2015). One of the significant differences in entitlements relates to access to higher education.

For much of the past six years, approximately 30,000 people seeking asylum in Australia have resided in community detention, or lived in the community on temporary Bridging Visas, while they await the processing of their claim for refugee status. These are people who arrived in the country by boat either before 13 August 2012 without having their protection visa application finalised as at 18 September 2013 or those who arrived on or after 13 August 2012 and were not sent to offshore detention on Nauru or Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. If people seeking asylum are deemed eligible for protection in Australia, the Department of Home Affairs issues them with one of two temporary visas: a 3-year Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) or a 5-year Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV). While more than half of these people have now received a decision on their refugee claim, as at July 2018 there were still 12,290 people seeking asylum who continue to wait. (Department of Home Affairs, 2018). In this paper, the term 'people seeking asylum' is used to refer to people who are either awaiting the outcomes of their refugee application and living in the community on a Bridging Visa or in community detention, or those already found to be a refugee and granted a TPV or SHEV.

People seeking asylum who hold Bridging Visas, TPVs, or SHEVs are ineligible for income support programs such as the Newstart Allowance, Youth Allowance, or Austudy. While they may apply for Special Benefit - the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) payment which at a maximum equates to 89 per cent of the Centrelink NewStart - there are stipulations about the nature and length of study that may be undertaken while receiving this income support. Further, they are ineligible for Australian Federal Government programs designed to assist students with financing higher study and concession rates. Accordingly, people seeking asylum are generally required to pay international student fees in order to attend tertiary education (comprising vocational education and training (VET) and university) in Australia.

With the average undergraduate degree costing over \$30,000 per year without government subsidies

(McCarthy & Dauba, 2017), the financial expense of admission to higher education via the international student program is prohibitive for most people seeking asylum. As such, while students from asylum-seeking backgrounds may successfully complete secondary schooling in Australia and qualify for entry to university, most are unable to continue their education due to the cost of enrolling as an international student (Hirsch & Maylea, 2017). This situation highlights a contrast in policy where people seeking asylum are permitted to attend government schools yet, upon graduation, they are not deemed to be local students for the purposes of receiving financial assistance to attend university (White, 2017).

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

Thus, the significant obstacles facing people seeking asylum who wish to participate in higher studies renders education impossible for most people in this situation. Exclusion from tertiary education diminishes employment potential and has been shown to undermine positive resettlement prospects and social inclusion significantly (Fleay, Lumbus & Hartley, 2016; Hirsch, 2015).

In response to the substantial barriers preventing people seeking asylum from participating in higher education, some universities have introduced full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships, bursaries, stipends, and part-time employment opportunities attached to scholarships as well as computers. Furthermore, state/territory governments in Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory have offered various forms of support for people to access higher education. There have also been local community responses seeking to facilitate access to education for people seeking asylum. These include the provision of case management to link people seeking asylum with potential scholarship opportunities and liaising with universities to highlight the urgent need for full fee-paying scholarships/waivers and other support. A national network of academics, education practitioners, and community sector organisations has also been established by the Refugee Education Special Interest Group (<https://>

www.refugeecouncil.org.au/educationsig/), which hosts quarterly national teleconferences to discuss developing challenges in this area.

## Overview of the current study

There is a relatively large body of work focusing on the educational experiences of people with refugee status; however, most of this work relates to the school sector (e.g., Naidoo, Wilkinson, Adoniou, & Langat, 2018). A central focus of the small amount of work undertaken within the higher education sector includes approaches to facilitating successful transitions to, and participation in, higher education for people with refugee backgrounds, as well support mechanisms for assisting with the navigation of linguistic and sociocultural practices (Baker & Irwin, 2019). Yet despite the growing recognition that people seeking asylum represent a particularly disadvantaged group due to the uncertainty of their situation, the ongoing impact of trauma, and their limited access to government services and support, there remains a dearth of research examining the experiences of such people (see, however, Hirsch & Maylea, 2017; White, 2017).

The findings presented here are part of a larger research project involving analysis of Australian Federal Government policy about people seeking asylum and their ability – or lack thereof – to access higher education and creation of a nation-wide map of university and community responses to the issue. However, for the purposes of this paper, we focus on the findings regarding the lived experience of people seeking asylum in higher education in Australia in the current restrictive socio-political climate. This is critical because, currently, there are no clear indicators as to how people seeking asylum manage to navigate the financial, linguistic, bureaucratic, social, and cultural landscape of Australian higher education institutions.

## Method

The data discussed in this paper have been drawn from the aforementioned participatory research project, which employed a mixed-methods design. The project design pertaining to the lived experience of people seeking asylum involved two main forms of data collection: a public symposium on issues of access to higher education for people seeking asylum (based on notes made throughout the symposium), and a series of individual semi-structured interviews with higher education students with lived experience of seeking asylum. We have

also included some quotes from community organisation representatives working with people seeking asylum to help contextualise the students' contributions.

Consistent with our ethical stance, we sought to open a safe space for our research participants to share their experiences and to amplify their voices rather than us as researchers recasting all of their stories in our words. Exploring the journey experiences of people seeking asylum (including through systems and institutions like higher education) can help to 'challenge the competing voices that come from [those] more socially powerful' and allow for people's experiences to be elevated (BenEzer & Zetter, 2014, p.304). The precarious position of asylum-seeking students means that telling their stories can be felt as a risk. We have tried to bring participants along with us throughout the process of the current study – which extends to our advocacy and practice beyond this project. However, even with the best intentions, participatory research can inadvertently objectify and reduce people from a refugee background (Doná, 2007). We have sought to avoid this as much as possible by seeking to learn from, and with, our participants throughout each part of the research process (Block, Warr, Gibbs & Riggs, 2012).

### ***National Symposium: People Seeking Asylum and Higher Education***

In November 2017, a public symposium was convened at The University of Melbourne organised by the research team (the authors of this article) in collaboration with community sector organisations including the Refugee Council of Australia, the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network, and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, as well as colleagues from the Melbourne Social Equity Institute at the University of Melbourne and Monash University (see Hartley, Fleay, Baker, Burke & Field, 2018 for the final symposium report). The symposium was organised with the purpose of bringing key 'stakeholders' from across Australia together for the first time to discuss the ways people seeking asylum to access university study could be better supported and focused on identifying emerging challenges and future opportunities. The stakeholders included 25 students with asylum-seeking backgrounds (both currently enrolled in higher education programs and prospective students) and 40 representatives from universities and community organisations. The symposium privileged the students' voices and stories, thus enabling the broader community to listen to and learn from people seeking asylum and their experiences and creating the possibility for rich and honest conversations about

existing practices, challenges and setting an agenda for collective advocacy.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

As part of the broader research project, we also conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with asylum-seeker students, university representatives and representatives from community organisations. In this paper, we draw on the interviews conducted with people seeking asylum. Participants were recruited via their engagement in either the symposium or contacts known to the researchers. In total, we conducted 11 interviews with students with lived experience of seeking asylum and studying in higher education residing in Western Australia, New South Wales, and Victoria (ten men, one woman) and six community organisation representatives.

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

The interview data were coded using thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). In the first phase, one of the research team coded the interview transcripts into themes. In the second phase, we reviewed the initial codes and removed themes that overlapped or did not have enough data to support them. In the final stage, we crossed checked the themes, deliberated about any themes that were unclear or appeared counter-intuitive then confirmed the theme names and definitions.

## **Results**

The findings represented in this section arise out of an integration of data collected from the National Symposium and the interviews with students with lived experience of seeking asylum. At the symposium and throughout the interviews, the students spoke of

the myriad challenges experienced in trying to access higher education in Australia, including their treatment as international students and the barriers created by complicated application processes. However, they also discussed the importance of key allies, such as a trusted broker or friend, in enabling their participation, and many demonstrated tenacity in the face of extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

Six major themes emanated from the data. The first was the importance of accessing studies (scholarships; loans; commitment; resilience). The second was the stress of struggling to meet living expenses while studying, and the third was the impact of all of this on the mental health of students. The fourth theme involved support for people with disabilities, health challenges, and family

responsibilities, and the fifth theme was the importance of language support and the need for brokers. The sixth and final theme was the importance of higher education in the settlement of people seeking asylum.

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## **The importance of accessing studies**

### ***Scholarships***

The critical importance of scholarships in enabling access to higher education was highlighted by student participants at the National Symposium as well as students taking part in the interviews. As Student Participant B noted in their interview:

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

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

Each person, each person has to have a purpose or goal you may say. My study is the purpose of continuing my life. If that is taken away from me, I am nothing.

However, while the provision of fee-waiving scholarships is a welcome response from universities to the limitations caused by Federal policy, this alone cannot support the successful participation of people seeking asylum in their studies. As Engstrom and Tinto (2008) succinctly described, 'access without support is not opportunity'; therefore offering a 'free' place in a course is the first of a series of types of support that universities need to offer in order to respond to the complex needs of people seeking asylum, particularly in the context where welfare payments are cut as a direct result of studying at university.

### **Loans**

Many students expressed a preference for loans like other Australian students, rather than scholarships to facilitate access to studies. The desire to 'earn' their education, or to reimburse the institution for the opportunity to study, is indicative of their willingness to contribute to the resettlement context and play a role in 'giving back' to the community.

### **Commitment**

Despite the significant challenges associated with studying in a foreign language and unfamiliar institutional environment with limited financial resources, student participants maintained a strong commitment to successfully completing their education in Australia. A desire to make family proud, and an appreciation for educational opportunities that were denied to parents and other relatives was identified as a chief motivating factor. For example, Student Participant F stated in their interview that their 'parents never had an opportunity to study... my parents said to me if you got the opportunity just make our dream real. We want to see at least one of us study at, get one degree you know'. Student Participant C also stated in their interview that it was:

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

### **Persistence in the face of significant challenges**

Another clear theme that was present in discussions at the symposium and in the interviews was the students' tenacity, devotion, drive to study, and the use of coping strategies to achieve good outcomes from participation in higher education.

Student participant D believed that he 'got lucky' reflecting on the many other people he had met in his

literacy class who also wanted to go to university, but he also reflected that he had 'worked [his] arse off'. He said, 'I would just say that I broke the norms and made it possible'.

The degree of persistence demonstrated by some people seeking asylum was also noted by community organisation and educational institutional participants. For example, one Community Organisation Participant noted in their interview that:

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

Student Participant D also described how he was undertaking a heavier load of study in order to get through his degree as quickly as possible given the severe financial constraints he faced. Despite his very heavy study load over the past two years, he expressed his gratitude for the opportunity and when asked how he was experiencing his studies replied that he was 'loving it'.

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

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

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

combined with ongoing trauma from past experiences and separation from family, weighed heavily on these students.

The cost of living is a significant barrier to people seeking asylum accessing higher education. One of the student participants at the National Symposium described their daily life as a student as 'eat, survive, study'. Student Participant H described in their interview how difficult it was to survive even with Centrelink support: '... sometimes the money even that Centrelink were giving... 'cause I was living alone...that was money was exactly for food and just the rent' (Student Participant: Individual Interview).

Other students described the great degree of stress they endured when they were suddenly cut from the SRSS scheme. As Student Participant K described in their interview:

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

Frequently, assistance from community organisations provided the only means by which students were able to survive while continuing their studies. For example, Student Participant D described going to the Red Cross and telling them:

I am homeless, I am an engineering student, they couldn't believe it. They said are you serious? I say yes ... and they gave me, I think they gave me two gift cards for Coles... I say what will happen next week and this was on my brain (Student Participant: Individual Interview).

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

One student described supporting himself by working 20 hours a week in a restaurant, which was a reduction from the nearly full-time job he had while he was undertaking his Diploma course. The student had to reduce his paid work because he had a 'gut feeling'

that he was in danger of failing if he tried to work at the same level he had been able to manage the previous year. He described never having enough money especially since his SRSS payments were stopped without prior notification. Despite these additional pressures on his finances, however, he was adamant that nothing would stop him from studying.

Student Participant E described the following in their interview:

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

The difficult and very specific challenges that these students face with regards to meeting living costs and consequent labour exploitation was also highlighted by a number of higher educational and community organisation participants. As one Community Organisation Participant put it in their interview:

I just don't know how they're going to survive... It's a hard flog for them but then they look at their mates... and some of them have worked really crappy, have been exploited in shitty jobs in Sydney where they're getting paid a pittance (Community Organisation Participant: Individual Interview).

Unmistakably, students who are seeking asylum are significantly disadvantaged as they cannot access income support as other Australian students. While a range of universities who offer full fee-paying/fee-waiver scholarships also offer income support for helping to contribute to living expenses, more needs to be done. Federal policy change which ensures all people seeking asylum and refugees have access to income and student support on par with other Australians would be the ultimate solution, but in the interim, income support and subsidised accommodation for students who receive scholarships is a necessary first step.

### ***Impacts on mental health***

The third major theme involved the stresses of adjusting to new academic life while coping with financial difficulties and living in an extremely precarious and uncertain situation, which has a significant, negative impact on students' mental health. The long-term uncertainty around their future in Australia due to the lack of access

to permanent protection and the right to family reunion, the mental health impacts of detention, and living in the community for years without the right to work, amplifies the trauma experienced in their country of origin and while fleeing. These significant pressures can act as further barriers to higher education making it difficult for people seeking asylum to focus on their studies. As Student Participant D described in their interview:

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

People seeking asylum also have to endure not seeing their families who remain in the country they fled and not knowing when – or if – they will ever see them again. Some have endured separation from family members after they arrived in Australia. As Student Participant F put it in their interview: 'I got depressed because they separated my brother and I at the first day coming out of detention.'

Community organisation participants also noted the negative mental health impacts of living in extreme uncertainty. For example, one community organisation representative lamented this sense of insecurity, indexing what van Kooy and Bowman (2019) refer to as 'manufactured precarity':

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

Mental health pressures and pre-existing trauma are exacerbated by the lack of time for self-care. High study and employment workloads leave little time for people seeking asylum to create a work/life balance. Greater financial support was identified as one way in which students could reduce their hours in the workplace and maintain a healthier and more sustainable lifestyle.

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

As raised at the National Symposium, students with ongoing health concerns and disabilities are a particularly vulnerable group of people, especially with regard to

accessing appropriate and affordable health care and support while undertaking studies. More information needs to be collected about the numbers of students seeking asylum who struggle with ongoing health and disability issues and the official structures in place to support such students.

People seeking asylum with children, particularly women, who are not able to access affordable childcare also face further barriers to accessing higher education. For students with responsibilities to financially support family members either in Australia or elsewhere, there is the added barrier of needing to find employment given the lack of access to student financial support.

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

Developing English language proficiency is a key barrier to finding employment and accessing education and can be a source of social isolation and marginalisation (for example, Ager & Strang, 2008; Fozdar & Hartley, 2013). Being essentially locked out of government-funded free English language classes due to the temporary nature of their visa means that developing language proficiency is much more challenging for people seeking asylum and places a significant burden on the individual to find affordable ways of learning the host country's language. In our study, community organisations observed the need for greater and more specialised English language support as a chief priority and we note here that many offer free classes to people seeking asylum. People who were pre- or semi-literate in their first language(s) were particularly affected.

When it comes to accessing tertiary education, a person's language proficiency can provide significant barriers, not only to meeting the entry requirements of the institution but also in terms of their participation in their studies. For people seeking asylum, studying in English language adds an additional, but invisible, language load on their studies. As Student Participant G articulated, 'I have to study a lot, especially as a second language you have to make it double sort of'. For this student, like many others, this additional work (of translating, of reading course materials several times, of practising writing and checking its accuracy) is on top of their paid work, travelling, and caring responsibilities, and thus constitutes a significant burden on their time.

In addition to establishing fluency in academic language and terminology of their discipline, students also need to develop the academic literacies through which they can demonstrate successful learning, and which will

help them to secure meaningful employment after they have completed their studies. There is therefore a need to support the language and literacies development of culturally and linguistically diverse students, especially for people seeking asylum who are likely to have experienced disruptions to their education, and who do not have easy access to free English language tuition. Tertiary education institutions need to ensure that sufficient and responsive support for academic language, literacies, and cultural navigation are available.

A number of student participants highlighted the importance of key people, such as a trusted broker or friend, to help at all stages of the process of accessing higher education including locating courses, scholarships, writing and submitting course and scholarship applications, and the transition into university life. One student who had a disability described that successful transition to university had only been possible through having a mentor and friends. Another student who was present at the National Symposium spoke positively of the profound impact that key people within community and university sectors have had in enabling access to higher education: 'I am an example of what the community can do... when the community takes responsibility for others'. It is therefore important that both educational and community institutions recognise and valorise the efforts of these trusted people, so that their efforts do not go unseen.

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

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

successful, successful settlement...what we want to see is social inclusion and people being able to participate fully in their new community'.

## **Discussion**

This first Australian-wide research highlights that people seeking asylum face complex and specific challenges and barriers to higher education access and enrolment. These barriers function as a compound set of injustices. In addition to the financial implications of the barriers, they are also causing considerable distress and eroding the hopeful possibilities that engaging in education can offer. A major barrier is that the only current pathway

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to accessing higher education is being granted admission as an international student, resulting from the temporary nature of the visa they are issued by the Australian Federal Government. This means that they are ineligible for

Government programs designed to assist students with financing higher study including the Higher Education Loans Program, Commonwealth Supported Places, and concession rates. Therefore, for most, this entry-point is financially prohibitive.

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

A range of Australian universities have responded to these restrictive government policies by implementing mechanisms to support access to higher education coupled with community sector advocacy and support. Our broader research project highlights that these efforts have resulted in more than 204 people seeking asylum studying in 23 universities across the country on scholarships that meet their full tuition fees, as of October



2018 (Hartley *et al.*, 2018). Some of these universities also offer living allowances (ranging from one-off case-by-case payments to \$7,500 per year), language support, and other measures. Other institutions offer partial-scholarships, that is, they were still paying international fees, but partial scholarships were used to contribute to the cost of the degree. While data were not collected on this cohort of students, a number of universities disclosed that they offered partial scholarships. Based on the numbers provided of people seeking asylum who had been offered these scholarships, there were at least 15 people seeking asylum studying in this situation. However, the numbers in this cohort are likely to be higher as not all universities that offer partial scholarships disclosed these numbers or had access to such data.

These measures are seen as critical and welcome responses by our participants. The advocacy of community organisations for the establishment of such scholarships and income support, and the bridge they provide between people seeking asylum and the complex admissions and scholarship application process, are also seen as critical. However, there are many other people seeking asylum who remain unable to access a scholarship and/or meet the university entry requirements. There are also challenges related to the effectiveness of scholarships and other measures as well as the retention, participation, success of, and support for people seeking asylum in their studies.

## Conclusion

University scholarships for people seeking asylum that meet the full cost of tuition fees, coupled with a living allowance and other support, have enabled access to higher education for more than 200 people across Australia. The determination and commitment of these students to their studies, while living in situations of extreme uncertainty and receiving minimal support compared with most other students in Australia, is clear and needs to be lauded. The university and community organisations responsible for the scholarships and other forms of support are also to be commended.

However, further measures need to be provided by other universities to ensure that these opportunities are available to people seeking asylum across the country; it is also essential that universities ensure that these students receive support that is necessary for their retention, participation, and success in their studies.

Most critically, the Australian Federal Government policies underpinning the most significant barriers

that people seeking asylum face in accessing higher education need to be addressed including the need for permanent protection visas to be issued to all who have been recognised as a refugee. This recommendation is most pressing in light of the re-election of the Coalition Government in May 2019, which has committed to continue the restrictive policies. Collective and sustained efforts directed at realising this are clearly needed.

## Acknowledgement

The research presented in this paper is from a project funded by the National Centre for Student Equity and Higher Education, which can be accessed from: <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/people-seeking-asylum-in-australia-access-and-support-in-higher-education/>.

**Lisa Hartley is Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Human Rights Education, Curtin University, Western Australia, where she conducts research with people seeking asylum and her interdisciplinary research is focused on questions of human rights and social change.**

**Contact: [lisa.hartley@curtin.edu.au](mailto:lisa.hartley@curtin.edu.au)**

**Sally Baker is a Lecturer in equity, academic language and literacies and higher education and is also a co-chair of the Australian Refugee Education Special Interest Group for/ with students from refugee backgrounds, supported by the Refugee Council of Australia (<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/ourwork/educationsig/>).**

**Caroline Fleay is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Human Rights Education, Curtin University, where she conducts research with people seeking asylum and is currently a Board Member of the Refugee Council of Australia.**

**Rachel Burke is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, at the University of Newcastle, NSW, whose work focuses on linguistically and culturally diverse educational contexts, the critical examination of polycscape, and praxis-driven approaches to language and literacies education.**

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