



Fairer Future for Refugee Migrants – Enriching Employment Experiences

Dr Asanka Gunasekara, Dr Pradeepa Dahanayake, Dr June Tran,
Dr Rojan Afrouz and The Social Policy Group

This project was funded by RMIT's Strategic Impact Fund (SIF)

In Partnership



Table of Contents

Acknowledgement of Country and Thank You	3	Collective Solutions and Policy Recommendations	24
Executive Summary	4	1. Reforms for Australia’s Settlement Programs	24
Project Overview	6	2. Strengthening Strategic Collaborative Partnerships	25
Findings	9	3. Actions to Overcome Structural Barriers	27
Findings Overview	9	4. Bicultural, Bilingual and Lived-Experience Workers	30
What Does Meaningful Employment Mean?	14	5. Employers: Build Capacity and Improve Engagement for Better Refugee Employment Outcomes	31
Key Challenges to Finding Meaningful Employment	18	Conclusion	33

Acknowledgement of Country and Thank You

RMIT University and The Social Policy Group acknowledge the people of the Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nation, traditional custodians of the unceded lands on which we conduct the business of the University. RMIT respectfully acknowledges their Elders, past and present.

The RMIT research team, Dr Asanka Gunasekara, Dr Pradeepa Dahanayake, Dr June Tran, and Dr Rojan Afrouz would like to extend our sincere gratitude to the team at The Social Policy Group for their vital support in making the Fairer Future project a success.

This work was made possible by RMIT's Strategic Impact Fund, coordinated through the Enabling Impact Platforms of the Research and Innovation Portfolio in 2025. We offer a special thank you to

Professor Swee L Mak and the entire team for their decision to support this impactful project.

This project would not have been possible without the contributions of our valued participants from 32 institutions, listed below. We specifically thank Dr Dunwoodie for her thought-provoking keynote speech, as well as all the panellists and stakeholders across the sector who shared their expertise during workshops.

Finally, we recognise the essential administrative support provided by the School of Management, the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, and Armita Abdollahyan for their dedication during the workshop phase.

Executive Summary

Australia has a long history of accepting refugees and humanitarian entrants, providing protection and supporting new arrivals to rebuild their lives in safety. In 2025, Australia reached a historic milestone, granting its one millionth refugee and humanitarian visa entrant since the end of World War II. While refugees rebuild their lives, employment is an important milestone in the settlement process. However, despite the country's commitment to refugee resettlement and the continual efforts of refugee and vulnerable migrant settlement service providers, including through programs such as the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program, sustainable and meaningful employment remains a challenge. Many refugees remain unemployed despite a genuine desire to contribute economically, while many others who do find work are consigned to roles that fall well short of their skills, qualifications, and what they consider to be meaningful employment — a double waste that diminishes both the individual and the communities they've joined. In response, the *Fairer Future for Refugee Migrants: Enriching Employment Experiences* project was developed with the objective of providing insightful and pragmatic solutions to improving access to meaningful employment for refugee cohorts in Australia.

By taking an interdisciplinary approach, with multi-stakeholder engagement, this project aims to bridge the gap between high-level policy and the practical realities of the refugee employment journey.

The project is a collaborative effort between RMIT University and The Social Policy Group (SPG), an Australian settlement and migration peak body. The project engaged integral stakeholders involved in refugee employment through two workshops held on the 4th of August and the 11th of November 2025. This report presents the findings and recommendations from the two workshops. The reflections and voices of the workshop participants, which included people with refugee migrant settlement experiences, settlement service providers, employers, representatives from local councils, federal government representatives, representatives from SPG, and academics, are presented along with recommendations to improve employment outcomes for people from refugee backgrounds.

The key findings indicate that the pathway to meaningful employment is challenging for many people from refugee migrant backgrounds in Australia, who face significant barriers. These include low English proficiency, limited social capital, barriers to recognising prior qualifications and experience, bias and stigma, a lack of culturally sensitive and trauma-informed approaches within employment services, inappropriate funding models for settlement providers, and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) within employment services that undermine meaningful employment outcomes.

The collaboratively developed recommendation areas to come out of the two workshops have been categorised in this report as follows:

1. Reforms for Australia's settlement programs
2. Strengthening strategic collaborative partnerships
3. Actions to address structural barriers
4. Better support for bicultural, bilingual, and lived-experience workers: staffing and leadership
5. Employers: building capacity and improving engagement to achieve better refugee employment outcomes

Meaningful employment is critical to the wellbeing and financial stability of refugees and their families, while also delivering broader labour market contributions.

This report champions a human-centred approach to refugee employment, which puts the lived experience, strengths, dignity and agency of refugees at the core of policy and practice strategies. This report also advocates for an integrated approach that brings refugees, settlement providers offering employment support, Workforce Australia employment services, industry, policymakers and academics into strategic collaboration.



Project Overview

Settlement providers are committed to supporting the successful settlement of refugees and vulnerable migrants across the country, assisting them at key stages of their settlement journey: from greeting new arrivals at the airport to helping them to secure housing, learn English, build social networks, navigate essential services, and land their first job. Settlement providers, however, face systemic, employer-related obstacles, and capacity limitations as they attempt to support refugees and vulnerable migrants to find meaningful employment. In this context, providers are often constrained in the quality of employment-related supports they can offer within their settlement programs. A reformed approach is needed to achieve sustainable employment outcomes.

Inspired by the call to action at the 2024 National Settlement Community of Practice Forum in Canberra,¹ this initiative was designed to contribute to that collective future by strengthening the refugee employment sector. We aimed to collectively identify key barriers and develop practical solutions for decent and secure work for refugees. By taking an interdisciplinary approach, this project

aimed to bridge the gap between high-level policy and the practical realities of the refugee employment journey.

This work is a team effort between RMIT University and SPG. The core team includes RMIT researchers: Dr Asanka Gunasekara, Dr Pradeepa Dahanayake, Dr June Tran, and Dr Rojan Afrouz, working alongside the team at SPG. Our work was made possible by RMIT's Strategic Impact Fund, coordinated through the Enabling Impact Platforms of the Research and Innovation Portfolio in 2025.

Our main goal is to improve employment outcomes for refugees by working closely with various partners across multiple sectors, particularly the settlement sector. To achieve this, we held two workshops that brought together those committed and engaged in the refugee employment space, including refugees, settlement providers, employers, government representatives, and academics. Workshops were carried out with human research ethics clearance from RMIT University to ensure everyone involved was supported, protected and respected.

1. 2024 National SETSCoP Forum Summary Overview Report: <https://members.setscop.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/SETSCoP-2024-Forum-Report-Landscape-V4-20012024.pdf>

Key Terminology

For the purposes of our report, and in line with our findings, meaningful employment operates as a dynamic and changing concept, which is contingent on perspective and circumstance. As our report unfolds, many elements of meaningful employment are introduced through the lens of three key perspectives: refugee employees, settlement service providers, and employers. While the elements of meaningful employment vary across perspectives, certain conditions emerge consistently; to address these, we advocate for an employment system that supports refugees to access work that is secure, fairly-remunerated, that aligns with

their skills and values, that provides opportunities for professional development and career progression, that is embedded in workplaces that foster dignity, safety and belonging, and that is satisfying enough to foster retention.

Within this report 'employment services' will refer to Workforce Australia's employment services, and 'settlement providers' will refer to settlement programs that offer employment-related supports to refugee migrants.

Workshop Participants

1. 54 Reasons
2. AMES Australia
3. Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights
4. Banksia Gardens
5. Brotherhood of St. Laurence
6. Centre for Multicultural Youth
7. Ceres Fair Food
8. City of Melbourne
9. Civik People
10. Cultura
11. Deakin University
12. Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
13. Ethnic Council of Shepparton and District Inc.
14. Cultura (formerly Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services)
15. Many Coloured Sky
16. MiCare
17. Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne)
18. Migrant Workers Centre
19. North West Migrant Resource Centre
20. Multicultural Communities Division
21. Office for Multicultural Affairs (Department of Home Affairs)
22. RMIT
23. Southeast Community Links
24. Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre
25. Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre
26. Thrive Refugee Enterprise
27. Value Nation
28. VETASSESS
29. Victorian Afghan Associations Network
30. Wellsprings for Women
31. Whittlesea Community Connections
32. Wyndham Community and Education Centre

Workshop One Overview: Challenges and Partnerships in Refugee Employment

Workshop One was held on 4th of August 2025 at the RMIT City Campus from 9:30 am to 3:00 pm, with 48 participants in attendance. The session opened with a keynote speech by Dr Karen Dunwoodie (Co-founder of Deakin CREATE, Deakin University), followed by two panel discussions. The first panel, moderated by Nick Ross (National Director of Migration, Settlement and Justice, SPG), explored the challenges and benefits of securing meaningful refugee employment from the perspectives of refugees, employers, and settlement providers. Panellists included Petra Helal (Brotherhood of St Laurence), Hiyah Rahman (Whittlesea Community Connections), Emmanuel Dusengumuremyi (Bank of Australia), and Maryam Saahar (AMES).

The second panel session focused on methods to strengthen cross-sector partnerships to enrich employment outcomes. Moderated by Dr Asanka Gunasekara, the session featured contributions from Bec McConnon (Office for Multicultural Affairs, Department of Home Affairs), Bis Hakimi (PhD Student, Deakin University), Dr Sherrica Senewiratne (Organisational Psychologist), and Professor Afreen Huq (School of Management, RMIT University). Following the panel discussion, the workshop format transitioned into interactive consultations; participants were divided into four focus groups to engage in deeper dialogue regarding the specific challenges and benefits of refugee employment from the perspectives of refugees, employers, and service providers.

Workshop Two Overview: Strategy Development and Policy Recommendations

Workshop Two was held on the 11th of November 2025 at RMIT University from 9:30 am to 2:30 pm. It was attended by 32 participants, including RMIT researchers, representatives from SPG, and various settlement providers. The session began with sharing the key findings from Workshop One, which led into an open discussion involving all participants.

Following this, the RMIT researchers facilitated four focus group sessions dedicated to collaborative problem-solving. These sessions were designed to develop strategies for overcoming the previously identified barriers (Workshop One) and to formulate specific policy recommendations and employment frameworks. The workshop concluded with a representative from each focus group sharing a summary of their discussion with all the participants, to ensure a collective and unified approach to the project's final outputs.

Findings

Findings Overview

Across both workshops, participants consistently noted that suboptimal refugee employment outcomes do not arise from a lack of effort or goodwill from government, employers, or service organisations working towards refugee employment outcomes, but instead from the way the current system is structured. Employment support for refugees delivered by employment services and settlement providers is undermined by key performance indicators (KPIs) that do not incentivise meaningful employment outcomes, as well as short-term funding cycles that increase compliance pressures. These features create misaligned incentives that prioritise rapid job placement instead of sustained skill recognition, career progression, and long-term retention. As a result, refugees are frequently channelled into survival jobs and precarious employment that do not reflect their qualifications or aspirations, while employers struggle to access appropriately prepared candidates. For qualified and skilled

refugees, bridging barriers to Australian industry, including in training, certifications, and qualification-recognition, exclude refugees from appropriate work opportunities, adding to the structural factors that reinforce cycles of underemployment and downward occupational mobility. Furthermore, settlement providers are constrained in their capacity to deliver tailored, career-focused support to refugees due to limited resources. In addition, employment services and settlement providers are undercut by fragmented responsibilities and limited coordination between Workforce Australia, settlement organisations, government and policymakers, industry, skills assessment bodies, and training providers. Employers, settlement providers, training, certification and assessment bodies, and governments each have key roles to play in a reformed approach which is conducive to meaningful employment outcomes.

Summary of Keynote Speech

Dr Karen Dunwoodie, Co-founder of Deakin CREATE, Deakin University, highlighted several critical failings within the current refugee settlement sector, describing it as a "broken system" that too often hinders rather than helps refugee integration. One main concern Dr Dunwoodie highlighted was the reality that skills recognition is treated as a privilege for some, rather than a right afforded to all. This problem frequently leads to refugees being funnelled into low-skilled roles that do not match their qualifications or experience. Furthermore, Dr Dunwoodie emphasised that existing service models often prioritise meeting immediate KPIs over the vital goal of securing meaningful and sustainable careers. She stated that these challenges are exacerbated by a significant lack of cross-sector collaboration and reiterated the urgent need for a more unified and human-centred approach to refugee employment.



To address these systemic failings, Dr Dunwoodie called for a fundamental realignment of the sector, structured around six key shifts.

1. ***From a numbers game to a capability strategy:*** Moving away from purely quantitative outcomes with regard to refugee employment towards recognising individual talent and expertise.
2. ***From job readiness to human potential:*** Shifting the focus from simply preparing refugees for work to recognising and nurturing their inherent potential.
3. ***From credential doubt to skill recognition:*** Addressing systemic scepticism towards overseas qualifications by treating skill recognition as a standard right.
4. ***From bias to inclusion:*** Actively dismantling workplace biases to create environments where refugees can authentically belong.
5. ***From "any job" to "the right job":*** Moving past the "survival job" model toward career-aligned employment that matches an individual's skills, experiences, and professional background.
6. ***From short-term fixes to long-term belonging:*** Replacing temporary, income-based interventions with strategies that support social and economic integration.

Panel Discussion

Panel 1: Securing and Sustaining Refugee Employment: Challenges and Benefits

The first panel brought together diverse perspectives to explore the practicalities of refugee employment, focusing on both the systemic challenges and the tangible benefits for employers. The discussion produced four strategic pillars:

<p>1. Effective communication and relationship building</p>	<p>2. Adopting a “strengths-based” approach</p>	<p>3. Strategic capacity building for refugees</p>	<p>4. Targeted advocacy strategies</p>
<p>Panellists emphasised the need to prioritise clear, culturally sensitive communication between employment providers and the refugee communities they serve. A recurring theme was the importance of “centring” the lived experiences and professional qualifications of refugees, ensuring their voices lead the placement process.</p>	<p>Rather than focusing on deficits or barriers, the panel urged employment services to adopt a strengths-based approach. This involves mapping out the specific career goals of individuals and identifying concrete actions to achieve them, building upon the existing strengths, skills, and resilience of the client.</p>	<p>To move beyond survival jobs, the discussion highlighted the necessity of providing specialised training opportunities. By investing in field-specific skills, the sector can better support long-term professional growth and ensure that integration is sustainable rather than temporary.</p>	<p>The panel noted that successful advocacy on behalf of refugees requires targeted messaging to key stakeholders. When attempting to engage an employer or policymaker for example, the specific interests and terminology/language of that employer or that government department should be employed.</p>

Panel 2: Strengthening Cross-Sector Partnerships to Enrich the Employment Outcomes of Refugees

The second panel explored how integrated, cross-sectoral collaboration can transform the refugee employment landscape to produce better outcomes for refugees. The discussion moved beyond individual organisational efforts to focus on a systemic, "all-in" approach and commitment to refugee employment. The key insights were:

<p>1. Resource requirements for providers</p>	<p>2. Addressing downward occupational mobility</p>	<p>3. Advocacy and bias in recruitment</p>
<p>Panellists noted that service providers require adequate and appropriate resources to properly partner and collaborate across the sectors, needed to effectively support the complex needs of refugee communities.</p>	<p>A significant concern raised was that refugee migrants are often forced into downward occupational mobility, taking roles far below their actual skill levels</p>	<p>Meaningful involvement from all sectors requires active connection and advocacy to change deeply rooted industry standards (at a systemic level) and recruitment biases (at an organisational level) that currently exclude qualified refugee talent.</p>
<p>4. Agency and collective impact</p>	<p>5. Psychosocial impact of unemployment</p>	<p>6. Valuing cultural capital</p>
<p>By focusing on individual agency, a "collective force" is created among the different actors in the system, leading to more robust and unified employment outcomes.</p>	<p>Employment barriers caused a severe emotional toll as refugee migrants often experience a profound loss of identity and feelings of hopelessness when they cannot find meaningful work.</p>	<p>The panel emphasised that cultural capital is a significant asset that refugees bring to Australia, which should be recognised as a benefit to the national economy and workplace diversity</p>



Focus Group Discussions

During the second half of Workshop 1, the session transitioned into a series of four focus groups designed to explore the specific challenges and barriers to achieving sustainable employment outcomes. These groups were strategically divided to capture three distinct viewpoints: the refugee employee perspective, the employer perspective, and the settlement providers perspective.

The participants engaged in a collaborative dialogue to unpack what "meaningful employment" means to different partners in the sector. This multi-stakeholder approach ensured that the project's later frameworks would be grounded in a shared understanding of success, balancing the needs of employees with the operational realities and goals of employers, service providers and other partners in the sector.

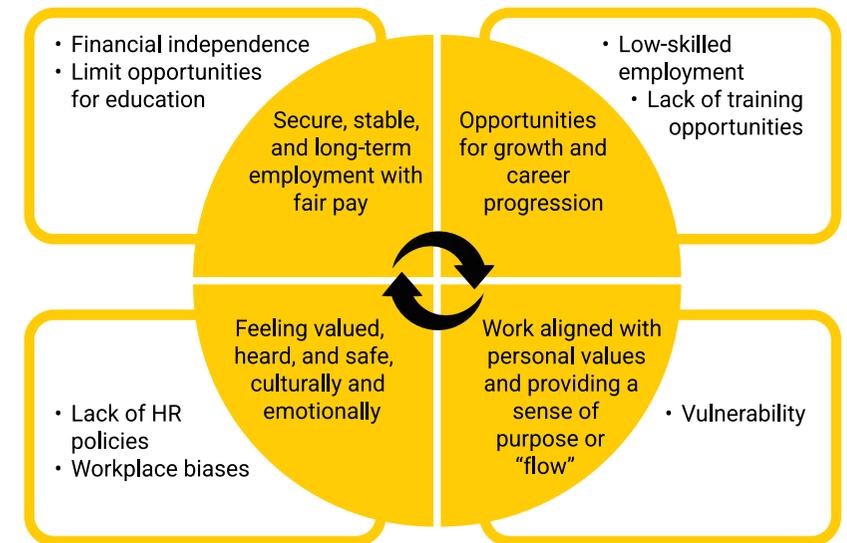
What Does Meaningful Employment Mean?

Refugee Employee Perspective

During the focus group with refugee migrant employees, participants were asked what “meaningful employment” looks like from their perspective, as opposed to the idea of just “getting a job”. Participants identified the following four elements:

1. **Secure, stable, and long-term employment with fair pay:** It starts with the peace of mind that comes from financial dignity and knowing a job is secure for the long haul.
2. **Opportunities for growth and career progression:** It means having access to opportunities to learn, improve, and move up, rather than feeling stuck in one place.
3. **Work aligned with personal values and a sense of purpose:** It is about doing work that feels “right” and aligns with a person’s sense of purpose or “flow”.
4. **Feeling valued, heard, and safe:** It is about a workplace where employees feel respected and protected, both culturally and emotionally.

Figure 1: Refugees migrants’ perspectives on meaningful employment.



Employer Perspective

During our focus group with employers, we explored what "meaningful employment" means from their point of view. With operational factors at the centre of the employer perspective, the following three thematic priorities were identified:

1. **Reputation and becoming an employer of choice within refugee communities:** By providing a "meaningful offering" (an intentional value proposition for refugees and migrant communities that goes beyond simply pay), employers can build a reputation as a trusted and sought-after refugee workplace, building reputation as an employer of choice within refugee communities.
2. **Strong employment support networks between employers and settlement providers:** "meaningful employment" occurs when robust, reliable employment support networks are in place between settlement providers and employers, who collaborate to help refugees navigate the employment journey. Settlement providers can support newly-employed refugees in settling into their new workplace, and a partnership between all parties can support understanding workplace practices, workplace issue resolution, and provide wrap-around support.
3. **Reduced employee turnover and higher retention through meaningful engagement:** "Meaningful work" is work that produces employee engagement and satisfaction, which lowers employee turnover rates and builds a stable and committed team. By reducing turnover, an employer sees greater returns on their investment in specialised training, professional development, and the cultivation of institutional knowledge. Long-term employment is meaningful to employers, to see greater returns on their investment in an employee.

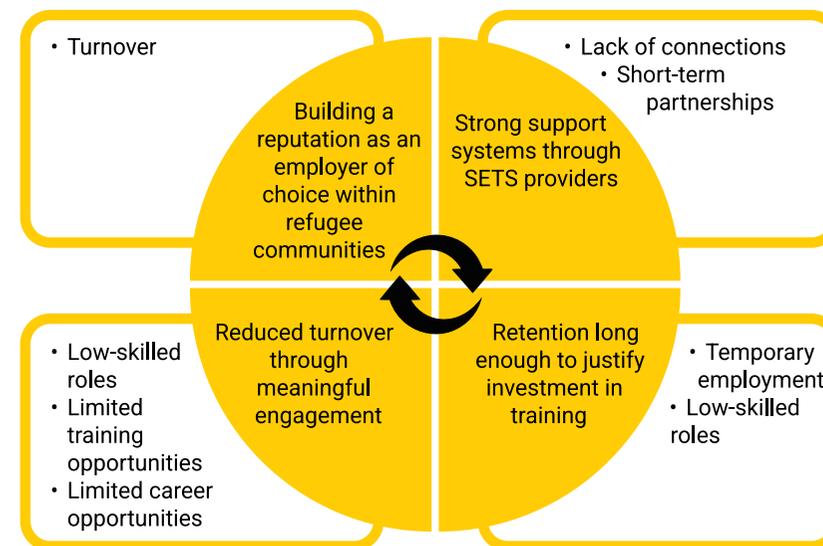


Figure 2: Employers perspectives on meaningful employment.

Settlement Provider Perspective

Settlement providers were asked what "meaningful employment" means to them in their focus group. The following four themes were identified:

1. **Social connection and community contribution.** The value of a job is measured by the sense of belonging it provides, on top of the specific tasks performed.
 - > **Civic contribution:** Jobs that allow refugees to "protect" or serve their local community (e.g., hospital staff) are in high demand because they foster pride and social integration
 - > **Workplace connections:** Meaningful employment is defined by positive connections with colleagues and a sense of being part of a team, which significantly improves quality of life.
 - > **Integration:** It is less about the "type" of job and more about how integrated and valued the individual feels within the Australian society.

2. **Age, financial security, and family responsibility as variants.** Settlement providers describe "meaningful work" for different refugee clients in diverse ways. For youth, even a casual after-school job is meaningful because it offers a first taste of financial autonomy and security. For clients with dependents, any job that ensures rent is paid, food is on the table, and children are educated is considered meaningful. For an older, educated migrant, professional recognition might be central to a job that is considered meaningful.

" *I know from my perspective, during COVID times, our organisation placed about 80 refugee background community members in the local hospital. And that for them was so meaningful.*

- Workshop Participant

" *I think meaningful employment is also about connection. [Without a meaningful job] you don't feel connected to your colleagues, to your environment, your employment kind of ecosystem, you're not really going to want to go to work regardless of how much enjoyment you get out of the job.*

- Workshop Participant

" *To some, meaningful employment may mean any job that helps them put food on the table, educate the kids, pay rent and job security.*

- Workshop Participant

3. **Employer environment and safety.** The "where" and "how" of work are as important as the "what."

> **Psychological safety:** Employers must be culturally safe and trauma-informed.

> **Respect and longevity:** A workplace that offers long-term stability and treats employees with respect is essential for refugees to feel settled and secure.

4. **Realism vs. idealism.** Due to the harsh realities of the labour market, "meaningful work" is considered to be a "far-fetched dream" for many individuals and communities across Australia. Finding work that is decent, or simply finding work, are realistic goals for many. Settlement providers have found that they are often playing a challenging 'expectation management' role with highly skilled, qualified, or experienced refugees who are aiming for positions commensurate with previous roles. While the labour market is often inequitable for refugees with high skills, settlement providers, employers, and refugees themselves must navigate and balance the idealism behind these aspirations with longer-term pathways that may not be ideal.



Figure 3: Settlement providers' perspectives on meaningful employment.

During the workshop, refugee employees, employers, and settlement providers, understood 'meaningful employment' in many different ways. Combining these perspectives, 'meaningful employment' can be understood as work that is secure and fairly-remunerated, that aligns with skills and values, that provides opportunities for professional development and career progression, that is embedded in workplaces that foster dignity, safety and belonging, and that is satisfying enough to foster retention.



Key Challenges to Finding Meaningful Employment

Refugee Employee Perspective

The focus group held with refugee employees revealed that the challenges preventing refugees from finding and retaining meaningful employment are complex and multifaceted. Participants identified several systemic and structural hurdles, as well as obstacles relating to the spread of information and knowledge.

“ One important issue with employment services is that they have a KPI they try to reach, they don't care about the career development or finding the right job for a person, they try, they encourage them to get a job for two months or for three months or three weeks to get the placement. So, it doesn't matter if you want to be a doctor or an engineer, just go and do some job for a few weeks. When they go or went to the job, and they say, oh, it's not for me. It's not the right job. Yeah. So, then they lose because they are not interested in that job quickly after a month or after three weeks.

– Workshop Participant

1. **Settlement provider capacity and capability:** Many settlement providers are seen as being unequipped with the requisite resources and associated skills and knowledge to provide truly effective employment services tailored to refugee needs.
2. **Grant design and management of settlement provider contracts:** Settlement providers strive to meet KPIs, some of which do not align with meaningful employment outcomes. In limited resource environments, there is an incentive to help refugees to “get a job”, which is better than unemployment, but not considered to be meaningful employment.
3. **Intersectionality and identity:** Intersectional factors such as age, family status, LGBTIQ+ identity, and differing ethnic backgrounds are often ignored in the employment process. This oversight makes it difficult for refugee employees to balance protection of details of their personal identity and maintain individual dignity while they are seeking work.
4. **Misinformation:** Refugee communities often rely heavily on peer networks and word-of-mouth for information, particularly when formal systems feel inaccessible, language barriers exist, or there is distrust of official institutions. These networks can become channels through which inaccurate information circulates and gets reinforced. Outdated, misunderstood, or contextually wrong advice create additional barriers to finding meaningful employment and inefficient and inappropriate allocations of refugees to employment opportunities and pathways. This includes misinformation regarding what career pathways are available and accessible, misinformation regarding work appropriateness for different intersectionalities and identities, and misinformation regarding different employment processes.

5. **Systemic pressures and vulnerability:** Many individuals feel forced to choose between immediate financial independence and long-term education, often abandoning their studies to secure "survival" jobs. This cycle frequently leads to downward occupational mobility, where highly skilled refugee migrants are forced into low-skilled roles.

“ They don't have time because they need immediate income. They have four or five families, they need housing, they need other things to survive.

– Workshop Participant

6. **Specialised training and qualification recognition:** There is a lack of specialised training opportunities and qualification-recognition pathways for refugees which are designed to address the unique barriers that refugee migrants face when building their new lives in Australia. There are also inherent biases in hiring practices towards migrants and refugees. These factors contribute to the downward occupational mobility of refugees.

Settlement Provider Perspective

During their focus group, settlement providers shared their unique perspective on the hurdles that make it difficult to support refugee employees to find and sustain meaningful employment. They identified several critical challenges.

1. **Short-term funded programs:** The refugee employment ecosystem is currently hindered by short-term funding cycles, particularly settlement programs that support refugee employment. This is at odds with meaningful refugee employment outcomes, which inherently require a medium to long-term commitment when taking into consideration appropriate training and education acquisition, relevant job qualification and certification attainment, job search and selection, job application processes, interview preparedness, and job retainment. Short-term funding models are leading to short-term planning and undermining meaningful outcomes.
2. **System fragmentation:** The employment system is fragmented across three disconnected policy domains: settlement programs (funded by the Department of Home Affairs, philanthropic sources, and state governments), employment services (funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations [DEWR]), and skills and training programs (predominantly funded by state governments and DEWR). Because no single agency owns the outcome, no single agency has the incentive or authority to fix the underlying coordination problem. This produces duplication, service gaps, underutilised programs, and an inefficient matching of refugees to employment-related opportunities. Improved coordination and collaboration are also needed across the broader ecosystem of stakeholders involved in refugee employment, including skills assessing authorities, local councils, community groups, and industry.
3. **Policy gaps:** At present, there is no index or accreditation for inclusive refugee recruitment and hiring in Australia. Relative to the Australian Disability Network's Access and Inclusion Index, this represents a policy gap for refugee employment. Without a framework, employing refugees depends on individual employer goodwill, and is invisible and untracked. Without this shift of responsibilities towards employers, settlement organisations work tirelessly to prepare refugees for workplaces, prepare workplaces for refugees, and to advocate or mediate on behalf of refugee clients should a problem arise.
4. **Business pressures:** There is a noted lack of tolerance from some businesses/employers, as their focus remains strictly on immediate revenue generation and meeting rigid internal KPIs. There is little room for the flexible support some refugees may need.
5. **Pressure to down-skill:** It is not uncommon for employment services, settlement providers or fellow refugee community members to suggest that refugees remove high-level qualifications or professional experience from their resumes. This occurs to increase the likelihood of securing any available job, directly leading to under-employment.
6. **Discrimination and bias:** A major barrier is employer bias. Discrimination and bias in hiring and recruitment practices, in work culture and treatment, and in contract termination policies and practices. Employer biases stem from a fundamental lack of awareness and understanding at the societal level of diverse cultural, historical, and lived experiences of forced displacement.

7. **Structural barriers** Practical, everyday obstacles continue to act as significant roadblocks. This includes the high cost and complexity of recognition of overseas qualifications and skills, employment specific language barriers, transport barriers (for example, for those without a license), family caring responsibilities or childcare challenges combined with inflexible working arrangements, workplaces without cultural-responsive practices (for example, lack of a space for prayer), continue to act as significant roadblocks for refugees seeking employment or looking to progress in meaningful employment.
8. **Balancing English language requirements with work:** There are challenges in balancing English language requirements, which were widely recognised as important for long-term meaningful employment and settlement, with a desire to work in the short-term. Requirements for the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP), a settlement program offering free English to eligible refugee migrants, were identified as a barrier to refugees desiring to engage in traineeships, internships, and work, with the need for a more flexible arrangement that allows refugees to meet both areas.
9. **Professional development:** Settlement providers explained how difficult it is to direct clients to enrol in the right course without employment-specific training. Specialist knowledge is required to understand how the education system works, and how qualification recognition works in each industry and sector in Australia. "I remember... that didn't really help because I wanted to work in this area, and someone asked me to do [a particular] course, but [the employer] didn't recognise this [particular] course".
10. **Specialist bridging gap:** Refugee specialists (e.g., doctors, lawyers, engineers) need a "bridge" to work in Australia. Specialists with 20+ years of experience are sitting at home on Centrelink because they cannot afford the bridging units or supervised practice required by the Australian system.
11. **Challenges for young lived-experience employment workers:** There is a "cultural age gap" where young bilingual workers feel stressed when advising older community members on employment, as this goes against cultural tradition.

" Having bicultural employees working in organisations such as Workforce Australia is important. However, this is challenging... the people who have the best bilingual skills tend to be the young people. And what they were finding is that when they bring people in for appointments, the young person culturally can't be telling the older person why they're not finding work... The older person will just say, why are you being so disrespectful? And it's so much pressure on this young person who has the bilingual skills that they just keep quitting.

– Workshop Participant

Employer Perspective

During the focus groups, employers highlighted several structural and educational barriers that make it difficult to establish meaningful employment pathways for refugees. Their perspective focused on the need for better coordination between Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), settlement providers, and their businesses, and more practical, industry-aligned support for refugee migrants.

1. *Disconnection between employment sector partners*

- **Lack of coordination:** There is a significant disconnect between Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), settlement providers, and businesses, as these partners are not currently coordinating their efforts effectively.
- **Job readiness:** When it comes to meaningful employment opportunities, refugees are frequently not trained in the specific skills that employers are looking for, which leads to a decrease in business interest in, and engagement with, refugee employees.
 - > A mismatch was reported between the AMEP's curriculum and standard workplace requirements. Participants noted that the program focuses heavily on formal grammar rather than the industry-specific language needed to function effectively at work.
 - > A critical funding gap also exists within the "Skills First" framework, as only some courses are funded.
 - > Essential "micro-credentials" like First Aid requirements for employment in childcare are often excluded, leaving refugees unable to start work, despite completing their certificates.

2. *Limited awareness and education among employers*

- **Knowledge gaps:** Many employers lack fundamental information regarding refugees, including legal rights to work, transferrable skills and experience, and potential contributions to the workforce.
- **Biases and assumptions:** There is a common, underlying assumption among employers that refugees are low-skilled, contributing to the tendency for employers to consider non-refugees over refugees for professional roles.
- **Desire for low-burden solutions that align with KPIs:** While many senior or executive level employer representatives express a willingness to hire refugees, lower to medium level hiring practices may not align with this sentiment. This is because "headache-free" hiring practices, that do not add significant administrative or training burdens, are preferable; this is particularly so for hiring managers who are under pressure to meet KPIs, and must prioritise KPI meeting over the good intentions of those at the senior or executive level at their organisation. For small and medium businesses who struggle to make and maintain their profit margins, hiring refugees is similarly not preferable.

3. *Job readiness, RTOs, and employee turnover*

- **Readiness gaps:** Employers identified that many candidates do not yet possess the "job-ready" skills required for immediate and meaningful job placement. The effectiveness of vocational training is undermined by bureaucratic barriers and hidden costs. For instance, government-funded courses in high-demand sectors like aged care often exclude essential certifications like First Aid or CPR, leading to refugees who are qualified, but not job-ready, as they cannot afford the additional fees despite their studies.
- **RTO gaps:** Employers reported mismatch between RTO courses and job-readiness. This comes from a disconnect between key employment sector stakeholders. While RTOs are focused on building industry-specific skills that meet current market demands, with Training Packages designed by Industry Reference Committees, gaps remain in practice. The cutting of flexible traineeship program funding and the enforcement of rigid attendance rules present barriers for refugees who may have childcare responsibilities, be taking AMEP classes, or be completing driving courses while completing their RTO course.
- **Turnover concerns:** Businesses are hesitant to invest in repeated training cycles due to high employee turnover rates. Increasing employee satisfaction and engagement are critical to foster employee retention.

Collective Solutions and Policy Recommendations

The focus of the second workshop was to collaboratively develop strategies for overcoming the previously identified barriers and to formulate specific policy recommendations to achieve meaningful employment outcomes. The key recommendations are outlined below.

1. Reforms for Australia's Settlement Programs

The following four recommendations focus on reforms to the settlement program.

1.1. KPI realignment

Settlement grant programs, such as the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program, should be designed and managed to depart from a "tick-in-the-box", quantity-based employment measures, moving towards a qualitative, long-term employment model which focuses on career progression. Moreover, while not part of Australia's settlement programs, realigning KPIs and associated funding should especially apply to the Workforce Australia model, which should be designed to focus on meaningful employment for refugees instead of incentivised placement into "any job".

"Ultimately, the goal is to move beyond a "tick the box" KPI culture that prioritises immediate job placement over long-term career progression and professional dignity.

– Workshop Participant

1.2. Professional development

It is recommended that settlement providers undertake employment services training to build their capability to act as “specialised career counsellors” for refugees. Settlement providers are well placed for this role, given their understanding of refugees’ cultural contexts and trauma-informed support needs.

1.3. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Improved information regarding RPL will help settlement providers better understand the Australian education system to prevent refugees from taking the “wrong” courses.

1.4. Soft skills and work ethics

Settlement and employment services supporting refugees into work should provide culturally safe coaching on Australian workplace norms (for example, punctuality, dress standards, and workplace communication) so clients are supported to secure and sustain employment, not just obtain a job.

2. Strengthening Strategic Collaborative Partnerships

As discussed earlier in the report, meaningful employment requires an “ecosystem” approach rather than individual parties working in silos. The following recommendations are presented:

2.1. Research-led partnerships

Settlement providers should form partnerships with independent bodies like academic institutions/universities. The goal of research-led partnerships would be twofold: First, to collect unbiased data to assess the economic contributions of settlement programs. Second, to support research into ‘what works’ in supporting economic participation and employment, bolstering sector practice with theoretical and practical research. Research-led partnerships could then inform the development of meaningful policy reforms to government employment programs and services.

2.2. Active and honest relationships

A three-way relationship of trust and communication should be built between a refugee employee, their settlement provider, and their employer to enable early intervention if issues arise during employment, internships and placements. Settlement providers should be active in following up with refugees beyond initial job placement, to better support the initial period of employment as well as potential progression over time.

2.3. Settlement providers as intermediaries and advocates

Settlement providers are well placed to take on this role between refugees and the wider employment sector because they understand their clients' skills, aspirations and experience, and can provide culturally informed and trauma-informed support. Some actions they could take are:

- Attending key appointments, such as Workforce Australia appointments, to ensure service delivery is trauma-informed and culturally appropriate.
- Contacting employers on behalf of clients to encourage inclusive recruitment, outline any reasonable adjustments or supports that may be helpful, and clearly communicate the value refugees bring to the workplace.

2.4. Settlement collaboration

Settlement providers should strengthen the relationship and collaborate closely with Workforce Australia, leveraging their broad employer networks alongside settlement providers' cultural and settlement expertise.

“ There's a lot of funding available within Workforce Australia to support participants to find meaningful employment. But most [settlement providers] don't have a close working relationship with their Workforce Australia [counterpart], so don't know what funding they can access. ”
- Workshop Participant

2.5. Cohesive balance between English language learning and meaningful employment

While learning English is fundamental to settlement, AMEP could continue to reform so refugees can meet their language learning needs while also participating in training, traineeships, internships, and work. This would include a stronger focus on on-the-job language learning, industry and workplace-relevant English, and flexible learning arrangements, while maintaining a clear emphasis on English proficiency as a foundation for long-term meaningful employment and successful settlement.

2.6. Co-designed employment pathways by RTOs and employers

RTOs should work with employers to develop shorter, practical training pathways that align with real job requirements and include a “commitment to interview” on course completion to signal job readiness. Workshop participants noted that parts of the employment and training system can feel disconnected, leading to wasted effort and resources. Co-design between RTOs and employers would help ensure training is relevant, targeted, and linked to genuine employment opportunities.

“If training is developed collaboratively with an employer, and they get a commitment to at least an interview at the end, which more often than not then ends up with employment.

– Workshop Participant

3. Actions to Overcome Structural Barriers

The following recommendations focus on addressing the immediate obstacles that prevent refugees from entering the workforce:

3.1. CEO sponsorship

Direct buy-in from CEOs and senior executives should be sought to provide the initial support and resourcing that enables employers to offer refugee internships. A real-world example shared in the workshops highlighted how an initial conversation between a settlement provider CEO and an employer executive helped catalyse an employer’s existing interest into a dedicated refugee employment internship program.

3.2. Paid internships (12-week pathways)

Short-term, full-time, paid placements should be utilised to help refugees to bypass the “lack of local experience” barrier. Reportedly, a 12-week timeframe provides a “low-risk” trial for the employer and a “high-reward” resume builder for the potential employee. Some participants stated that training is most valuable for refugees when it can be integrated with pathways to employment. Other participants felt that internships that do not end with an offer of employment are a waste of time and energy.

3.3. Embedded qualifications

Ensure government-funded RTO courses (e.g., Aged Care, Disability) include costly "job-ready" credentials like First Aid and CPR.

3.4. Mobility as a priority

Expand and reform driver's license programs by removing age cut-offs and gender-based barriers, acknowledging that a license is a primary gateway to employment, especially in regional areas.

“ There are a few other programs that are popping up for women, but there's nothing for men. And in most families, the men are the breadwinners. The women are staying at home with the kids. But the mum can get her license, but then the mum's having to get up at 5:00 in the morning to drive the husband to work, to come back to get the kids ready for school, right? It's more burden on the woman because there are no programs to help the man get the license.

– Workshop Participant

3.5. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Improved information sharing on recognition of prior learning (RPL) would help settlement providers better navigate the Australian education system and reduce the risk of refugees being directed into unsuitable courses. Settlement providers noted that it can be difficult to guide clients toward the right training pathway without clear, practical information on how qualifications recognition and education pathways work in Australia.

“ I remember some people said someone asked me to do this course, but that didn't really help because I want to work for in this area, and someone asked me to do this course, but they didn't recognise this course.

- Workshop Participant

3.6. The clinical and professional internship gap

The workshop highlighted a major gap in funding for those who are already specialists (e.g., doctors, lawyers, engineers) but need a "bridge" to work in Australia. Participants noted that some professionals with 20+ years of experience are unable to access required bridging units or supervised practice because of the cost, leaving them reliant on income support. Addressing this gap would help highly skilled refugee migrants re-enter their professions, support sustainable employment pathways, and enable stronger contributions to society and the economy.

3.7. A proposed loan scheme

The Australian Government should consider an income-contingent loan (similar to HECS-HELP) for overseas-qualified refugee professionals to cover upfront costs such as bridging units, supervised practice requirements, and registration-related training. This would enable participants to pay costs upfront and repay the loan once they are employed, through the tax system and in line with their income.

3.8. Translating refugee resilience to entrepreneurial skills

Skills developed through displacement and settlement, such as problem-solving, resource management, budgeting, crisis management and navigating complex systems, should be more formally recognised as entrepreneurial and management capabilities in recruitment and hiring.

3.7. Ensuring refugees have all necessary certifications and required documents after RTO training

Service providers have seen refugees complete RTO training in high-demand fields (e.g. personal care), only for employers to advise that additional credentials are required before a person is considered “job-ready”. These can include a Working with Children Check, NDIS Worker Screening Check, National Police Check, First Aid and CPR, Manual Handling/Safe Patient Handling, a Food Safety Supervisor Certificate, and medication assistance training, often requiring the refugee to pay for and complete them independently. The Australian Government, employers and RTOs should better integrate these requirements into training and certification pathways, so graduates are job-ready on completion and do not face avoidable additional barriers to economic participation.

4. Bicultural, Bilingual and Lived-Experience Workers

The following recommendations address how employment services and settlement providers can leverage lived experiences to build trust and culturally sensitive communication to strengthen employment pathways for refugee migrants.

4.1. Bicultural and bilingual staffing

Settlement providers and employment services should prioritise the hiring and retention of bicultural workers to improve engagement, build trust, and strengthen employment outcomes for refugee clients.

- This would address the “cultural age gap” where young bilingual workers feel pressured when advising older community members. Practitioners shared that *“having bicultural employees working in organisations such as Workforce Australia is important. However, this is challenging... the people who have the best bilingual skills tend to be the young people. And what they were finding is that when they bring people in for appointments, the young person culturally can’t be telling the older person why they’re not finding work... The older person will just say, why are you being so disrespectful? And it’s so much pressure on this young person who has the bilingual skills that they just keep quitting”*.
- This should be paired with strong supervision and regular debriefing for bicultural and bilingual workers, who often carry an added cultural and emotional load because of their lived experience and community connections.
- Engaging bicultural and bilingual workers who are recognised as community leaders can strengthen participation and trust. Clients are often more likely to accept and act on employment advice when it comes from someone with established standing in their community.

4.2. Lived experience staffing and promoting mentorships:

Employers, employment services and settlement organisations offering employment support to refugees should hire staff with refugee backgrounds to offer “richer” support and credible guidance for new arrivals (while noting that lived experience workers make up much of the settlement sector). Skills developed through navigating displacement and settlement, such as resilience, problem solving, crisis management, resource management, and managing complex logistical processes, often in a variety of complex cultural and systems contexts, should be formally recognised within recruitment and hiring practices. Mentorships, both through formal programs and informal practices, should be instituted for refugee workers, with recognition for the mentor.

- Organisations should also value lived-experience when considering candidates for leadership opportunities, and in promotion practices.

5. Employers: Build Capacity and Improve Engagement for Better Refugee Employment Outcomes

Transforming refugee hiring to be more inclusive, informed and strategy driven.

5.1. Addressing employer bias and discrimination

Employers should undertake cultural safety training to ensure that organisational practices, policies, and cultures are culturally informed and safe. For example, interrupted education on the resume of a refugee may be due to forced displacement, it is important that hiring and recruitment practices take this into account. Similarly, by educating employers about cultural differences, timekeeping differences are less likely to be misunderstood as performance issues and lead to employment termination.

5.2. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) meets strategic hiring practice

Hiring people with refugee backgrounds should be framed as a core part of an organisation's CSR and as crucial in strategic human resource planning rather than just a "charitable act." Employers, including human resources and senior leadership, can develop their strategic human resource planning to better recognise the lived experience, skills, diverse viewpoints, and ability to connect with diverse communities as key contributors in their workforce capabilities.

5.3. Greater support for small and medium businesses

The Government should offer support to small and medium businesses who hire refugees, who can otherwise not afford the additional resource cost.

5.4. Employer engagement with refugee employment

Employers should share business success stories of their hiring of refugee employees with the public. This could occur on social media and at events. When other employers see a peer succeeding, it reduces the perceived risks, and increases the perceived benefits, associated with refugee employment.

- Participants from the City of Melbourne shared some recent success stories through their internship program. One workshop participant spoke about the power of the City of Melbourne's success story about a refugee called Najia² and called this move by the City of Melbourne "thought leadership".

5.5. Mentorship and honest relationships

Building a three-way relationship of trust between the settlement provider, the employer, and the refugee is important to enable early intervention if issues arise, particularly during the early days of refugee placements.

5.6. A refugee index or accreditation

A refugee index or accreditation would create measurable, institutional standards for employers to meet in order to earn and keep their status as refugee-inclusive employers. This would redistribute responsibility away from individual settlement workers, and towards employers.

2. *Talent in transit: internships for skilled migrants* <https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/news/talent-transit-internships-skilled-migrants>

Conclusion

By bringing together cross-sector actors, this project examined how meaningful employment outcomes for refugee migrants can be achieved. The findings draw on insights from two collaborative workshops held in 2025. Through structured dialogue between participants with refugee migrant experience, settlement providers, mainstream employment services (including Workforce Australia), employers, policymakers and researchers, the project created a rare space for the refugee employment ecosystem to share perspectives, to reflect, and to strategise. The findings show that while stakeholders operate under different constraints and priorities, there is strong convergence around what meaningful employment should entail and where current systems fall short.

Importantly, findings revealed that employment outcomes cannot simply be measured by “getting a job”, and that many refugee employment KPIs incentivise this approach to refugee employment. Instead, as this report has demonstrated, the employment system must support refugees to access work that is secure, fairly-remunerated, that aligns with their skills and values, that provides opportunities for professional development and career progression, that is embedded in workplaces that foster dignity, safety and belonging, and that is satisfying enough to foster retention. Fragmented employment service delivery, costly certifications and bridging requirements, skills and experience non-recognition,

short-term employment service and settlement provider funding models, inflexible training programs, and employer bias were some of the factors found to contribute to cycles of underemployment and downward occupational mobility, undermining both refugee wellbeing and labour market efficiency.

The project highlights the urgent need to move towards integrated, human-centred employment pathways. Sustainable outcomes require coordinated action across policy settings, training systems, employment services, and employers, with settlement providers positioned as skilled intermediaries and advocates on behalf of refugees. Governments have a critical role in realigning funding models for settlement service providers, as well as KPIs for settlement and employment programs. Governments also have a critical role in reforming training and education policies and pathways, as well as qualification frameworks, to support the meaningful employment and long-term career progression of refugees rather than short-term placement. Employers are central to this shift and are required to focus on embedding inclusive recruitment practices, investing in supported pathways such as paid internships, and recognition of refugee capability as a workforce asset. Settlement providers, in turn, are uniquely placed to work collaboratively with employers to deliver culturally responsive support and align refugee aspirations with industry needs.

The policy and practice recommendations emerging from this work offer a pragmatic roadmap for reform. These include realigning employment service provider KPIs to prioritise meaningful employment career progression and retention, embedding job-ready credentials within funded training, addressing critical gaps such as professional bridging and clinical internships requirements, strengthening culturally responsive service delivery, and reframing refugee employment as strategic human resource planning and a CSR investment rather than a charitable endeavour. While the recommendations acknowledge the realities of labour market constraints and funding pressures, they demonstrate that incremental, coordinated change is achievable and necessary.

Taken together, this report contributes evidence-based insights to national conversations on refugee settlement, workforce participation, and social inclusion. It underscores that achieving a fairer future for refugee migrants is not solely a moral imperative, but a shared economic and social opportunity. Translating these insights into impact will require sustained commitment, shared accountability, and purposeful collaboration across government, industry, employment service providers, and the research community - so that refugee migrants are supported not merely to find work, but to build meaningful, dignified, and enduring careers in Australia.

END OF THE REPORT



In Partnership

