

Building Pathways: **A Framework to Support Transitions for Young People from Refugee Backgrounds**

building pathways

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Introduction

Transition points represent critical opportunities and key stressors in most young people's lives. As the *Good Practice Principles: Guide for Working with Refugee Young People* (VSPC 2005) sets out, the unique intersection of challenges faced by young people from refugee backgrounds – coping with adolescence, settlement and their traumatic past – mean that they can find it particularly difficult to make successful transitions. In addition, the diversity of experience amongst refugees requires creative support that looks beyond the assumptions of linear mainstream pathways.

This framework aims to improve the sensitivity and responsiveness of support provided to young people from refugee backgrounds moving through education, training and employment by building on the three core values of the *Good Practice Principles*: Understanding; Trust; and Social Justice and Access. It describes practical approaches to implementing these core values at two levels: 'What you can do' as transition workers; and 'What the relevant sectors can do', including program managers and policy makers.



UNDERSTANDING

Understanding involves making an active attempt to learn about what is important to a young person from a refugee background, what their life experiences mean to them and what they would like to do with their life.

Consider the impact of the refugee experience

The capacity of young people from refugee backgrounds to make decisions and manage the pressures of transition is impacted on by their refugee experience, cultural adjustment and the practical demands of settlement.

What you can do

- Identify and accommodate the personal factors impacting on the transition experience of young people.
- Be aware that the process of change, for some young people, may exacerbate other personal and emotional issues related to their refugee experience.
- Facilitate opportunities, such as discussion groups, for young people to address their fears and concerns.
- Keep up to date with information about what is happening in the young person's country of origin.

What the relevant sectors can do

- Share information between services and education providers regarding new learnings, changing demographics and research findings.

Arriving in Australia aged 18 with his 23 year old brother, Abdul was enthusiastic about continuing his education, which has been disrupted by civil war when he was in Year 9 at secondary school in his country of origin. Abdul had lost most of his family, fled to a refugee camp and witnessed traumatic events. As a result of these experiences, he found it hard to trust adults, lacked confidence and had frequent headaches and nightmares.

Abdul wanted to study with other young people, so he joined an ESL class at the TAFE close to his flat. He studied English and vocational subjects in a program that also supported his settlement needs. His teacher recognised that Abdul's irregular attendance and difficulties relating to other students was connected to his refugee experience. His teacher referred Abdul to a trauma counsellor and a recreation program to.

With the support he received to deal with his post-traumatic stress, Abdul got a full time position at Safeway, being promoted to a supervisor after 10 months. He was then accepted to train as a security guard. He worked at the Commonwealth Games and is now working in security at an office building in the city.

Build on young people's ambitions

Young people from refugee backgrounds may have ambitions for educational success without the necessary understanding of career planning and education pathway options.

What you can do

- Affirm a young person's capacity to make decisions about their future.
- Encourage young people to be guided by their interests and ambitions to set realistic goals.
- Support young people to make decisions about education and training pathways, taking into consideration their educational preparedness, personal circumstances and family's expectations.

What the relevant sectors can do

- Provide a variety of flexible pathway options, including both mainstream and specialist alternatives.
- Promote the use of peer education to increase young people's understanding and support their decision making.

Fozia was 19 years old when she arrived in Melbourne, after two years in a refugee camp in Kenya. She had received no formal education prior to arrival in Australia and was not literate in her own language. She had a career goal of becoming a nurse.

After 6 months in her Adult Migrant English Program class, she joined a specialised, low level ESL literacy class, which also addressed settlement needs and provided emotional support for young adult migrants. Fozia progressed to a higher level ESL class after a year, maintaining her enthusiasm for learning and willingness to study independently.

Fozia's careers adviser encouraged her to pursue her goal of working in the health industry and helped her plan a career pathway beginning with an Aged Care certificate. Fozia is now working in an aged care facility but also knows that she has the option to undertake further study towards becoming a nurse in the future.

Support the role of family and community

As part of a community still establishing itself in Australia, family and community play a critical role in the educational choices of young people from refugee backgrounds and may have high expectations of their young people, but with little understanding of the education, training and employment systems.

What you can do

- Assist families to understand the important role their support can play in a young person's education.
- Provide information to families and communities regarding the education system, career planning and pathway options, in their preferred language.
- Where appropriate, involve families in the development of young people's career planning and pathway options.

What the relevant sectors can do

- Adopt practices to engage young people that are inclusive of their parents and families.

Salim and his son arrived in Australia after 18 months in a refugee camp. Salim's son had completed Year 10 in their home country, excelling in maths. Salim hoped that his son would become a doctor.

When Salim's son began studying English, his English Language School (ELS) rang to invite Salim to a series of parent information sessions, which were supported by bilingual staff. Then, when his son started at the local secondary school, Salim attended more information sessions. With the help of an interpreter Salim discussed with a small group of parents and teachers the differences between the Australian education system and the one in his country of origin. Parents also discussed their concerns and how they understood their role in their children's education.

These culturally sensitive sessions made Salim feel confident about approaching staff at the school and participating in other school activities.

TRUST

Young people from refugee backgrounds have experienced traumatic circumstances before arriving in Australia, in which they have felt vulnerable and experienced loss. It is therefore imperative to build trust from a young person's first contact with a new setting through the provision of a welcoming and safe environment.

Foster trust in a new setting

Education, training and employment settings create an environment that engenders and reinforces trust.

What you can do

- Be aware of appropriate greetings, behaviour and physical environments for the age, gender, religion and culture of young people and their families.
- Provide a familiar point of contact who can build a relationship of trust with a young person and their family in the setting.
- Foster the social connectedness of young people from refugee backgrounds with peers in their new setting through one-to-one or group activities.

What the relevant sectors can do

- Recognise the need to resource social connectedness in delivering education and training programs.

Atong was 16 years old when she arrived in Australia after 4 years in the Kakuma refugee camp having had no formal education.

A month before finishing her study at an English Language School (ELS), Atong was involved in a transition program in which teachers from the local secondary school talked to the exiting students about the new school environment and matched her with a student 'buddy' from the secondary school.

After meeting her buddy at the ELS, Atong spent a day with her exploring the secondary school and sitting in class. On Atong's next visit to the school, she received her uniform, books and locker key.

Atong started at the secondary school in a special ESL Bridging Program for some classes and was with her buddy in others. For the first 6 months, Atong met with her buddy once a week to plan and participate in activities together. Atong felt this helped her to make new friends and feel comfortable in the new school environment.

Ensure continuity of support between settings

Provide continuity of support that recognises the vulnerability of trust for young people from refugee backgrounds.

What you can do

- If a young person leaves your service, support them to ensure they are introduced to and made familiar with another appropriate service.
- Assist young people to maintain contact with their 'last point of trust', even if they have transited out of that particular service.

What the relevant sectors can do

- Build capacity and flexibility in program guidelines for case-management across settings.
- Explore alternate models that allow funding to follow an individual young person.
- Establish regional coordination that encourages collaborative planning across mainstream and specialist providers to support young people from refugee backgrounds.

Ikram came to Australia as a 16 year old, having experienced war, loss of her family and dislocation to a refugee camp in a neighbouring country.

After completing her English study and Year 10, Ikram struggled to complete Year 11. With the help of her school's careers adviser, Ikram developed a pathway to becoming a social worker. As well as helping her enrol in an ESL course at her local TAFE, Ikram's adviser ensured that she contacted the pathways support worker at the TAFE. With support from the careers counsellor at TAFE, Ikram has completed a Community Services certificate.

Ikram moved to a different campus for her Diploma, but still calls her careers counsellor when she has problems that she cannot resolve, such as paying her course fees on time or finding suitable work experience. Her counsellor is linking her to appropriate support at her new campus.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ACCESS

Young people from refugee backgrounds have the right to fully participate in mainstream society. Education, training and employment settings should enable these young people to achieve equitable outcomes and assist them to achieve their full potential.

Take responsibility for equitable outcomes

Young people from refugee backgrounds have a right to meaningful education and training that takes into account their refugee experiences and educational preparedness in supporting them to achieve equitable educational outcomes.

What you can do

- Maintain dialogue between settings to enable appropriate information sharing and monitoring of a young person's progress.
- Take a holistic perspective of a young person's situation and ensure they are linked into broader service networks in order to respond to their particular needs.

What the relevant sectors can do

- Create mechanisms to understand how young people are faring in different settings.
- Provide flexible learning alternatives, particularly in relation to eligibility requirements and responsiveness to individual needs.

The 'Transition to Senior Secondary School' programs at Cleeland and Debney Park Secondary Colleges were developed in response to the interrupted schooling of many newly arrived young people from refugee backgrounds. These programs are a partnership between the schools and the Adult Multicultural Education Service (AMES) to deliver the VCAL Foundation curriculum. The programs respond to some newly arrived families preference for young people to study in a structured school environment with their peers.

The programs feature parent information sessions in first language, where possible, and school visits preceding enrolment. Students are accompanied to the Secondary Colleges by AMES staff and their progress is continually monitored.

The ongoing bilingual support and pastoral care offered in this model, contribute to the very high retention rate of these vulnerable young people. All students are assisted with realistic pathways to further education, employment or vocational training, which may include extending their time in senior secondary school.